

Nose Work for “regular” dogs

The sport of nose work was created by three professional detection dog handlers: Ron Gaunt, Amy Herot, and Jill Marie O’Brien. First developed as an enrichment activity for shelter dogs, the sport expanded to pet dog classes, then to competitions sponsored by the National Association of Canine Scent Work (NACSW), and ultimately, to other venues. The earliest competitions utilized professional detection dog handlers as judges, who were universally impressed with the performance of the competing dogs, and gradually adopted the NACSW training methods.

Professional dog handlers select detection dogs from litters bred specifically for their high drive. Most pet dogs don’t exhibit high drive but can be motivated if they first start searching for something they love, such as food or a favorite toy. Boxes are a low-cost and simple method for starting pet dogs in the sport. As the dog develops motivation, drive, independence, and skill, the handler can transition to odor by pairing the odor with food (classical conditioning). There are many benefits to using this method. First and foremost, scent work sports are the only sports in which the dog is the expert. Training taps into a dog’s instinct and her greater olfactory ability. Handlers have no choice but to trust their dog when they don’t know the location of a target odor. After all, the handler can’t smell it!

All dogs can locate the source of target odor with incredible precision and accuracy, and nose work benefits all of them, including disabled dogs (blind, deaf, or in wheelchairs), reactive dogs, and retired dogs. Training in nose work in a controlled environment builds confidence, lowers reactivity, and strengthens the dog/handler relationship. It can also prove very tiring for the dog, since they are mentally challenged by the search. Moreover, nose work can be done anywhere and anytime. All it takes is some training, a target scent, and some imagination!

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