

## Go Sniff

### "The journey to becoming the 1st Australian Terriers to title in Canine Nosework"

By Beth Moon

Finnick waits patiently at the start line with his nose up in the air. After a few moments he has caught the scent of birch oil in the wind and he is ready to hunt, he is only waiting for the cue. "Go sniff", I call and he takes off across the start line and the search begins.

Dodging to the right of the 3 parked cars, it looks like he is going in the wrong direction but he is just following the scent that bounces around the 3 vehicles, hits the warm pavement and is swirled around in the air. But as he follows the scent out it suddenly takes him to a sharp left and then back to the first car. It may look like he is zig-zagging around but Finnick is moving with purpose as he closes in on the front passenger tire.

He smells each spoke of the tire, deep nasal breaths, until he is sure exactly where the source of the odor is. He takes one last sniff, looks up at me, appears to smile and lays down, waiting to be paid. He has a satisfied smug on his face as if to say 'I'm awesome at this. You can't trick me'. I call "alert". The judge announces "yes". Finnick is rewarded with bits of turkey hotdogs and string cheese. This search happened in only 30.03 seconds.

As we leave the search area we are celebrating because Finnick has found the fourth hide of the day and we have earned our NW1 title. Not only that, but we join Finnick's cousin, Oscar, who has also just earned his NW1 title. My sister and I are ecstatic that both of our dogs get to share the honor of being the first Australian Terrier ever to earn their NW1 title in the National Association of Canine Scent Work (NASCW). We've worked hard together and can put sibling rivalry aside and share the moment.

Canine Nosework was developed out of Professional Canine Detection to allow pet dogs to learn and compete with scent detection skills. The first NASCW trial was held in January 2009. It is a new dog sport that has started to explode in popularity. It allows dogs to use their greatest asset, their nose, to do something that humans can't do. Dogs have 300 million olfactory receptor cells compared to 5 million in humans which allows dogs to smell their world in stereo. I think about how much Finnick and Oscar like to explore through smell on their walks. In training for Nosework we are capturing something they love to do already and creating a game out of it.

In January 2016 my sister, Emily, and I began training our Australian Terriers, Dunham Lake Over the Moon "Oscar" (3 years) and Dunham Lake LunaTrick Finnick "Finnick" (1 year) to compete in the sport of Canine Nosework. We began training through an online class in our living room. The first steps were to build value and drive for the birch oil. We used q-tips with birch oil and put them in a tin. We would hold the tin out in our hands and they would smell the tin and get a treat. They smell, they get a treat, over and over. I quickly got bored of this step but Finnick and Oscar thought it was a super easy way to earn treats.

As value was built, we lined up three boxes one with oil (the hot box) and two with nothing (the cold boxes). They would find the box with the oil and would get a treat. As time went on we would make it progressively harder by putting the boxes all over the room, placing them on higher platforms, or kind of hiding them. They picked up the game fast. They find the oil, they get paid. Simple as that.

What I was amazed was how much they obsessively loved to find the odor. They would whine waiting for their next turn and rush out of their crate to begin the next search. As we advanced the game became more fun because Emily and I tried to be more creative and challenging in our hides and, most of the time, the boys would find it. As kids we would hide Easter eggs over and over again just for the fun of the hunt. This brought back that childhood pastime and was a fun way to interact with our dogs. Australian Terriers were originally bred as ratters so it makes sense that they would pursue scent hides with enthusiasm.

I was also surprised at how mentally engaging it was for the dogs as they searched for the odor. The dog has to really process and think critically as they hunt and it wears them out more than our winter walks could. As they search, the dog must problem solve where the odor could be coming from. The wind blows and the odor spreads in different directions or it may vent out from different side and disperse in another direction. Dogs have to find the trail but that isn't good enough, they must also locate the source. And once we added two hides in one search area this created more need for problem solving as a dog had to distinguish between two converging odors. Having fun and the bonus of a tired puppy were two strong motivators to keep playing this game.

We learned there were other benefits. Oscar competes in agility but has some noise sensitivities. Agility trials can be stressful events for noise sensitive dogs. But because Nosework requires room to mentally focus on finding the scent, the competitions are set up to allow the dog to focus without other noises and distractions. There are no buzzers, crowds or announcers to be concerned about. Dogs get to hunt in peace and quiet and worry only about what they love to do, sniff. After every find Oscar would strut himself around the parking lot so proud of what he had accomplished. That is the confidence building that we love to see in our dogs.

Nosework also offers benefits for dogs with reactivity issues. Finnick was snapped from behind by another puppy during a class last year. This set off a fear based reactivity and created a constant vigilance in him. As a team, Finnick and I have been working through his issues. Nosework classes are a great place to build up his confidence and show him that the world isn't such a scary place.

In Nosework classes only one dog works at a time while the other dogs are crated. During trials there are rules about how far dogs have to be away from each other, even while outside. The trials are also thoughtfully set up so that dogs don't crash into each other going from one location to another. I am so grateful that Finnick and I can work on his fear issues and we aren't judged but understood and welcomed. It has been wonderful to see him blossom and to see his reactivity become secondary to what he really loves, hunting for the odor. He is learning to trust me to have his back so he doesn't have to worry about surprises. That is the most important thing we can accomplish as a team.

Part of our training is learning to work together. I'm learning to better read Finnick's signals, to know when he is on odor, when he is working out the direction it is coming from and when he has found the source. Nosework allows the handler to step back and lets the dog take the lead in the hunt. As a handler I'm also learning to read his cues, how weather and other environmental situations can affect his hunt and how I can step in and help him search if he gets stuck. I'm accidentally learning to be a better handler and we are bonding.

In order to begin competing in a Nosework trial the dog must pass an Odor Recognition Test (ORT). For the test, 12 boxes are lined up in two rows and the dog must alert the one box with the odor. Birch is used in NW1, Anise is introduced in NW2 and Clove is added in NW3. We tried our first ORT in March and it was a huge fail. We may have tried too early and Finnick and Oscar didn't have enough understanding or drive at that point. We went home disappointed but kept playing. In May we signed up for another ORT and Finnick found the Birch Odor in 8 seconds and Oscar in 12 seconds. At that point we knew that they had the drive and the understanding for the sport and our next step was to get ready for trial.

Nosework trials are set up so that a dog has to search four different elements: interior, exterior, container and vehicles. In order to title a dog must find all four hides within the time limit, usually around three minutes. As a team titles and progresses they are faced with harder hides, multiple

hides, two or more different scents and once at the NW3 stage teams don't know how many hides have been placed. It is fun to see how advanced this game can become and think about the training challenges ahead.

Oscar also competes in agility and has earned titles in both AKC and CPE venues. Finnick and I are also training in agility and he shows great passion and drive for that sport as well. What I love best about this breed is they are simply happiest being with you; however, working with you is a fun bonus. I find Australian Terriers to be energetic, engaging, super smart, and they have a big desire to learn. I have heard people say that terriers are difficult to train because they are too stubborn. I've never trained another breed, terrier or otherwise so I find this comment baffling. I wonder if some dogs even easier than Australian Terriers to train. We are always learning new tricks together. I am challenged to learn more as a trainer so that we can do even more together. Another positive point, these dogs are very food motivated which means that we can engage them even with distractions.

We started out this game as a fun living room past time to deal with cold Minnesota winters. But of course we have caught the competition bug. When I learned that there had not been any other Australian Terrier to title in the venue, which spurred our team on to practice practice practice. We went into our first NW1 trial not knowing what to expect with our #1 goal to have fun. But being the first Australian Terriers to title was a hopeful goal #2. We are so proud of Oscar and Finnick to tie with that first title. It really made for a special history making day for the breed we love.

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