

In Action

How I Trained That:

Improving Canine Confidence with [K9 Nose Work](#)

By Jane Fallander, BS, KPA CTP, ANWI

Just What the Doctor Ordered

The world is a scary place for Joshie, a five-year-old brindled pit bull. In addition to being afraid of new environments and objects, Joshie is afraid of people, and this fear manifests as human aggression. His patient owner, Christine Clouser, has taken him through several reactive or “growly” dog classes, with only moderate success. Many times he’d have to leave class early because he’d reached his stress threshold.

Last summer, Christine enrolled Joshie in a K9 Nose Work class at the recommendation of [Dr. Margaret Duxbury](#), the veterinary behaviorist at the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center.



Initially Joshie was hypervigilant and wary of any changes in the environment. I had to be cautious of my movements; if I moved too much or too close or even spoke to Christine, Joshie would not be able to search. The first time he hunted, I used a box

with low sides because even putting his head into the box was too frightening for him. We had to be cautious that a box didn’t shift and suddenly frighten him.

But within a month, his attitude toward the class began to change. He bounced into the building with his tail up and a happy, eager expression. He now trots confidently around the search area. He clearly loves this new game, and best of all, the game is good for him: He’s starting to develop more confidence around people and new objects, both in and outside of class.

“I notice this on our walks,” says Christine. “He used to be so scared of lawn ornaments, statues, waving flags, and any unfamiliar items in people’s yards. Now he will approach these type of items with cautious curiosity.”



This video clip shows Shiloh, another fearful dog Jane has worked with. Although not as fearful as Joshie, Shiloh begins overcoming her fears in her second Nose Work class. Notice Shiloh’s scanning of the environment and difficulty concentrating.



Joshie one year into treatment under Dr. Margaret Duxbury, who prescribed anxiolytic medication and a behavior modification plan that included K9 Nose Work.

[Jane Fallander](#), BS, KPA-CTP, ANWI, is the owner and lead trainer of [A Great Dog Now](#) in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Jane teaches K9 Nose Work in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area and provides private behavior consultations. In addition to having a Bachelor of Science in Animal Science, Jane is a Karen Pryor Academy Certified Training Partner and Associate Nose Work Instructor. She keeps her education current by attending regular seminars on behavior, training and K9 Nose Work.

What's K9 Nose Work?

K9 Nose Work, an activity and sport inspired by working scent-detection dogs, teaches dogs to find a specific (safe!) odor and locate its source. Initially dogs are taught to find a delicious treat in one box among five to 12 empty ones. As their skills improve, the dogs can learn to hunt for a non-food odor such as birch, which has a slight minty smell. The reward? Lots of their favorite treats and the opportunity to play their favorite game.

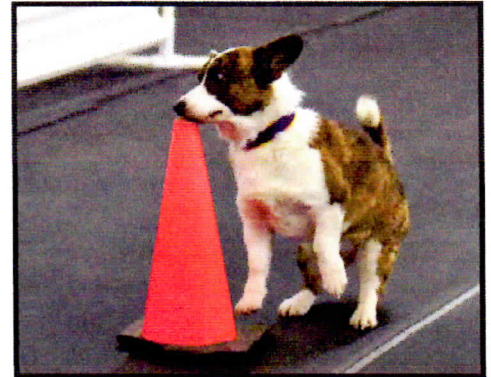
Developed by Ron Gaunt, Amy Herot, and Jill Marie O'Brien, the activity was designed to help most dogs succeed—even dogs with issues that might normally preclude group classes. Dogs work one at a time, and while one dog is out of his crate, the other dogs are covered in their crates or confined in another area. Dogs should not be able to see each other. No obedience training is allowed in class, so the environment becomes a safe zone where the dogs do not have to worry about either intentional or inadvertent corrections.

In Minnesota, veterinary behaviorists are starting to recommend K9 Nose Work for client dogs with anxiety and anxiety-related issues. Recently, Janet McKay of Eden Prairie, Minnesota, enrolled her golden retriever, Singer, in a K9 Nose Work class. Singer has anxiety-related aggression toward other dogs.

"Since Singer took the class, I see her being more self-confident, better able to focus, and less reactive to other dogs," said Janet McKay, a client of [Dr. Christopher Pachel](#), a veterinary behaviorist in Portland, who recommended she try the class.

"Imagine a beach 1500 feet long, 150 feet wide and 40 inches deep. On this beach, a dog can find two grains of sand that smell differently."

*The Canine Kingdom of Scent by Anne Lill Kvam Fun,
[Dogwise publishing](#), 2012.*



Siren has found the odor, but not the source.



Siren locates the source of the odor.



Siren's owner rewards her for finding the odor under the cone.

Benefits of K9 Nose Work

K9 Nose Work is not a panacea for behavior problems or behavior disorders, and there have been no formal studies on its effectiveness as part of a behavior modification program. But anecdotal evidence suggests it can augment such programs for some dogs by:

Increasing confidence

- Tiring them out through mental exercise instead of potentially stressful walks
- Helping dogs learn an activity that may be more comforting than scanning in times of stress
- Increasing frustration thresholds
- Teaching dogs to relax while performing an activity
- Improving focus
- Providing mental stimulation for elderly dogs
- Strengthening the owner/pet bond, which may be damaged by repeated failure in other activities
- Providing passive counterconditioning to other dogs, people, and the environment



Jasmine, a seven-year-old deerhound



Ryder, 15-year-old Australian Shepherd

Resources

K9 Nose Work

<http://www.k9nosework.com>

Find a Certified Nose Work Instructor or Associate Nose Work Instructor

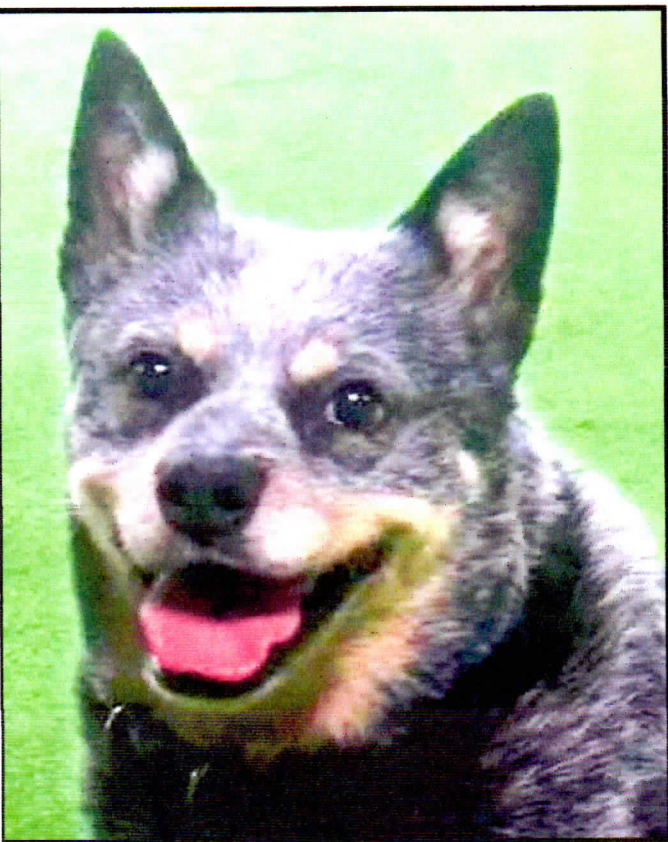
<http://www.nacsw.net/instructors>

National Association of Canine Scent Work

<http://www.nacsw.net/>

K9 Nose Work Blog

<http://k9noseworkblog.blogspot.com/>



The "Nose Work Grin"

Top Five Reasons I Love K9 Nose Work

by Nicole Wheatley (with Shanoa)

- 1 I love nose work because my dog loves nose work. Every time we go to class she's super excited. She's happy working. She gets to come to class, hang out in her crate eating a Kong or bully stick, and then find yummy treats that she gets to eat. It's the best game ever.
- 2 I love nose work because it uses my dog's natural abilities to scent. It's her most powerful tool! Using her nose engages one of her primal abilities. Watching her hone her natural skills is amazing.
- 3 I love nose work because it challenges my dog's mind! It's an activity that really makes her think and learn. Using her nose is natural, but learning how to find and track scents is a skill. It engages her smart-as-a-whip brain and really tires her out!
- 4 I love nose work because I'm lazy! This activity is very dog-directed. I don't have to be a particularly good trainer or practice often. There's no pressure on me to "do it right," so there's no pressure on my dog, either. I just have to trust her—I don't have to teach her. It's very freeing for both handler and dog!
- 5 I love nose work because it's set up so that all dogs can succeed. Classes are structured so that even shy, anxious, or reactive dogs (to people or other dogs) can not only participate but be successful.

"Many of my patients have had their lives shrink because they aren't successful in the world at large," says Dr. Duxbury. "A controlled K9 Nose Work setting can provide a safe chance for these dogs to shine. When they have the chance to fulfill a natural drive and solve fun puzzles in a completely safe environment, their confidence and sociability grow. Little by little, they begin to have a world that works for them."



Woofa enjoying her turn to search.