cardboard boxes strewn about the floor. Even for a dog-savvy observer, it would be difficult to guess from her puppy-like enthusiasm that Echo is a mature nine-year-old rescue who tends to be shy with strangers. She briefly passes her nose over each box, and as she slows to one in particular, she pokes her head in expectantly. Her “find” is confirmed with a flood of treats and a joyful celebration with her handler. They are both clearly thrilled with her work. “I’m really enjoying finally doing something with Echo that she thoroughly loves,” says Cook, “and I have a renewed appreciation of her inherent talents. After all, she’s doing something no human can do!”

Echo’s work in this case is K9 Nose Work, a recreational sport rapidly exploding in popularity among pet owners. The objective is for the dog to...
“Nose Work engages Bertrand like nothing else. His whole demeanor changes when he works. He’s got the body language of a confident little professional when he searches.” — COLLEEN BOYLE, OWNER

locate a hidden target scent and alert us to its exact whereabouts in the environment. The tables are turned in this activity as the dog teaches the owner to trust the dog’s superior scenting capabilities. Constructive physical exercise and intense mental stimulation are among the many benefits to the dog; owners advance to students of behavior and learn. Working individually and without social stimulation allows the dog to channel energy, leaving dog and handler free to concentrate and learn from each other. Natural dog behaviors commonly regarded as “uncivilized” are encouraged as part of drive-building in the game of scenting and searching. Pulling through the door excitedly, turning full attention on the environment and leaping about playfully are not considered problem behaviors here. Embarrassed eye rolling and disapproving glances are replaced with laughter and admiration as the dogs are allowed to express themselves and focus on their job.

Bay Area Certified Nose Work Instructor Kelly Dunbar of SIRIUS Dog Training has seen huge transformations in a growing number of Nose Work students. “I’ve watched environmentally sensitive dogs learn to overcome their fears through Nose Work,” she says. “It seems to help them build confidence, and both handler and dog no longer focus so intently on the environment; instead they channel that energy into the search. Reactivity virtually disappears.” This certainly seems the case with Bertrand, a 10-year-old Lab/Pit rescue. His owner, Colleen Boyle, says, “Nose Work engages Bertrand like nothing else. His whole demeanor changes when he works. He’s got the body language of a confident little professional when he searches.” Formerly timid and arouses new people and dogs, Bertrand’s self-assurance and ability to focus have grown exponentially. Boyle believes this has developed out of the sense of accomplishment that comes from mastering a difficult task. “For me, it’s just gratifying to see him enjoy something and strut around looking proud of himself when we’re training.”

The training process encourages the
The sport’s swift growth beyond its southern California center is a clear indicator of its wide appeal to companion dog owners. Since its inception, classes given by certified instructors have spread quickly up the West Coast and even reached the far corners of the Northeast. Massachusetts-based trainer Scott Williams, of Beyond the Leash Dog Training, has introduced the concept to over 200 dogs in a short eight months. He believes the popularity lies, in part, in the lack of equipment involved. “It doesn’t require a large fenced field,” he says. “It can be done indoors or out, anytime of the year, and requires relatively little handler involvement. Actually, the less the owner does, the better the dogs like it!”

For handlers wishing to train to a specific standard and test their Nose Work skills, titles can be earned through trials organized and sanctioned by the National Association of Canine Scent Work (NACSW). The only prerequisite for trialing is passing the Odor Recognition Test (ORT), in which the dog identifies the appropriate target odor for his level of competition: sweet birch for NW1, aniseed for NW2, clove bud for NW3. Elements of competition include box drills, interior building, exterior area and vehicle searches. Practicing for competition is easy and can be done just about anywhere. Maine student Mac McCluskey says, “What I like about Nose Work is that if you are competitive, you have the opportunity to get good at it. It’s easy to hide a scent anywhere, and the more creative, the better a dog likes it. And if you and your dog are weekend athletes, it’s just as much fun!”

We humans are ultimately responsible for orchestrating the best decisions for our adored animal companions, but within the realm of scent and K9 Nose Work, we learn to trust our dogs to be our best guides and teachers. Here, the dog is always right, always good, and we are allowed an opportunity to achieve a better understanding of him. Sport founder Herot says, “The nose is such a primary source of information for the dog, and this type of work is a very powerful way to connect with your dog in their world.” Evidenced by the smiling faces and clearly content dogs leaving the Nose Work classroom, the sport succeeds as a method for deepening relationships with our canine companions as we learn how they experience the world.