

UTILIZING THE COMPANION SNIFFER DOG TRAINING METHOD TO DEVELOP APTITUDE IN LOCATING TARGET SCENTS

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Canine scent work has garnered increased interest, both amongst law enforcement/military agencies (professional K-9 units) and companion pet dog training enthusiasts. Unsurprisingly, public perception of scent-related tasks (e.g. tracking, trailing, scent detection, evidence discovery, search & rescue, etc.) is that these are highly specialized skills requiring significant time commitments both for the dog and handler to achieve even minimal ability (modern dog owners are often unaware that their pet was selectively bred for thousands of years to excel at scent work). In line with these prevailing attitudes, we developed a Companion Sniffer Dog Training (CSDT) curriculum over the past three years as a higher-level “activities” course to further refine handler skill, deepen understanding of the human-canine bond, and increase long-term training enthusiasm in our students.

In addition to increasing client retention, an interesting aspect of this program is the high skill level developed by the relatively novice canine/handler teams. In two controlled field experiments, CSDT teams trained for scent detection were able to effectively locate hidden cotton swab targets infused with hemp oil. The CSDT students were trained to detect hemp oil by using modified guided learning and verbal/toy reward system. To verify the effectiveness of CSDT methods, we contrast their ability to detect the hemp oil targets with dogs possessing variable experience in Agility training, Rally-Obedience training, and CSDT. We show that CSDT students achieve statistically significant superior performance versus non-CSDT students in terms of precision (percentage of positive indications which were correct) and recall (percentage of true targets indicated) levels. These results demonstrate that CSDT methods are effective for rapidly training dogs in indicating target scents to their handlers and imply that properly trained companion pet dogs may be suitable for many scent work tasks.

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