



In August 2007 we were lucky enough to have the Welsh police-dog instructor Alun Williams come to give us a seminar. In it, he set great store by various points which I shall try to summarise in these pages. I should like to stress explicitly that these are Alun Williams' ideas, as I understood them. It is quite on the cards that I misinterpreted or misremembered some of them. As always, I would recommend reading these pages in a critical spirit, and adopting only those points that appear to you to make sense or seem relevant to yourself and your dog.

The scent-article

Alun Williams attaches great importance to having a good scent-article. The dogs, he said, can work effectively only if they are provided with a first-rate scent-article. Alun favours articles that are permeated with the scent of the person to be sought, preferably from the area of the genitals or the armpits. In experiments with his own dogs on the subject of scent-articles, he has observed that the dogs work better, more securely and with greater concentration, the more strongly the article smells of the target person – i.e., the longer it has been in contact with that person. So as to have the least possible external contamination of the article, it is always picked up by the dog-handler.

He keeps the articles in screw-top jars inserted in plastic bags, since experience has shown that plastic bags alone are not sufficient. After about 20 minutes, scent escapes even from sealed plastic bags, or the article absorbs scent from its surroundings, which results in the “pollution” of the article. The Welsh police use nothing but gauze as a carrier for the scent (the scent transferred from the scent-article proper, which may have to be subjected to forensic examination).

Scenting and the start

Every bit as important as the scent-article itself is the phase of scenting. In this connection, Alun Williams speaks of “the whole picture”, which the dog has to take in so as to have the best possible chance of succeeding in the search. If the dog registers the scent only superficially, in difficult circumstances it may lack key aspects of the scent which it may need to identify the trail. Hence, he argues, the dog should stick its nose in the bag for several seconds before it is sent on the trail. If some dogs dislike doing this, he recommends putting a “treat” in the bag along with the scent-article until the dog has grown accustomed to the practice.

The start should be carried out as calmly as possible, and not immediately and automatically after scenting. To guarantee the safety of both dog and dog-handler, after scenting Alun Williams does not give the start command until he has returned the scent-article to its receptacle, sorted out the dog-lead and checked that there are no hazards (e.g., cars) in the vicinity. Alun does not operate with perimeters. When the dog sets off, the dog-handler remains standing at the starting point until the dog unambiguously shows him the direction to go. If the situation allows, the dog should be given the entire length of the lead to reconnoitre the area. Only when the dog has unambiguously settled on a direction should the dog-handler follow his dog.

Structuring the training

When one begins mantrailing with a new dog, care should be taken in the structuring to see that the dog develops the most distinct body language possible, since that greatly facilitates reading the dog.

First objective: the dog should indicate an unambiguous direction. Initially, one should start with the hiding person going away from the dog rapidly, while the dog watches. The dog will pull strongly in the direction of the hiding person: this is a type of behaviour one wishes to foster, since the dog is thereby indicating an unambiguous direction. The dog-handler follows the dog only if, and as long as, it is pulling in

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a single (the right) direction. Gradually the distance is increased. The next step should not be taken until this behaviour pattern is well-established.

Second objective: practising headturns. Before one starts systematically practising headturns, the dog should regularly be able to search between 50 and 100 metres straight ahead, while pulling vigorously. It should expect the hiding person to be at least 50 metres away from the starting point. In order that the dog may demonstrate headturns in search of the person to be sought, it must run past the place where that person is hidden. To achieve this, the distance the dog has to run up to the person must be much reduced, taking care that the dog cannot see where the person is hiding and how he gets there. Once the dog is ordered to search, in the expectation that it will have to run straight ahead for quite a long time before reaching its goal, it will dash past the hidden person and, at almost the same moment (pay attention to the wind), jerk its head in his direction before changing direction towards him. These sudden changes in the direction of vision are the headturns which later, on the trail, will show us which direction to take. Gradually increase the distance. Do not proceed any further until this behaviour pattern is likewise well-established!

Shaping the dog's behaviour (negative scent-article)

Dogs have a natural body language that can be accurately interpreted by the trained observer. It is important to foster and enhance this language, so that it can be recognised even after a lengthy period, and even when both dog and handler are tiring. Under the heading "*Structuring the training*" I have already given two examples of how behaviour can be shaped. A further point is the negative alert. Dogs that have lost the trail and do not know which way, or how, to go on normally look (after varying periods of time) to their handler for help. Such eye-contact may often at first be very short, hardly perceptible. It should, however, be reinforced, so that the dog can learn what behaviour is expected of it in this situation. Such eye-contact then gradually becomes an unambiguous indication for a negative alert.

The exercise then proceeds as follows: the dog is put on its lead, as usual, and is scented with the negative scent-article in its bag. Once the time is considered to be

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right, the dog is ordered to start searching. As a rule, the dog will set off on its search, but the dog-handler will remain standing where he is. That gives the dog no clue that the scent-article is negative (if this is the customary procedure). The dog is given the full length of the lead (depending on the surroundings) in order to search the cross-roads, the square, or whatever, but the dog-handler does not move, since

he knows that a negative scent-article is involved. After a certain length of time (differing from dog to dog), the dog will seek eye-contact with the handler, such contact possibly not lasting longer than half a second to begin with. For all that, praise and reassure the dog immediately!! It is important to bear in mind that, initially, it is not a matter of the dog showing us that the scent-article is negative; what counts is that we demonstrate to the dog what behaviour we are expecting of it when a negative scent-article is involved. That is to say, we shape its behaviour first and do not test as yet whether it has understood what it is to do. Alun Williams recommends using a negative scent-article about every 20 trails. In time the dog will respond faster and faster to a negative and give its response more and more clearly. That is the time to proceed a step further.

Once the dog has indicated a negative scent-article, it is praised briefly, taken a few metres further and ordered once again to seek the scent previously presented. This is to test whether it sticks to its opinion, and to prevent it from getting the idea that it can claim a reward quickly and easily by indicating a negative scent-article. The shorter the time that elapses, on average, before the dog registers a negative, the more critically and sceptically the situation should be viewed. The first time, a single confirmation of a negative is in order??, but in time one makes the dog search more and more often, and larger and larger areas, before accepting a negative. When such a negative scent-article is working well “in safeguarded mode”, one can start to test whether this is also the case when the dog-handler remains in the dark. For this purpose, one gives the handler a scent-article about which he does not know whether or not it is negative. If the team comes to the right decision (i.e., negative or not), that is an initial indication that the dog’s behaviour pattern may be well-enough shaped. Needless to say, this finding has to be confirmed by a number of other, similar tests.

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Running known trails, so as to learn how to read the dog

Alun Williams considers it essential -- especially at the start of training -- to run as many known trails as possible. There are two main reasons for this: it is the only way of shaping the wished-for behaviour of the dog and, moreover, it is the best way of learning how to interpret the dog's body language.

As for the shaping: at the start of training, the dog does not know what one expects of it. The manner in which one gets the dog to search on the trail is, for it, the sole and crucial clue as to what one is expecting of it. Thus, if one has the dog seek over a wide area, it will learn that one wants it to search widely. If one allows it to depart from the trail proper, it will learn that **such** behaviour is desirable.

But what is the behaviour that we really want of the dog? Alun would like to have a dog which searches efficiently, and which follows the actual trail as precisely as possible. For the police, it is important to ascertain exactly where the malefactor has been or where he went. Needless to say, not everyone will have the same requirements. But the police in Hesse have already intimated that precise tracking is important to them, too, in a mantrailing team. If one follows Alun's principles, one must see to it that the dog searches efficiently and follows the trail faithfully from the very beginning. "Efficiently" means that the dog makes no unnecessary detours, "following faithfully" means that the dog stays as close as possible to the trail actually run. To ensure that this is so, one has to know over a long period where the trail runs, for otherwise one can neither ensure that the dog remains **on** the trail nor prevent it from making detours.

As for the reading: when one begins to learn how to read a dog, this is much easier to do if one knows in advance where the trail is running. Then one can look out specifically for changes in the dog's body language when one approaches a spot where the trail changes direction. Among many dogs, these signs are so slight that they may easily be missed if one is not watching out specifically for them or waiting for them. In this way, one can learn how one's own dog indicates the route of the trail, so that one can subsequently recognise the signal when the trail is unknown.

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Regularly checking the team

If one works often with known trails, it is of course essential to check from time to time whether or not one can be successful in a particular respect even without any aids. The time has come for such a check once the team has gained the impression that it can perform without difficulty the tasks set. Then, one should systematically remove one "crutch" after another, but only as long as the team continues to be successful. For instance, on an otherwise known trail one can leave one or two crossroads at the end indistinct. If the team has no problems with this, one could, for example, lengthen the unknown part of the trail. But as soon as any task turns out to be too difficult, one should at once go back one step. Quite generally, however, Alun recommends that one should know where a relatively high percentage of the trails run.

Efficient working

By "efficient working" Alun means that the team follows, without any detours, the trail actually run, if possible without any lengthy delays at the various crossing points. For him, efficient working is vital, for two reasons: in the first place, it is important to conserve energy, since one cannot know how long the trail will be. Even if the dog does not mind covering twice the span of metres and the dog-handler if trained and fit, in the course of police duty, when less fit people are accompanying the team in order to protect it, they may be grateful for every metre that they do not have to run.

Secondly, Alun recommends not simply running behind the dog because one may quickly forget the point at which one last had the impression that the dog was "on the trail". In built-up areas it is perhaps still possible, but in unstructured districts (woods, fields) in areas one does not know, one would quickly lose one's bearings, and thus not be able to return to the spot at which the dog was still sure of itself. If one follows the dog only when it indicates unambiguously that it **is** sure of itself, then the chances of not losing the trail are substantially higher.

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Following the trail precisely

For Alun's work, it is essential that the dog follows the trail precisely, for only like this can one reconstruct where the offender has been or where evidence might be found with the aid of which the offender can be convicted. That does not necessarily apply to the area of search and rescue dogs, since in this case it is only a matter of locating a missing person. Even so, in my view there are good reasons why we should attach importance to precise tracking. If one allows one's dog to make short-cuts, the following problems may arise: during the short-cut, the dog may lose the direction, and thus the entire trail, because of a change of wind; as soon as the dog returns to the actual trail, it must identify the direction again, and may make a mistake in doing so (from what I have heard, this task is not so easy, especially if the dog returns to the trail at a 90° angle); on the omitted part of the trail there may be an eye-witness who could provide further evidence (be it only a confirmation that the missing person did indeed go that way); during training, it is even harder to ascertain why the dog has lost its way (a false combination, difficult conditions, etc.)

Practising what went wrong

During training, everybody is looking for success. Success is absolutely essential to man and dog alike if the training is to remain fun. At the same time, however, there is always a risk that one sticks primarily to those things that come off well, just because one wants to enjoy the successes. Although this is understandable, it really ought to be the other way round: one really ought to practise the things that go wrong, for only in that way can one improve and make progress. In many cases, one tries to avoid situations which have caused one trouble, but it is precisely those which will lead to failure on a mission.

The dog may make mistakes

It is perfectly normal, and not a disaster, for the dog to make mistakes. Making mistakes is a necessary aspect of learning, and no problem at all during the shaping

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process. After all, the dog is endeavouring to find out what is expected of it, and is trying out. By our permitting or encouraging only the behaviour that we want, the dog learns over time what is expected of it. The “wrong” behaviour will automatically diminish and – if we do it properly – disappear over time. Until that happens, one should understand mistakes as an opportunity to show the dog what is not wanted.

As difficulties mount, the length of the trail must be shortened (or other demands reduced)

When something new is being practised, it is essential that the learner – in this case, the dog – should be able to concentrate on one thing at a time. In other words, if a second difficulty is to be added to the first one, the first problem should temporarily be mitigated somewhat.

As far as every trail is concerned, one should know what is the point of it, or why one is running it

Unless one clearly foresees what one means to accomplish on a trail, one cannot practise effectively. One will run many unnecessary trails that do not yield any real progress. The objective should be to get as far as possible with as few trails as possible.

One should stick with a difficulty until one has mastered it, before turning to a new one

If one is constantly practising something new, one spreads oneself too thinly. One has no idea how far one has progressed in a particular matter, and lessons previously learned will have been forgotten again by the time one practises once more; one often has the impression of having made no headway, because the progress is so small as to be almost imperceptible unless one has a clear recollection of the last trail on a given subject. Moreover, it appears as though one cannot say for certain that, as a team, one has mastered a particular task. Needless to say, this does not mean that one should not undertake easier, motivating assignments from

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time to time but, at all events, several difficulties should not be practised at the same time.

Body tension in the dog/crossroads work

At the beginning of crossroads work, it is important for the handler to be informed about the precise route of the trail. It is only in this way that he can give the dog the right signals, so that it can conclude what behaviour is expected of it. To begin with, the dog can see the runner going away from it, if this helps it to exhibit more unambiguous body language. The language we want to see from the dog may differ from creature to creature, but there are a number of common features: one must have the impression that the dog is feeling tense; its entire body should be forward-directed, and should imply a clear direction as to where it wants to go.

As one approaches a crossroads, one shortens the length of lead available to the dog and watches the dog carefully. If its body tension clearly suggests that it is feeling confident, and really wants to go in the right direction, one follows the dog; if necessary, one can extend the length of lead. If one notices signs of uncertainty in the dog or if it has gone wrong, one stops at the crossroads and gives the dog as long a lead as it needs to reconnoitre the area. At most crossroads, it is not necessary to give the dog a lead of more than five to seven metres to enable it to decide on the correct direction. As soon as one sees from the dog's body language that it has settled on a specific direction, one can follow it (needless to say, only if it has decided correctly!). If the dog decides wrongly, on no account follow it, since that would teach it a wrong lesson, but rather offer it alternatives until the dog sets off in the right direction. The key factor determining whether one should follow one's dog at a crossroads is not whether it is correct, but whether it shows unambiguously through its body language where it wants to go. Of course, the direction must also be right if one is to follow it.

The number of crossroads or the length of the trail should gradually be increased. Only if one has the impression that one can read the dog easily should the dog-handler run a trail that is unknown to him in safeguarded mode (with a companion

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who knows where the trail runs). Until the dog automatically shows the direction unambiguously, this behaviour pattern should periodically be practised/brushed up again and again, especially after long and strenuous mission trails.

Practising identifications

The prerequisite is that the dog already how to indicate the runner at the end of a trail and offers this behaviour autonomously when it is a matter of identifying a person. This exercise is structured as follows:

One selects a road with next to no traffic. One person is asked to walk down the road on the right-hand side and another on the left-hand side. They stop walking after about 50 to 100 metres, but not level with each other; one person should be 10 to 20 metres nearer to the starting point than the other. At the beginning of the exercise, the dog-handler should be told to which of the persons the scent-article that he shows to the dog belongs, to stop his dog making a mistake. If one has set store by precise tracking, the dog, after scenting (which should take place in the middle of the road [but watch out for cars!]), should cross to the side on which the right person has walked. That is an initial indication that the dog is attentive to the scent-article. To begin with, the dog could be praised (with restraint). There is a strong likelihood that the dog will run to the right person and indicate him, even if he is the more distant one and the dog has to run past the other distractor person. However, if the distractor is someone the dog knows, it may happen that the dog will want to cross the road to greet him, and even to indicate him. But one prevents this during the shaping phase, and makes the dog go on searching. Otherwise, one cannot teach it which behaviour is wanted. Great care must be taken to ensure that one knows precisely which person the scent-article belongs to. Otherwise one is apt to incorporate some misassociations, with serious consequences. What is more, the scent-article should be a well-weathered object.

This exercise should be repeated in a number of different ways: the correct person is sometimes on the left and sometimes on the right; sometimes he is nearer and sometimes further away. When the exercise causes the team no further problems,

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the requirements can be stepped up: an additional person, and then several persons, can be included, or both persons walk on the same side.

Once everything runs smoothly, a test is called for. To be absolutely certain that the team has understood its task, it is necessary for all the clues which the team may have used to get its bearings to be eliminated. Hence Alun makes sure that neither the dog-handler nor the persons hiding are told who is to be looked for. Only the instructor, or the person organising the test, is notified who the scent-article belongs to. In the first test, the requirements should not be set too high, and the same set-up as on the first occasion should be used (i.e., two persons on opposite sides of the road). In the test, unlike during the shaping phase, the team should be allowed to make mistakes, for then it may be possible to identify what the cause of such mistakes is. If the dog slips up once, that has no adverse implications for the training. The operative word here is **once**.

As for the dog's response, the following options are conceivable:

1. The dog performs exactly as desired; it runs straight to the right person and indicates him. That's fine, but once is only a clue, not a guarantee, so some extra test runs are needed, with a different test set-up.
2. The dog runs to the nearer person, although this is the wrong one. As long as the dog does not indicate that person, but goes on searching on its own initiative, this is no problem. But if it unambiguously indicates that person, the dog-handler should definitely tell the dog "no" and get it to go on searching. Additional test runs should only be carried out "in safeguarded mode".1)
3. The dog runs past the nearer person, even though this is the right one. If it does not run on very much further but remains in the vicinity of the right person, it may be that the dog is concentrating so much on the scent that it overlooks the target person. An additional possibility is that the dog has a problem with the target person – e.g. he seems to the dog so threatening that it does not want to indicate him. In both cases, I would carry out a further test run, which might provide more clues as to the cause.

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4. The dog runs past the nearer person, even though this is the right one, and runs on relatively purposefully to the distractor person. If the distractor is someone the dog knows, then it is a fairly safe assumption that the dog has a preference for that person or remembers that it has already been praised by him. It appears to the dog highly likely that it will be praised by that person once again. In this case, the dog has not understood the task, especially the scent article, and one should continue the training "in safeguarded mode". If the distractor person is a stranger, possible causes might be that in the past the dog has often had the experience that the target person is not the nearer/left-hand person or that it has negative associations with the nearer person (adverse past experience, looks threatening ...).

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