

## Leos on odor: a guide to K9 Nosework with your Leonberger by Mary Kline

I got interested in K9 Nosework after the Coventry School, where our dogs had gone for years for training and grooming, put out fliers that they were offering a class. Little did I know that this was the first class offered in the mid-Atlantic and one of the first offered on the East Coast. All I knew was that my 6 year old Leo Havoc (who already had numerous flyball titles and a WD to his name) needed a sport that demanded his brain but didn't tax his body beyond what he could stand. "Wait? You can get titles for this? When does class start?"

A few words about K9 Nosework: This is a sport that was designed by 3 explosive detection dog trainers (Amy Herot, Jill Marie O'Brian and Ron Gaunt) who were also active in shelter dog rehabilitation. Now, take a minute, Leo friends, and consider that sentence. These are people who were risking their lives on a daily basis and decided that their volunteer work in shelters with shelter dogs could be enhanced by the skills they had taught their detection dogs. And then they decided that they could enrich the lives of shelter dogs and owners of former shelter dogs by developing a competitive venue where the dogs and owners could show off their skills. Okay, back to work...

There are many methods for training scentwork. We were lucky enough to be introduced to the sport by a former Air Force detection dog handler (Jacy Kelly, founder of K9 CO-Pilots). Along with the founder of the Coventry School, the legendary Ruth Chase, we were introduced to boxes. Boxes full of tasty food, that is...

The method we used for the first six weeks focused on boxes. Finding food in boxes. Finding food in boxes that were difficult to reach. Finding food in boxes with tiny partitions that made our dogs work to target the exact place the food had been left. Finding food that the dog could smell, but only human intervention could retrieve. It was a fun game, we had great classmates and everything was going smoothly. We did searches for food outside of boxes and in places that were difficult to reach in the second six weeks.

In the next six weeks, we introduced odor into the equation. In an NACSW™ trial, the dog is searching, not for food, but for a particular odor. The first odor introduced is birch. A dog must qualify with birch before he/she is permitted to trial at the NW1 level.

The most difficult idea for most experienced dog trainers (maybe with the exception of detection dog/search and rescue dog trainers) is the notion that our dogs know things that we don't. We may intellectually understand that a dog's sense of smell is 500 times better than that of a human. But we don't translate that into a true visceral acceptance that our dogs know better than we do just where that container with Q-tips scented with birch oil has been placed. And, if our dogs have been trained in

other sports where they had to listen to a human's direction and override natural instinct, the dog has forgotten this as well.

I've gotten a lot of affectionate teasing over the years about how atypical a Leonberger Havoc was in many ways. It's certainly true that he had an amazing amount of competitive drive, great love of learning and a (mostly) biddable nature. All of these traits were a disadvantage when we introduced odor into our Nosework practice.

When odor is introduced, at first the birch Q-tips are paired with food to condition the dog to associate the odor with food. In our classes, we spent many, many weeks doing only "paired" "non-blind" (in other words, known to the handler) hides. I was delighted at how quickly Havoc developed a "natural" alert – lying down once he had found the odor. He was one of the stars of the class! And then we began to introduce "blind" hides. These are hides where the handler doesn't know where the odor is.

I hadn't spent any time at all learning to (as we say in nosework) read my dog in the previous 18 weeks. Why should I? He would find the odor and he would lie down. All I had to do was to make sure to have my treats ready once he'd found the odor so he knew he'd done it right.

Our first blind hide was a real eye-opener. I gave him his cue to search, he launched himself into the search area, sniffed around a bit and then looked back at me. I looked at him and he backed up and barked. Now, those of you who knew Havoc know that he almost never barked. This was something he only did if he was in a situation where he had no clue what was expected. "Go on, buddy, show me" I said. He barked again and then lay down. Our instructor, who had been kindly and patiently telling me to watch my dog for 18 weeks, had to stifle a grin. "Okay" Jacy said, "Take him out of the search area. Set him up and send him again and THIS TIME watch your dog. He knows where it is. YOU don't."

So, we ended up starting over again. Havoc learned that I didn't know where the hide was and it was no good waiting for me to unconsciously signal him to lie down. I learned to watch his nostrils and his pace and the set of his tail. He passed his Odor Recognition Test for birch with flying colors. We entered a Nosework 1 trial and failed every element (a nosework trial has four elements: container search, interior search, exterior search and vehicle search) because our old bad habits reemerged under the stress of competition. We were both humiliated but more determined than ever.

We came back and retrained again. He developed his true natural alert – stuffing his nose into the source of the odor and then looking back at me with a happy expression. If you watch his videos, he is SO delighted! I found it, his face says, ME. Look, look, here it is, I found it. He passed his Odor Recognition Test for the next level of odor, anise, that winter.

Unfortunately, Havoc died of hemangiosarcoma before he was able to attend another nosework trial. However, he was able to keep practicing until a couple of days before he died. In his last days, he has a 4 cm cancerous tumor in the atrial valve of his heart. But, his face: "I found it. You were looking for this birch Q-tip stuck in the ground and I found it."

So, for all of you considering K-9 Nosework, just remember: this is a unique sport. Your dog knows better than you do. Your job is to stay out of your dog's way and learn to read your dog. On occasion you may be able to assist your dog in some small way. But mostly, you are looking for that moment where your Leo says "I found it. You didn't know where it was but I found it." And this moment will change your relationship with your dog forever, for the better.

Happy hunting!