

E | Fur and Feather

Police Dogs

In the Kent countryside, south of London, there is a big training centre for police dogs. All police dogs in this part of England come here regularly to attend courses. An experienced senior officer and dog trainer was more than willing to tell us a bit about dog training.

– *What kind of breeds do you use as police dogs?*

As general police dogs we have tried several breeds such as Weimeraners, Rottweilers and Dobermans, but the German Shepherd is the best dog for all the roles we need it for. It has got a controllable amount of aggression and we can train it to be obedient. A Rottweiler can sometimes be a bit heavier and not so good at jumping. They don't show so much aggression in their facial expression, so you don't know when they are going to bite and when they are not. A Shepherd curls its lips and pulls back its ears, and that gives you a sign of aggression. Dobermans normally work better in pairs, so they work as a team together. But we quite often work on our own with the dog, so we want a dog that likes working on its own. We also use the Malinois these days. It is like a German Shepherd, but it is smaller. They use it as a police dog in France.

Springer Spaniels are very good as drug dogs and explosives search dogs. They are very intelligent and busy dogs. They may not always be brilliant as pets because they are so intelligent and want to be kept busy all the time. These dogs are happiest when they are working.

– *Do you breed your own dogs here?*

Yes, we do. We keep them until they are about eight weeks old. They then come on a regular visit once a month to do some training until they reach ten months when they do a week's course. Then they do two more visits before they go on a basic course at twelve months of age, which is for twelve weeks. Having done that they are fully trained and they go out on the street. They are, however, only basically trained when they first go out, and the training continues for the rest of their lives. They get a training day once a month, and every year they have to pass a test to make sure that they are still capable of doing their job. When a dog passes the test, it will get a license for another year. An important part of what we teach the dogs here is tracking, and a puppy is normally introduced to tracking when it is around twenty weeks old.

– *What is tracking?*

Basically it involves a dog following a track. When you tread on the grass, you crush the grass, which gives off a smell. You also crush vegetation and insects. You will even leave some bits of polish from your shoes. Also fibres from your clothes and dead skin cells will be dropped in that area. It is these individual smells the dog follows when it is tracking. When we train the dogs, we drop articles around so the dogs can find them, and they are always rewarded when they do. This really has to do with experience, and the young dogs are not as good as the older ones. When the dogs have learned tracking on grass, we teach them tracking on hard surfaces such as a pavement. It is the same thing, really, but much more difficult. And if a person has walked on a pavement when it was raining, the chances of finding particles that give off a smell are slim.

Dogs have an incredible sense of smell. It is probably at least 1,000 times better than ours, and they can follow a track that is more than six hours old. Some dogs can even track up to 24 hours.

– *But there are many kinds of drugs. Can the drug dogs detect them all?*

Oh, yes. All the drugs have their own individual smell, and the dogs are taught each smell. Therefore they understand what to find. It is extremely difficult to find drugs without a dog, because they can be hidden almost anywhere. The dogs can smell even the smallest amount of drugs.

– *How are the drug dogs trained?*

The dog is rewarded with a play article. Then we associate that play article with the smell of a drug. And every time the dog finds a drug, he gets his reward.

– *And how about explosives search dogs?*

Exactly the same method is used for explosives. The difference is that with a drug dog we don't mind if the dog digs at the hide. But an explosives search dog must create a distance and be safe just in case an explosive device is booby-trapped. So, therefore, when a dog finds explosives, it freezes and stares at the hide, waits for the reward and then backs off. These dogs can also do a marine course. The handlers and the dogs are then taught how to board vessels in the middle of the Thames and do a search.

– *You have talked about drug dogs and explosives search dogs. Are there other kinds of special training for police dogs?*

Sure, we have the general-purpose police dogs, which are used on patrol, for searching for persons and detaining criminals. Dogs can also be trained in firearm recovery. Some of the experienced dogs are even able to take out an armed person. Other dogs are trained to find bodies.

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- 1 Why do the English police use the German Shepherd so much?
 - 2 Describe what tracking is all about in one sentence.
 - 3 At what age is a police dog fully trained?
 - 4 What kinds of drugs can a drug dog smell?
 - 5 Tell your partner about what you feel about dogs. Do you like them? Do you have a dog? Does anyone else in your family have one? Are there any dogs in your neighbourhood? If so, describe one of them.
 - 6 You were on your way to your family's holiday flat in Spain. As you passed through customs you witnessed a drug dog finding drugs on somebody. Describe what you saw in a letter to a friend.
 - 7 Pick eight new words from this chapter and write either eight sentences using one new word in each sentence or write a short text where you use all of them.