



Caution, this newsletter contains pictures of human bones.

We are respectful of Native American cultural sensitivities regarding human bones. In general we do not use pictures of bones in our newsletters. But, to train a dog to locate human burials, the dogs must be trained on real human bones. These bones are obtained through companies specializing in osteological specimens.



Starting Over ... Again

It's a reality for us that our dogs only have a limited working life. It can take anywhere from one to two years to train a new dog (if all goes well) depending on the age of the dog when we start and the handlers experience. Also, depending on the breed of the dog, their working life is between nine to 13 years, if we are lucky.

There are two schools of thought on training new dogs (maybe even more). Start with a puppy, or find a 12-18 month old dog who has the qualities we need. Over the years we have gotten much better at testing puppies to make sure the traits are there to make it a working dog.

We keep improving our techniques to train the dogs for our specific kind of work. Our dogs are specialists in historic human remains detection and are never cross-trained to find anything else.

Not all the dogs we start training for this specialty make it to certification. Sometimes along the way we realize this is not the right dog. Then it's back to the start, looking for a new prospect. I know this all too well. After a year of training my 2016 puppy, Finn, I was able to give him the job he really wanted to do ... he became a stock dog on a friend's ranch. I am currently training Jett, who I hope will be my 8th certified dog.

~Adela Morris~

Training a Human Remains Detection Dog – One handler's journey

A year ago, I decided to move from handling an air-scent, live-find search canine to a dedicated historical human remains detection dog. Because HHRD dogs can only be trained in that discipline, I had to get a dog specifically for the purpose. It is critical to know what your working requirements are, what tasks you will perform as a canine team, and be prepared for it.



Picking the right dog is the next step. I was fortunate to have experienced, successful dog handlers guide me in my selection of a breeder. Knowledge of the breeder and kennel bloodlines is essential to identify a pool of potential dogs with the right drive and disposition, and I went to a breeder who has produced excellent dogs for this kind of work. A year in advance I ordered a puppy from a future litter, and with the help of an experienced handler knowledgeable about evaluating puppies for working characteristics, took the pick-of-the-litter home with me last fall.

You need a dog that has good prey drive, is biddable, committed and loyal to source scent, brave, and can work under stressful conditions. The ideal dog should be calm, come in and out of drive readily (have an “off switch”), and be steady under pressure. I was able to find all these attributes in my new HHRD puppy, Sophie, from British bloodlines of field-bred Labrador retrievers.

Next was to develop or adopt a training plan with specific goals and objectives. I chose a training system used by several others in my training group, each of whom has successfully trained, certified, and worked a dog under this method. I plan each session with purpose, within a larger training plan structure. My teammates help me keep on the proper path for the training system we share.



ICF generally trains three times a week, usually in three hour sessions. Several of us train with other groups in addition to that, which increases our regular training load. This level of training continues throughout the working life of the dog.

It takes 18 months to two years to bring a canine team to certification. Training has to meet a number of diverse requirements:

- Technical search skills, scent identification, and alert behaviors are all trained specific to our needs. Most of our training time is spent here.
- Obedience, but not too much. The dog must be controllable both on and off lead, with appropriate behaviors and a command set that supports the work. But the dog must also have some sense of independence so that they commit to source scent that they detect, despite what the handler might be calling for. Each member of the canine team works cooperatively with the other, but the dog must demonstrate “selective disobedience” if need be, by following its nose to source scent.
- Environmental exposure to all sorts of weather, terrain, training conditions, buildings, and distractions is a regular part of training, and especially important with a puppy. Socialization to both humans and other dogs is part of this, because the dog must work and travel in close proximity, and play well with others.
- Physical agility, with endurance, is also developed and sustained during training.

Training in each of these areas can start when the puppy is surprisingly young, and managed as the puppy matures. We focus on results through rewards for performance.

Our training started at six weeks of age, starting with dropping treat rewards in a small bowl to develop indicating behavior and an alert in the “down” position with the dog’s nose at the point of strongest scent. Sophie learned very quickly

that treats would rain from the sky if she kept watching it. We progressed to reinforcing alerts on articles using successively smaller washers, and finally moved on to source-scented articles. The article was moved around and she learned to hunt for it. When she found it she had to lay down, point to the article, and not move if she wanted treats to continue. We require a hard focus on the point of strongest scent to reward the alert.



Transition to alerting on bone has to come in its own time, but for Sophie it was at fourteen weeks of age. We started with large bones, moved on to smaller sources, bone shards and teeth. We also train in historic graveyards with known burials. In time, we will train on cremated remains and decomposing tissue sources.

Our approach is principally a positive reinforcement training regime to build good search skills, loyalty to source scent, and to develop reliable alert behaviors. Dogs are exposed to increasingly difficult search problems, smaller scent sources, and other challenges as we move through training. The dog



needs to differentiate between human remains and non-human sources. Further, it is critically important that the dog not molest or foul source material.

As the puppy matures, we develop appropriate pace and thoroughness of the search. An example of a training aid used is a brick “scent flat” laid out to encourage the puppy to slow down, be thorough in its search, and focus on much finer scent sources.

Training is expanded further using unfamiliar source materials, varying environmental and physical conditions, and creating unusual challenges as the dog’s skills mature. Also as the dog matures physically, we increase that aspect of the training to develop advanced skills in agility and greater endurance.

Our goal is to train, certify, and be supportive team members for ICF and our sister organization, the Canine Specialized Search Team with the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Department. We will train constantly, increase challenges to improve and enhance our skills, test the effectiveness of our training on a regular basis, and recertify our skills annually. Our training and preparation is focused on learning to work projects effectively and efficiently along with the other members of the team.

Now approaching six months of age, Sophie has been progressing at a good pace and is achieving the goals we have planned for her and trained to. But there's still a fair measure of work to be done before we're certified and ready to work in the field with the big dogs. We're eager to get to it!



~ Dana Timbrook ~



Santa Barbara, California Mud Slides

After devastating fires in Santa Barbara, Ventura and San Diego we had flooding rain storms. The hillsides in Santa Barbara no longer had vegetation to hold the soil and the rain, causing massive mud slides killing 21 people with 2 more still listed as missing. These mudslides swept through entire communities, taking out many residences and businesses. Even Highway 101, that goes through Santa Barbara, was closed because of the mud slide for an extended amount of time.

Karen Atkinson, Lynne Engelbert, Peg Thompson and Kris Black (not pictured) responded to the mud slide in Santa Barbara with our sister team CSST under the Santa Clara Sheriff's office to help locate some of the still-missing victims.

Please feel free to pass this newsletter along to someone who might be interested.

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(650) 503-HHRD (-4473)

www.HHRDD.org

We are happy to talk to you about your project and how our dogs might help locate human remains or burials. Email or call us.

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