BLIND SEARCHES

When training, do you slow down your search when you know a target is present? Do you present the area containing your target more thoroughly? Do you change the grip on your leash as you approach the target location? You may be answering “No”, but your canine partner may answer differently…

Handlers must realize that the elimination of subtle, unintentional cues is nearly impossible when target hide location is known. These cues are problematic because dogs, and animals in general (do an internet search for “Clever Hans” sometime), are excellent at recognizing patterns and cues, which quickly become part of their conditioned response. Since these cues will be absent during actual operational searches (where target placement is not known), it can lead to confusion, nervousness, missed targets, and an increase in false identifications. To avoid such
To incorporate blind exercises into your routine, develop a buddy training system and take turns in the lead role. As the lead, you will be responsible for establishing an exercise that includes some combination of targets, controls, and distractors – the number and location should be unknown to your partnering colleague(s). In some cases, the training area should be void of targets to ensure that there is no expectation of finding something. While establishing the scenario does require more effort/time for the lead person, the partnering handler(s) can simply arrive and conduct the training. Thus, the overall efficiency of training for the group as a whole is greatly improved. The lead person should accompany each team during the search and provide assistance when necessary (e.g., prevent the “blind” handler from inadvertently removing the dog from target odor). At the end of the blind searches, the lead person is still able to use the established scenario for critical training; he will be conducting it as a “known” problem, but such situations are ideal for correcting previously identified issues or deficiencies.

Blind searches are one of the most powerful and impactful tools available to detection canine programs. Only under such conditions can trainers/handlers fully eliminate cues, understand true level of competency, and make improvements to real world detection capability.

Look for Topic 4 in the next issue.