ARS AVALANCHE RESCUE DOG HANDLER COURSE IN ANDERMATT, SWITZERLAND

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1. INTRODUCTION
In January of 2012, my avalanche rescue K-9, Parley, and I were selected to attend the Alpine Rettung Schweiz (ARS) Avalanche Rescue Dog Handler Course in Andermatt, Switzerland. As members of the International Commission for Alpine Rescue (IKAR), Wasatch Backcountry Rescue (WBR) and ARS have set up an educational exchange in which one avalanche dog team from WBR attends the ARS course in Switzerland.

During the week long course, the WBR team trains side-by-side with the top ARS avalanche dog handlers in all aspects of avalanche rescue. All teams must demonstrate safety and proficiency in avalanche transceiver searching, mountain travel, and searching as a K-9 team. Highlights of the program include a mock evening avalanche search, the Swiss “4 Phase” progression, and flights with the Swiss medical helicopter service (REGA).

2. ALPINE RETTUNG SCHWEIZ HISTORY
During a reported avalanche incident in the 1930’s, a rescue team member had their dog accompany them on the search, “History” (2012). The K-9 began to bark at a particular location which leads the team to re-probe the area. The victim was found alive in the probed location where the K-9 was barking. This lead a Swiss dog training expert to prepare four K-9s for avalanche search and rescue. The K-9s were then presented to the Swiss Army which was responsible for avalanche rescue during this era.

After World War II, the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) began to review methods of avalanche rescue, “History” (2012). During their review, the SAC considered the previous success of K-9s during rescue and developed a formal training program for avalanche rescue dogs. The ARS is the direct descendant of the SAC rescue training program.

3. ARS AND WASATCH BACKCOUNTRY RESCUE
Wasatch Backcountry Rescue was established in January of 1976 after the avalanche death of Doug Schreiber, Hutchinson (2004). On January 6, 1976 a meeting was held in Alta, Utah under the direction of the Salt Lake County Sheriff. The goal was to create a non-profit, volunteer organization that would provide wilderness rescue services. In 1977, the Wasatch Powderbird Guides brought in the first dog to WBR for avalanche rescue training. The original members of WBR included the ski resorts of Alta, Snowbird, Solitude, Brighton, along with the Wasatch Powderbird Guides.

Currently the WBR spans Northern Utah and includes nine ski areas operating under the direction of six county sheriffs. Because of the WBR’s proven expertise in avalanche search and rescue, they have been chosen to represent the United States in the International Commission for Alpine Rescue. One of the benefits of being a member includes the education exchange between the ARS and WBR. Every year one avalanche dog team and an additional dog handler from WBR are selected to attend the ARS dog handler course. The WBR handlers are grouped with the highest level ARS handlers. This allows the WBR

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handlers to observe the training techniques of the ARS handlers and participate in each step of the training process.

3. ARS AVALANCHE RESCUE DOG TRAINING

The ARS avalanche rescue dog training program is one of the oldest formal programs in the world. The Swiss have developed a “4 Phase” progression to develop a desired alert from the avalanche rescue K-9. The progression uses positive reinforcement along with the bond between the dog and handler to influence the behavior.

Prior to implementing the progression a reward must be established for the K-9. Both the WBR and ARS believe that this reward is used exclusively during search scenarios. The reward is the most critical aspect of the progression because it will determine the excitement and drive of the dog during searching. If the dog is not excited for the reward, then they will not exhibit the drive and stamina needed to locate a missing victim.

The Swiss are famous for using a type of sausage as a food reward. Most WBR members use a tug reward for their K-9s and have a puppy selection process to determine if the dog has a strong tug response. Both the Swiss and WBR are finding that each K-9 has their own personality. Because of this there is not just one reward that works for every K-9. Some handlers have even used games of Frisbee as the reward for their K-9.

3.1 Swiss “4 Phase” Progression

The first phase of the progression is a simple game of “hide-and-seek” between the dog and handler, Budde (2002). A third party holds the dog a short distance from a shallow hole that has been dug prior to the drill. The handler teases the dog while being held by the third party to excite the dog and get their attention. The handler then runs and dives into the shallow hole. If this is the dog’s first time “searching”, the hole should be positioned so the K-9 never leaves the sight of the handler. The third party then immediately releases the dog with the “search” command. When the dog goes to the handler and produces the desired “alert” then the handler immediately rewards the dog.

The second phase is designed to make the dog work a little harder for the “find” and encourage a dig alert, Budde (2002). Once the handler has teased the dog and entered the hole, the entrance to the hole is blocked using large soft blocks. Enough scent should rise through the blocks for the dog to instinctually dig through the blocks to enter the hole. The K-9 is rewarded once they dig through the blocks and enter the hole.

The goal of the third phase is to introduce a “stranger” into the search, Budde (2002). The drill is set up exactly as the second phase with the hole being large enough to accommodate two people. The stranger and the handler act as a team. Both the stranger and the handler approach the restrained K-9 and the stranger teases the K-9. Both the handler and the stranger run to the hole. The stranger is positioned in the front of the hole with the handler behind them. Once the dog produces the desired “alert” the stranger rewards the dog.

Stage 4, the last stage, eliminates the handler from the hole, Budde (2002). During this stage, the handler restrains the dog as the stranger teases the dog. The stranger will enter the hole and the handler releases the K-9. As with the other stages the stranger rewards the K-9 after the desired “alert”.

During the Progression, the key to being successful is a proper reward. Selecting “strangers” that will show the proper level of excitement during the reward could have both a positive and negative effect on the response of the K-9. The reward and the person giving the reward have to convince the K-9 that the search “game” is the best game for the K-9 to play.

The “4 Phase” progression is used at all levels of avalanche dog training. The progression is an excellent tool for teaching new dogs the search “game” and helps keep senior dogs
motivated. If a dog is not performing well at one phase of the progression then most handlers will go to an earlier phase to help motivate the K-9. The phases can be made more complex by deeper burials and multiple victims to help challenge the K-9.

Along with practicing the “4 Phase” progression, several other skills were practiced during the ARS school. One day was dedicated to demonstrating proficient transceiver searching and mountain travel in the Andermatt backcountry. The REGA medical air service came in one morning and the teams practiced loading the dog teams in a running helicopter. A highlight of the school was an evening mock avalanche search where teams practiced all aspects of avalanche search including K-9 searching, transceiver searching, and probing in an organized probe line.

4. SNOWBOARDING AND AVALANCHE RESCUE

For many years, using a snowboard as a method of travel for avalanche control and rescue was frowned upon due to non-releasable bindings, Tremper (2008). Although releasable bindings continue to be strongly encouraged during avalanche work, telemark ski patrollers have helped pave the way for non-releasable bindings being accepted in the avalanche community. Several resorts in Northern Utah are allowing snowboarders and telemark skiers on their ski patrols.

The “slowboarder” stigma is another hurdle when working on a snowboard in the backcountry. A system that helps with the transition from uphill to downhill travel is alpine snowboard bindings and Alpine Touring hard shell ski boots. The Alpine bindings are much easier to clip in and release than a traditional ratchet strap binding. In addition, the AT boots are much more stable when boot packing on hard surfaces. This boot-binding system has been successful when working with WBR, ARS, and the Canadian Avalanche Rescue Dog Association.

The last issue to overcome is travelling safely downhill with the K-9. Ski and snowboard edge cuts to the K-9 can cause permanent damage to the dog and even end the dog's career. These cuts can be caused by other skiers or snowboarders in high-traffic areas. Handlers can cause cuts themselves when skiing/snowboarding in close quarters with the dog.

To protect the dog during downhill travel, I have developed techniques specific to the snowboard. First, good verbal obedience is necessary. Teaching commands such as “heel” and “behind” keep the K-9 in position around the board while travelling downhill. To protect the dog from other skiers and snowboarders, I have developed a technique on a 6 foot lead where the dog remains directly behind the board while I am on a heel-edge side slip. This allows me to use my body and snowboard tips to protect the dog if another skier or snowboarder approaches.
REFERENCES


