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Class teaches dogs techniques to help find missing people

By KAYLA BUNGE (Contact) Tuesday, June 29, 2010

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Video

Camp Pawmark



Dog training at UW-Whitewater

WHITEWATER — Rock sniffed the ratty, knotted-up, orange handkerchief.

The 3-year-old Belgian Tervuren, an agile herding dog with a long, pointed nose and fluffy mahogany and black coat, took off through the grass, in between two large satellite dishes and onto the concrete sidewalk.

Rock was searching for an elderly man who had wandered away from a nursing home as part of a simulation Monday morning at Camp Pawmark on the UW-Whitewater campus.

Ed Presnall of Walworth, a longtime dog trainer, this week is teaching eight dogs and their handlers how to find elderly people, autistic children and others who might wander away from home.

Presnall is an expert on a technique called variable surface tracking in which dogs follow a scent through an urban environment.

He teaches dogs to navigate over dirt, through grass and across pavement and to overcome distractions.

"The dogs have to work through contamination, not chemical contamination, people contamination—their footprints, their scent, whatever they might leave behind," he said.

He also teaches handlers to guide their dogs and to respond to their dogs' natural instincts.

"They have to know their dog. They have to encourage their dog," he said. "They have to watch for cars and people and other things because the dog is too focused on tracking to watch out for its safety."

Camp Pawmark instructors laid several courses late Sunday night and early Monday morning to simulate the movement of a lost person. They wandered through grassy spaces, climbed up stairs and turned around buildings. They also dropped items made of cloth, plastic and metal.

Presnall tries to make camp exercises as much like real-life search-and-rescue situations as possible.

"The dogs have to walk through grassy areas, along buildings, through parking lots—anywhere a lost person might wander," he said. "They have to get used to being interrupted and getting back to work."

Many of the dog owners at the camp are experienced trainers, and many of the dogs have earned their tracking dog (TD) and tracking dog excellent (TDX) titles. Several dogs are working toward a variable surface tracking (VST) title—the hardest of the tracking titles to obtain.

The American Kennel Club has offered a variable surface tracking test since 1995. More than 7,000 dogs have attempted it, but fewer than 250 have passed it.

Presnall over the last 15 years has led five of his dogs to the title. He now takes pride in sharing his skills to find missing people and his knowledge to help aspiring handlers and their dogs reach their goals.

Presnall, who also runs an online pet-supply business, hosts about 10 camps a year all over the country. The camps are popular because no one offers such intense training for such an elite tracking title.

"Lots of people want it," he said. "I don't think these dogs care one bit about getting that title, though. I think they're having too much fun tracking to know a title is on the line."

Maureen Foley of Ann Arbor, Mich., a retired tracking judge, is not pushing Rock to become a champion tracker anytime soon. She just loves the sport and the time spent with her dog.

"We don't have a lot of miles together yet," she said. "We're here for the week to learn how to be a better team."

"Nobody here hopes you fail. Everyone here is cheering for you because it's tough."

Photo



Edwin W. Presnall

Photo



Photo by Bill Olmsted

Rock, a tracking dog, leads his owner Maureen Foley of Ann Arbor, Michigan to a purposely left behind object during an exercise on the UW-W campus 06-28-10. Foley and her dog were taking part in Camp Pawmark, an exclusive training program for search dogs.

DOGS IN ACTION

Camp Pawmark is holding a variable surface tracking test Sunday on the UW-Whitewater campus. The public is invited to watch the dogs follow a scent along a course over a number of surfaces and attempt to earn their variable surface tracker (VST) title from the American Kennel Club.

Testing starts about 5 a.m. and ends about 1 p.m. Courses are laid all over campus.

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