



IRWS first for UK Mountain Rescue

Izzy SearchDog is a four year old Irish Red & White Setter bitch, Caispern Nebiolo 2013. She is my pet dog first and foremost and lives at home with me and my partner Ester and our other four dogs, another of which is also a searchdog. Izzy is a Scent Specific Trailing Search and Rescue dog with Search and Rescue Dogs Association (SARDA) Wales an affiliate of Mountain Rescue in the UK. There are four current types of Mountain Rescue Search dogs in the UK; Open Area Search Dogs, Drowned Victim Search Dogs, Scent Specific Trailing Search Dogs and Open Area Scent Specific Search Dogs.

Izzy qualified as a Scent Specific Trailing Search Dog in November 2016 after two years in training and becomes the first IRWS Search and Rescue dog in the UK. A Scent Specific Trailing Search dog is trained to search for the scent of one individual person using an item of their clothing as a scent article and then to follow the trail of their scent until finding them some distance later. The requirement for a scent article from the missing person clearly has its limitations but the ability to ignore other people and follow the trail of one lost person is extremely beneficial.

My plan for Izzy to become a Search and Rescue dog in the UK started long before she was born but in the end it was when she was

only one week old that I started on the road to becoming a Search Dog Handler with SARDA Wales. You must complete a minimum of six months as a “dogbody” hiding for the dogs and handlers within SARDA Wales and therefore learning about what it is to be the person lying in a ditch waiting to be rescued or wandering lost and disorientated in the mist unsure which direction to go in. It is incredibly reassuring to hear the dogs coming from a distance and even more so when they locate you and rush off to inform their handler that their job is done.

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It was some 18 months later when Izzy started her official training with SARDA Wales after getting through the rigorous stock and obedience tests that all dogs must endure. The stock test ensures the dog will not worry sheep and cattle whilst working on the hillside and the obedience test not only ensures a minimum level of training ability and basic

standard from the dog and handler but also goes to ensure the safety of the dog whilst working with an “emergency stop” and out of site “stay”.



So at 18 months old Izzy began the long road of specific scent training, it starts with artificial scents placed on plastic boxes and progresses to human scents, and then to line ups of three or more people where the dog is required to select the correct person by taking the scent from a bagged article of clothing belonging to that person and then indicating by that person. Each Scent Specific dog is trained to “indicate” when it finds the correct scent, there is no standard indication, the ideal is for the dog to have its own natural indication, however it must be consistent and obvious every time. Izzy was kind to me in her training and indicated by way of a sit and bark, possibly the most obvious indication she could give, although I was a little disappointed she didn’t “point” or “set”!! We worked hard ensuring this indication was not only consistent but “bomb proof” whilst in training the IRWS’s wilfulness may be an issue, but when it comes to a stubborn indication the IRWS (and particularly Izzy) have a trait that proves to be priceless. I can’t see or indeed

smell the scent of another human so I need my dog to do it, it’s very easy to doubt the scenting ability of our dogs but Izzy time and again has not only got it right but she tells me she has, and when she has she doesn’t care if I doubt her, she knows best!! Another IRWS trait I’m sure you’ll agree. Once scent specific training is complete after about a year we move on to the trailing aspect of searching.

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November 2015, exactly one year after commencing our training we are ready to move onto the trailing aspect of searching, it seems to be a long time coming and essentially this is what it’s all about and what we both signed up for. We start by working a “trail” that’s only a few metres long and a few minutes old, but Izzy must first find the scent, then indicate to tell me she’s found it, then follow the trail to the missing person, where once again she must indicate to tell me this is the person we are looking for. I should explain at this point how a “trail” differs from a “track”, essentially a “track” is all about ground disturbance and whilst it can be scent specific, in police dog terms tracking is following the most recent ground disturbance. Trailing is quite different in that we follow scent given off from the person from whom we have an article of clothing. All of us shed about 40 000 dead skin cells an hour as we go about our daily life, the bacteria that grows on these skin cells provides the trail for my dog to follow. As these skin cells are carried on the wind when they leave our bodies, where they fall forms the “trail” for the dog to follow. Depending on environmental conditions this could mean the trail that the dog follows could be a few centimetres or many metres from the path actually walked. During training we move

from short and straightforward trails to those that are 24 hours old and cover more than 2km in all terrains from urban to mountains.



In order to qualify as a Scent Specific Trailing Search Dog with SARDA Wales we work towards passing an assessment which is five trails over 3 days where we must achieve an 80% pass rate, which basically means we have four trails to complete over two days and if 100% is not achieved we have one more chance on the 3rd day. I'm pleased to say Izzy qualified after passing the first four trails, these trails are all a minimum of 4 hours old, at least 1 km in length and are in different terrains including, urban, lowland, mountain and mixed scenarios. During all of this training and assessment we are of course indebted to those people who selflessly give up their time to come and hide for us whatever the weather!! So in November 2016 exactly two years after we started training, Izzy became the first IRWS Mountain Rescue Search Dog in the UK, and only one of four qualified Trailing Dogs in the whole of the UK.

....All of us shed about 40000 dead skin cells an hour.....

Since Izzy qualified in November 2016 she has been called to a number of missing person enquiries not only with North Wales Police but neighbouring Cheshire also. Whilst Izzy has not yet found a missing person she has confirmed sightings and given positive points where the missing person was collected by a

car. It would be expected that she will make a number of "finds" in her career and hopefully save a number of lives. Unfortunately the nature of what we do sometimes means saving a life is not always possible but what we can offer is closure for the families or help to concentrate ongoing police investigations in a targeted manner. To follow Izzy's career you can find us on Facebook at Izzy Searchdog or Search and Rescue Dogs Association (Sarda Wales).



Search and Rescue dogs in the UK are provided voluntarily by a number of organisations, SARDA Wales being just one of them. Their handlers give a great deal of time, money and dedication to achieve what we do so thank you for taking the time to read this article, I hope you never need our services but I also hope you show your generosity when the opportunity arises.