

# N O S E W O R K

## *Helps a Blind Dog See*

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Puppy Hopper

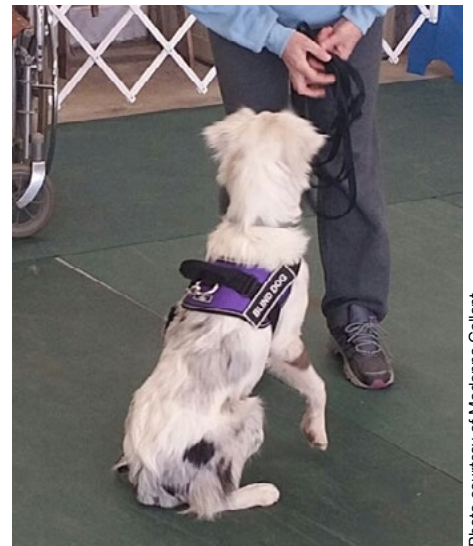


Photo courtesy of Madonna Gallant

Hopper when she joined the Nosework class

It was Saturday, and our Nosework class started just like many other classes we've taught over the years.

First-day classes with a group of dogs and their eager-to-learn handlers are always fun and chaotic. The dogs are gazing and raising their noses in the air to sniff out a familiar odor of another dog or person. This canine-smelling ritual is all about sizing up the room. "Is it safe? Do I know any of these people and their four-legged friends? I smell treats!"

For humans in the class, it is like being a

student in a new school classroom. "What chair do I sit in? What do I do first? Whom do I know in the room?" And, of course, "I hope my dog does not pee on the floor, sniff or growl at another dog."

Our friend, Angie, joined the Nosework class with her foster dog, Hopper. Angie rescues Australian Shepherds and cares for them in her home. Angie rescued Hopper's mother a few days before her litter was due. Of the four puppies, Hopper was the only one born blind and deaf, a genetic result of double merle breeding.

Many people are unaware that breeding two merle Aussies together will mean their puppies have a 25% chance of being born as a double merle. Double merle puppies have excessive white coloration or lack of pigment, which can cause loss of hearing, vision or any combination of the two impairments.

Because of this genetic abnormality, Angie expected difficulty in finding a suitable forever home for Hopper. Angie began exposing Hopper to lots of external stimuli, from walks around the block and playgrounds to outings in the park. These extra adventures would help Hopper adjust to being in unknown places as she matured.

### **A Dog's Nose Knows**

The same techniques we teach in Nosework are used to train diabetic alert dogs, PTSD service dogs, cancer detection dogs and other medical alert dogs. They all have one thing in common: using the dog's nose.

Nosework is a sport for all dogs—young, old,

small, large, three-legged, blind or deaf. Dogs search for cotton swabs saturated with two drops of essential oil. The three common essential oils that most of the national organizations use are birch, anise and clove.

Dogs learn and see the world through their keen sense of smell. From birth, a dog uses its nose to search for food. Their instinct is to search for any odor that interests them. The game of Nosework takes advantage of that instinct by adding in reward and praise and building drive in a dog to search for a scented object.

The biggest training challenge in Nosework is teaching the human handler. Getting the human to understand and trust what the dog is saying through body language takes time. Though humans like to be in charge, in this sport, the dog is in charge. The human must let the dog lead and learn how to read him or her.

### Goals for Hopper

Adopting a blind and deaf dog is very intimidating for many people. Our primary goal was to help Hopper expand her natural abilities, making it easier to function in a home, thus becoming more adoptable.

Nosework training would help Hopper expand her communication skills, improve her self-confidence and help her acclimate to new settings. With these skills, and given that she was already playful and fun-loving, the hope was that she would find her forever home sooner.

To test her scent-abilities, communication skills and ability to acclimate to new surroundings, Angie entered Hopper in a local Nosework trial in May after her beginner Nosework training class ended. That gave Angie and Hopper five months to train.

At the trial, Hopper would take part in a search-class called Novice Containers, where she would search 10 cardboard boxes to find the one with the scented Q-Tip. We train using more than 10 containers.

### Hopper's Introduction to Odor

Like humans, dogs have five senses. A human's primary sense is eyesight. A dog's primary sense is smell. Their body is a smelling machine; it is how they "see" their world. Like humans, when one or more of a dog's senses are missing, its remaining senses are even more enhanced.

Because Hopper is deaf and blind, we structured her training to take advantage of her remaining senses—in this case, smell and touch.

Unlike other puppies, Hopper could not



The scent is in one of these boxes.

see or hear how the other dogs reacted to her. But, using her nose, she could get a sense of them. Humans and animals emit distinct odors associated with their emotions. In this manner, Hopper learned to discern friend from foe. Her nose enabled her to gauge how safe her environment was.

On the first day of class, we introduce dogs to odor by pairing it with food. When the dogs touch their noses to the scent, they're immediately rewarded with high-value treats. Like most dogs, Hopper got excited when she smelled the treats, and she learned quickly that nose-touches to odor magically made the treats appear!

Angie's role was to continue to be a doggie Pez dispenser, generously treating Hopper for nose-touches to odor.

This game quickly turns into a lot of fun for the dogs! In fact, Nosework training works best in positively reinforced training sessions. Old school harsh treatment or corrections are detrimental to progressing in this sport and not allowed in our classes.

### Touch and Voice Commands

Angie was already working with Hopper on touch commands at home. She used various types of touches—a tap on the back meant Sit, a hand brush under the chin might cue Dinner. She also continued talking to Hopper because sounds emit a vibration, which enabled Hopper to "hear" through those vibrations.

When Hopper joined the Nosework class, she was a well-acclimated and happy dog, thanks to Angie's care and early training. Hopper adjusted well to the new class because she "heard" Angie talking, smelled her close by and felt her touch, which provided Hopper with confidence.

Using a consistent pattern of taps and rubs, we developed a cue to tell Hopper to "Go Search."

Once Hopper understood that a nose-touch to odor resulted in a treat, we moved the odor farther and farther away from her. Using the touch-cue each time before releasing her to go to the odor, Hopper learned what a Go-Search cue was.

Within a month, we could place the odor



anywhere in a room, and Hopper would find it. She was ready for Container searches.

In just a matter of a few weeks, Hopper could find the odor hidden in a box among many boxes. She could also find the odor when the box was on or under a chair. Sometimes she would trip over boxes, but she was so driven to the scent, knowing her reward was a treat and praise from her handler, nothing distracted or deterred her from her goal.

To expand Hopper's searchability, we took the scent out of the box and started hiding it on an object, such as wheelchairs, portable training equipment, under desks, and elevated the hide by taping it to the wall.

After a few months, Hopper was ready to compete.

### A Confident Hopper

Hopper took part in a Nosework trial in May. It took place in a building she'd never been in, with over 30 other dogs she had never met. There were a lot of new people and smells. Trusting Angie to lead the way, Hopper acclimated to the area and was unfazed by the new environment. When it came her turn to compete, Angie approached the start line, gave Hopper her Go-Search cue and let Hopper take charge of the search.

Hopper walked away with two successful searches that day, earning a ribbon for each search and a special award for her participation as a "Specially Enabled" Dog.

It wasn't long after the trial that Hopper moved into her new forever home. Angie said, "Learning Nosework gave Hopper a confidence to explore and become more comfortable with the world around her. It allowed her to find an adoptive home she could be happy and thrive in." 🐾



Hopper today

Photo courtesy of Angie Tomlinson

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