

A nose for search and rescue

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — The human half of canine search pairs may be called “handlers,” but really, the job is all about teamwork.

Eric Ronemus and his dog, Abby, provided a good example on Oct. 29 during a “human remains detection,” evaluation, part of a three-day clinic held in Dallas by Search and Rescue Dogs of the United States.

“If I stay out of her way, she does great,” he said.

Ronemus and Abby spent part of late morning and afternoon at the Polk County shops in Dallas searching for samples of human remains with some containing as little as one ounce.

Abby, with encouragement and guidance from Ronemus, performed well. She only missed one portion of the test and wasn’t fooled when evaluators had her search an area with nothing to find.

Before the test began, Ronemus was given the general area where remains were hidden — or not, as the case may be.

He and Abby were left to do the rest.

Abby, as one evaluator said, often worked in “text-book fashion.” She would happily jog with her tail in the air in the direction Ronemus lead her until she caught a hint of something. She would sniff it and make a wider circle just to make



Jillian McIntosh, of Madras, works with her dog, Hunter, on Oct. 29, testing his human remains detection skills.

sure she had the location correct.

When she was sure, she would bark and run to Ronemus.

“Show me,” he said.

Abby would make a beeline to the location and bark again, for which Ronemus would reward her with a short game of fetch.

Then it’s on to the next test.

Ronemus and Abby work with Jackson County Search and Rescue. He decided to test Abby, 4, on SARDUS national standards for the second time at the Dallas clinic. Her first attempt two years ago didn’t go as smoothly as the Oct. 29 test.

He said a good working dog and human pair has trust and teamwork “between their noses and our brains.”

Under his search and rescue uniform, Ronemus wore

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a T-shirt with the words “trust your dog” — printed upside down so he could read it.

He did, and he rewarded his tired puppy with a much-needed drink of water after a job well-done.

“She earned her drink,” he said as Abby relaxed in the back of his truck.

Ann Wichmann, a SARDUS board member and co-founder, said the job of the handler is to help dogs be more “effective and efficient.” Handlers can evaluate wind patterns and other conditions to put their dogs in the best position to do their job — then they can let them work.

She said dogs have an extraordinary willingness to serve their human companions and that, along with natural gifts, make them well-suited for search and rescue.



Eric Ronemus follows his dog, Abby, as she searches for human remains hidden at the Polk County shops on Oct. 29, part of a Search and Rescue Dogs of the United States clinic.

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“They are very fun and very inspiring to work with,” she said.

SARDUS, in conjunction with Region 3 K-9 Search and Rescue, also conducted evaluations on “trailing,” following scent trails, and “wilderness air scent”

searches, where the dog tries to locate people in a certain area, during the clinic held Oct. 27-29. Eleven teams from Oregon, Washington and California participated.

Mark Cooperider, a member of Polk County’s Search and Rescue Team who

helped organize the clinic, said these tests establish a standard for performance for teams.

“Local teams will test and certify to a national standard, which helps ensure consistency in the skill levels across canine teams,” he said.



Abby, 4, happily jogs around the Polk County shops during a test of her searching skills. She performed well at the clinic, the second time she’s gone through the testing.

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