

Let me sniff! Scent work has natural benefits for all dogs

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Scent work, nose work, snout work, scent detection and scent games are variations on a theme. What they all have in common is basically allowing dogs do what comes natural from the day they are born, sniff to search, find and identify odors for a reward (i.e., dam's teat for milk, prey/food, treats, find owner for attention, a bitch in heat to mate with). Now we can take advantage of this innately rewarding behavior of dogs and turn it into a game or team sport that we get to enjoy with them. The 'scent' could be a specific odor such as an essential oil, a personal item with your 'scent', a toy or just the novel item in the room.

The Tanana Valley Kennel Club is posed to support competitions in the American Kennel Club (AKC) sport of scent work but that isn't the only reason to want to get involved in learning the game and coming to play even if you never intend to enter a scent work trial. I dare you though, not to 'catch the bug' and want to test you and your dog by trialing for brags, ribbons and titles!

AKC Scent Work is the most recent sport they added and I've started in with my Belgian Tervurens after success in other AKCs venues such as agility, herding, obedience, rally, tracking, and conformation. However, AKC isn't the organization who started it and you probably first heard of it as "nose work" which is just another organization that turned the activity into a competition sport.

Instead of going into the details about the training, or the nuances of a trial, I want to tell you about the benefits to the health and wellbeing of your dog. I hope these will encourage you to try out taking a class or workshop at one of the training centers or online, getting a book on it and then come to one of our Snif-n-Go events or fun matches.

Scent work, (aka nosework) has been scientifically demonstrated to be beneficial to your dog's mental health. In a 2019 report in Applied Animal Behavior Science (of course those of you who know me knew I would have to cite a publication!) entitled "Let me sniff! Nosework induces positive judgment bias in pet dogs". Durnaton and Howitz tested the impact of two weeks of nosework practice on dogs' emotional state. Nosework allows dogs to express a natural behavior and be more autonomous. Since behaving naturally and making active choices are two

key factors in animal welfare, olfaction-based (aka sniffing) activities contributed to dogs' welfare. The researchers concluded that allowing dogs to spend more time using their olfaction through regular nosework activities makes them more optimistic. Thus, by allowing dogs more 'foraging' time, their welfare was improved.

In a recent webinar, scent detection trainer at UK Sniffer Dogs, Jamie Pound, expounded on additional the benefits of scent work for all types of dogs, especially reactive dogs, puppies and older dogs or dogs recovering from surgery. These included:

- Positive mental stimulation for dogs while on leash
- Confidence building
- Less visual stimulation for environmental triggers
- Bond strengthening/building between handler and dog
- Calming self-soothing
- Stress-relieving
- Observing body language when the dog searches helps the handler notice cues in other dogs and owners

For puppies, besides the great mental work out for the developing mind, scent work is also safe for a growing body. Additionally, it is a great way to introduce or 'socialize' him to new environments, and it's a mutually exclusive behavior to biting! Using snuffle mats, scatter feeding and hide and seek games are fantastic sniffing activities for puppies and you can start them from 6 weeks of age or earlier. It is really an easy way to start pairing an odor with reward by hiding it under the snuffle mat even before using a clicker!

Besides the general benefits listed above, for older or recovery/post-surgery dogs, scent work is a low impact activity that can be done on lead, such as for exercise when having restricted movement. Depending on the placement of the scent/odor 'hide', it can be used to get specific stretching movements. The dogs still get the mental stimulation they need, and it can be adapted to suit any dog and done virtually anywhere.

Sniffing is not just necessary for a dog's survival; it is essential to their mental wellbeing. In addition to all that, the game of scent work is fun! And I don't mean

just for the dog, it is fun to watch and learn to recognize your dog's behavioral cues when they are 'in odor', following the scent to its source. Best of all when they find that source, indicate it and you can call out a definitive "ALERT!" with a big smile and give your dog their reward. That reward can even be a piece of cheese or toy or whatever rocks your dog, even in an AKC trial. Where else can you do that? Vet tested; vet recommended!