

Canine Scent Detection – What Is It?

By Marilyn Clayton

Scent detection is an ideal activity for older, disabled, recuperating and reactive dogs as well as the young and fit (that goes for the human side of the equation too).

Scent Detection is more than a dog locating a scent. It's a dog learning which scents/odours to find; learning to find the source of that odour and communicating the specific location to its handler. The handler's job is to ensure the dog searches all parts of a search area without getting in its way or impeding the hunt.

NOSA follows a program designed by the Canadian-based Sporting Detection Dog Association (SDDA). The CKC is also working on a scent detection program.

What are dogs hunting for? The cotton-end of a Q-tip scented with 1 drop of a specific essential oil placed in a straw that is placed in a container that is hidden so neither dog nor handler visually see it.

The SDDA uses Wintergreen, Pine & Thyme as their target odours and offers 4 levels: Started, Advanced, Excellent and Elite. All 3 types of searches (Container, Exterior and Interior) must be passed to title. The titles are: SD-S, SD-A, SD-E & SD-EL respectively. To title at Elite, all 3 components must be passed in the same trial. If all 3 components are passed in the same trial at Started, Advanced or Excellent, a "Special" (SP) allocation is added to the title (e.g. SD-S-SP).

Within each component (Container, Exterior and Interior), as the levels increase from Started to Excellent/Elite, so do the number of target odours (from Wintergreen to Wintergreen, Pine & Thyme); the number of hides; the size of the search area; and the complexity of the searches.

Container searches. Started Containers are held indoors. 1 Wintergreen target odour is hidden in 1 of 14-16 vented, opaque boxes placed at least 3' apart and must be found in 3 minutes. Excellent Containers can be held indoors or outside; there are 3 hides (Wintergreen, Pine & Thyme) with up to 2 distractors (dog treats/toys) in 16-20 vented or non-vented items such as luggage, backpacks, coffee tins, clothing, etc. placed at least 1' apart where hides can be on or under things, such as chairs, and all 3 hides must be found in 4 minutes.

Indoor searches. Started competitors must find 1 Wintergreen hide, at a maximum height of 3' in one 100-800 sq ft room within 5 minutes. Excellent competitors search 3 rooms (each 100-1,000 sq ft in size) for Wintergreen, Pine and Thyme hides, at a maximum height of 4', where 1 room has no hides (clear room); 1 room has 1 hide and another room has 2 hides, but handlers don't know which room is which – so handlers must recognize when their dog hasn't found a hide vs when there isn't a hide to find – and do so within 15 minutes. Interior searches can be in school rooms, offices, storage areas, warehouses, bathrooms, in fact any safe indoor room.

Exterior searches can be Area searches – in parking lots, grassy areas, forests, on decks, between buildings – any outdoor area deemed safe – or Vehicle searches consisting of 3-4 vehicles. Again, at Started, there is 1 Wintergreen hide, at a maximum height of 3' that must be found within 5 minutes. At the Excellent level, an Area Search consists of 3 hides (Wintergreen, Pine & Thyme), at a maximum of 4' high; 1 vehicle can be included in the area search; and they must find all 3 hides within 10 minutes.

At the Elite level, competitors don't know the number of hides in any component; human food distractors (seafood, donuts, steak, peanut butter sandwiches, etc.) can be included in any component; and the maximum height a hide can be placed is 4' from a stable surface (e.g. 4' above a table, ledge, etc.).

To be successful, a handler must trust his/her dog; take into account how scent drifts, swirls and pools under different circumstances; how ones dog reacts when it has found scent vs when it is working a scent cone vs when it has found the source of that scent; how ones dog communicates the exact location of the hide to the handler; how to pattern your search so your dog has access to all parts of the search areas; and how to help your dog without getting in its way. It's not as easy as it sounds and you can lose points simply for poor leash handling. But the good news is you can reward your dog for each hide found with a treat or play as long as you do not disturb the search area.

Champion-level titles can be earned once a dog has its Excellent (SD-E) title.

- **Sporting Detection Champion – SD-CH** requires a total of 5 Advanced or Excellent titles with at least 2 of those titles at the Excellent level.
- **Sporting Detection Master Champion – SD-MACH** requires a total of 10 Advanced or Excellent titles with at least 3 of those titles at the Excellent level and at least 3 Gold titling scores. A gold titling score is earned when all 3 component scores at the same level are combined and converted to a percentage of 96% or greater.
- **Sporting Detection Elite Champion – SD-ELCH** requires 5 Elite titles earned under at least 2 judges with at least 2 Gold Titling scores
- **Sporting Detection Grand Master Champion – SD-GMCH** requires both a SD-MACH and a SD-ELCH with scores earned under at least 3 judges.

Scent Detection is an incredibly fast-growing sport – the dogs love it; it requires minimal equipment and it builds a wonderful connection between handler and dog.