

Forensic I: Puzzle Solved—Canine Search and Rescue

by Nancy Gardner



Susanah Charleson

Ever wondered what talents and abilities make a good Search-and-Rescue dog? Attendees at the 2006 Crime Bake found out when K9 Handler, Susanah Charleson introduced them to Puzzle, the Search and Rescue (SAR) dog.

Susanah, Puzzle, and another SAR Tech, Ellen Sanchez, belong to Mark-9 Search and Rescue, a Dallas, Texas volunteer group that works with local police and fire departments and federal agencies. Both Charleson and Sanchez obtained certification through National Association of Search and Rescue (www.nasarorg/nasar/).

Initially, Susanah spoke while Puzzle waited outside the conference room with Ellen. Susanah explained she first met Puzzle when the golden retriever was eight weeks old. Selected

because breeder-administered tests proved Puzzle lightning-fast at maze seek-and-find tests, the pup excelled at strategy and sniffing tasks.

Puzzle went home with Susanah at ten weeks, passing her certification tests at a mere eighteen months. To this day, Puzzle routinely trains at the Dallas Fire Academy to maintain her skills. Puzzle’s success rate in finding victims is 100% and—special dog that she is—she raises up on her hind legs when she’s found the search object.

To help us understand air scent and discrimination theory, Susanah orchestrated a game called “Your Inner Search Dog.” Human volunteers used their visual, auditory and scent skills to solve SAR-type puzzles—receiving chocolate-covered strawberry treats for their efforts.

Finally, Puzzle entered, spiffily dressed in a siren-red vest, moving in a curvilinear pattern. Susanah told us Puzzle was following the air currents in the room.

During the question-and-answer session, one attendee asked how you might fool a SAR dog. The answer: shuck clothing as you run. The dog would follow the dropped clothing; just know that this distraction wouldn’t fool the dog for long.

Happily, Puzzle stayed around for the rest of the weekend and many attendees got the opportunity to pat and admire her.



Puzzle— soooo soft!



Puzzle