

## Developing the Young Disaster Search Dog

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The Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) dog has to have a unique skill-set in addition to a good nose for detecting live human scent. Their eventual working scenario is disaster sites in an urban environment which may be immense rubble piles like the World Trade Center or the large area suburban neighborhoods in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. These dogs have to have the same work ethic and basic training as all detection dogs, but they have to be able to move, and eventually alert, over tricky and often intimidating terrain. Developing these dogs to take on the challenge of working in these situations starts as young puppies and critical imprinting is done during the first 6 months of age. The goal of this presentation is to show how dogs bred for disaster search work are exposed at a young age to the elements they will encounter as working adults. We will also discuss other aspects of building the foundation in play drive that contributes to their success.

### Environmental Conditioning

What sets US&R dogs apart from other search and rescue and detection disciplines are the environments in which they are deployed and terrain they are expected to work over. Nerve drive, the “no fear” mentality, is a necessary natural and developed skill. As early as 4 weeks of age, when puppies are starting to become more ambulatory and active they can be exposed to obstacles in their normal environment. Puppies will start exploring their surroundings both indoors and out at this age and the placement of objects within their living and playing quarters can provide early exposure to unusual surfaces. Items such as pallets, tires, drainage pipe, and large rocks can be used, and when encountered they will play on, around and in them building confidence and dexterity (Picture 1). As the puppies mature, they can be introduced to larger obstacles and interact with their littermates as a free-play session. To encourage them up,



Picture 1: 4 week old puppies exploring their environment. Tires and drainage tubes are placed in the outdoor pen connected to their inside quarters.



Picture 2: 10 week old German Shepherd puppies free-roaming on the pallet pile

over, and on obstacles pups may be lured with toys or by playing ‘follow-the-leader’. They can be encouraged over the more intimidating obstacles, but they should never be forced. At about 8 weeks of age, exposure to their eventual training scenario sites, such as pallet or rock piles may begin. At one training kennel, daily sessions on a pallet pile commence about 8 weeks of age. The puppies are allowed to free-roam on the pile, taking whichever path they are comfortable with (Picture 2). Observers monitor and follow the puppies closely to prevent injury and to assess their capabilities. Free-roaming will progress to play, such as tug or retrieve, on the

piles.

### Play and Evolution of the Game

Probably one of the most critical factors in development of the disaster search dog is play. If you break down search and rescue training, it really is an advanced game of hide-and-seek between dog and the “victim”. Their motivation for finding someone hidden in a rubble pile is that when they find them, they get a reward – play. These dogs obviously must have a very strong play drive so that the reward is worth the effort. How this drive is developed and shaped is important.

Puppies from a very young age play amongst themselves. Wrestling, tugging on toys, chasing, and playing keep-away are games they play together as a group. It is important that these some of these games are also played with a human early-on, as eventually it will be a person, not their littermates that are the “victim” when the game is being imprinted on them. For logistical reasons tug play is the most desired form of play to develop between dog and “victim”. Tug-play keeps the dog focused and engaged without ever having to leave the “victim”. You could imagine what other forms of play such as chase or retrieve would look like on a rubble pile.

The evolution of the game of hide and seek, starts with the puppy’s tug-play and a person. As early as 7-8 weeks of age puppies are encouraged to tug on toys with everyone in their world. It is important they must feel comfortable playing with anybody, so that there is no apprehension of engaging with strangers, which will be common in the testing and working environment. Several sessions of group play can be incorporated into their routine. Various toys that stimulate the puppies can be used. Only gentle tug play is performed for the first several months so as to not damage deciduous teeth or cause pain that would make the puppy adverse to tug play. From group play sessions puppies have one-on-one play sessions. Most play sessions occur on flat surfaces in the beginning. As the puppies develop strong tug skills on flat surfaces they are moved to sessions on uneven surfaces such as pallets, rocks, or chain link (Picture 4).



Picture 3: Young puppies in a play session



Picture 4: Eventually tug play sessions are moved to uneven surfaces like this chain link fence.

The alert for the US&R dog is a dedicated bark where live human scent is detected. After a good play foundation is made the bark alert needs to be incorporated and tied to the game. These are also the first steps to hide and seek, in that the first object that is hidden is the toy by the person playing with the puppy. The toy is not hidden in a remote location, but right there at the play-trainer; for example,



Picture 5: Example of the toy being 'hidden' to elicit the bark.

under an arm hidden out of view (picture 5). The pup is first teased with the toy and then it is snapped out of site. Frustration often builds and they will demand bark to get the toy to appear. This is a critical step, once they bark in demand for the toy, it is immediately brought out and the tug-play begins. Once understanding that the bark makes the toy appear, duration of the bark can be drawn out.

Now the alert is tied to the game.

The “two-toy” game is another tool that is used in training to further develop the alert and loyalty to the victim. After the ‘bark for the toy’ game is established, it will be evolved into an exchange game. Using two toys, the play-trainer will start the bark-tug process. After a good committed play the toy will be released and the second presented to the dog, usually as a tease with verbal encouragement. Often early on pups will parade around with the toy they have won, but with a strong play drive and a good foundation in play, they will be more interested in engaging with the person and the second toy rather than the dead toy for very long. Once the game is established a continuous rotation of bark-tug-release-presentation of 2<sup>nd</sup> toy is performed. With this solid foundation in play and incorporation of the alert the young US&R candidate may confidently move on to the next step of the game – finding the victim to play with.

Though they sound simple, the mastery of the play skills mentioned will take months to develop. It is the extraordinary US&R candidate that will be successfully performing even the simplest searches prior to 6 months of age. Since the play and understanding of the game is one of the most important areas to develop, significant time and patience is utilized to lay this foundation.

### Conclusion

Early environmental exposure and shaping of play are critical components in the development of the young US&R dog. Without these, eventual success in testing and most importantly on a deployment, where lives are at stake, will be difficult, if not impossible.