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Get a Whiff of This

Even the most basic description of a Weimaraner prominently mentions their scenting ability. Weimaraners revel in following their noses, poking and snuffing up smells that we never detect. It's no wonder that they act this way since their anatomy predisposes them to "seeing" the world through their noses. It's estimated that the average dog has 220 million cells devoted to their sense of smell, while we poor humans go through life with a mere 5 million or so.

Good news. There's a new dog sport on the horizon that taps into the dogs' ability and love of using their noses. It's called AKC Scent Work. Dogs are trained to detect a specific scent and signal the handler when the scent is found. As of October 2017 formal testing of this ability becomes an AKC titling activity.

As an AKC sport, Scent Work trials can be held by AKC Licensed and Member Clubs that apply and are approved to hold trials. There are two major divisions in testing: Odor Search Division (the dog searches for the odor of specific essential oil scents); and Handler Discrimination Division (the dog searches for the scent of their handler).

Testing is done in specified environments which are called "Elements." The four Elements are: Container (scent is hidden in a container like a box); Interior (scent is in an indoor search area); Exterior (the odor is out of doors and thus is effected by wind, weather and distractions); and Buried (the scent is in a small container that is buried underground).

What are the essential oil scents that are used in Odor Search testing? In Novice the scent is birch (it smells to me like root beer). In Advanced work anise (licorice smelling) is added and the dog is expected to detect birch and/or anise. At the Master level clove is added and the dog searches for birch/anise and/or clove. Finally in Master competition cypress is the additional scent and any of the four scents may be in the test.

Testing scenting ability is done at four competitive levels: Novice, Advanced, Excellent and Master. Progressively greater skill levels are tested by increasing the size of the search area, variety of types of search areas, time allowed to locate the "hide," and number of "hides." Dogs work one at a time and most often they are on lead. To qualify for a title, three qualifying scores must be attained at each level.

One of the best parts of Scent Work is that the training is so much fun for you and your dog. Although there are a variety of ways to train, they follow a basic pattern. First step is to foster the desire to hunt for food. (With a start like that will any Weimaraner lack motivation?) Food is hidden in a defined area and when it's found the handler reinforces with additional food. Once the dog learns the game of hunting for food, the food is paired with a specific scent. Finding the combination of scent/food pairing is reinforced by more food from the handler. Eventually food is lessened and the dog hunts for the scent and indicates a "find" to the handler.

How do you think Weimaraners will do in AKC Scent Work? You be the judge. The training is done with food. (Yes, that will get the attention of your dog). The dog is encouraged to use its nose. (Yes, we all know there's not a Weimaraner alive who isn't a nose on four legs). Does it sound like a sport made for Weimaraners? Absolutely.

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