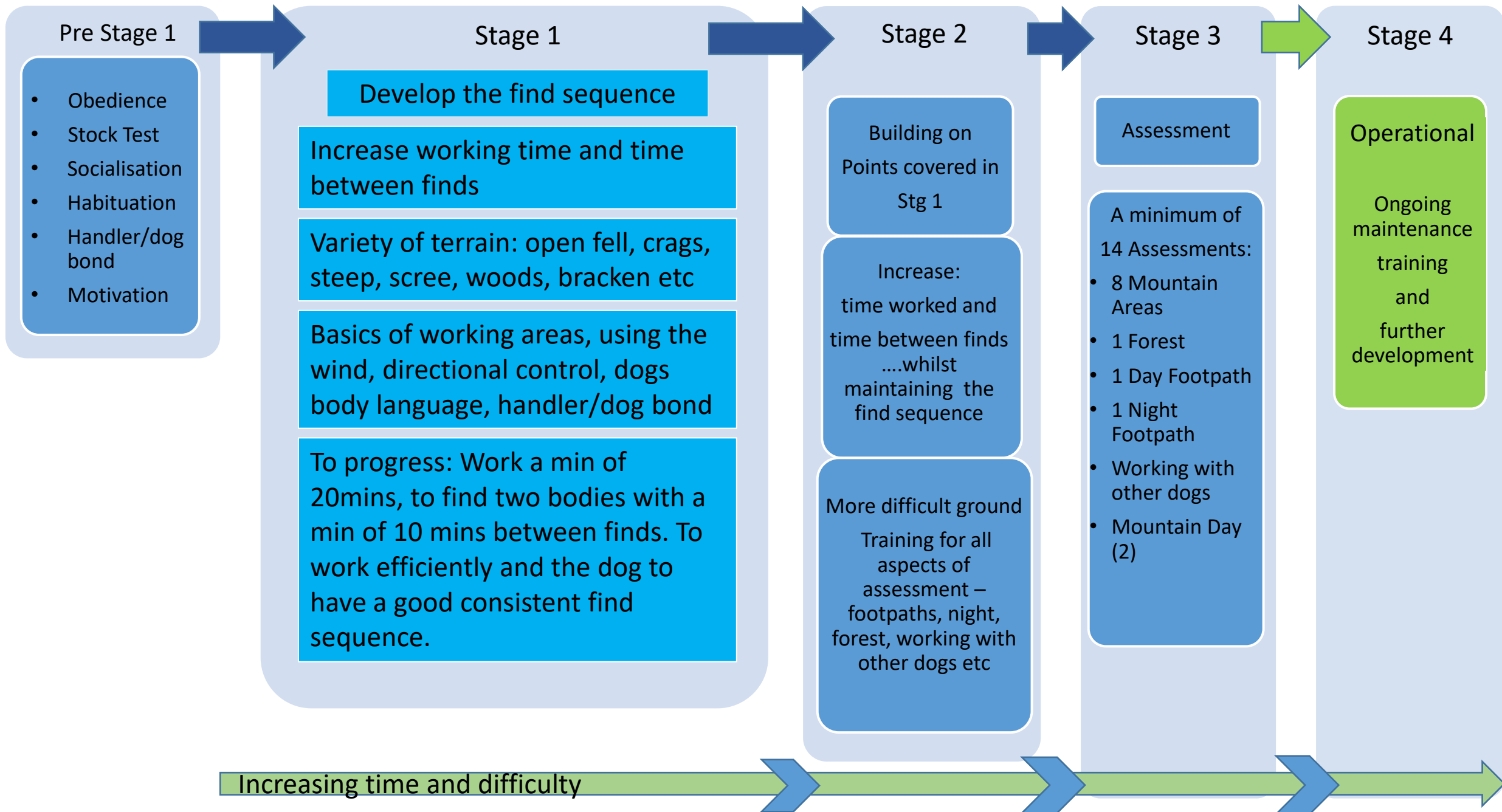# Search Dog Training – The Early Stages

ELLY WHITEFORD – SEARCH DOG HANDLER & STAGE 1 TRAINING CO-ORDINATOR

Development of a Lake District Mountain Rescue Search Dog

Pre Stage 1

- Obedience
- Stock Test
- Socialisation
- Habituation
- Handler/dog bond
- Motivation

Stage 1

Develop the find sequence

Increase working time and time between finds

Variety of terrain: open fell, crags, steep, scree, woods, bracken etc

Basics of working areas, using the wind, directional control, dogs body language, handler/dog bond

To progress: Work a min of 20mins, to find two bodies with a min of 10 mins between finds. To work efficiently and the dog to have a good consistent find sequence.

Stage 2

Building on Points covered in Stg 1

Increase:
time worked and time between finds ....whilst maintaining the find sequence

More difficult ground
Training for all aspects of assessment – footpaths, night, forest, working with other dogs etc

Stage 3

Assessment

A minimum of 14 Assessments:
- 8 Mountain Areas
- 1 Forest
- 1 Day Footpath
- 1 Night Footpath
- Working with other dogs
- Mountain Day (2)

Stage 4

Operational

Ongoing maintenance training and further development

Increasing time and difficulty

Pre-Stage 1

OBEDIENCE TEST:

- **WALK (ON and OFF LEAD** loose lead, with turns, with distractions

- **POSITIONS** Sit/down close and at a distance, with distractions

- **RECALL/RETURN TO HANDLER** From a stay position, dog recalled to handler, no set distance and from running loose, with distractions

- **STAY (IN SIGHT and OUT OF SIGNT) 3-5 MIN** Handler in sight/out of sight, dog in sit or down position. Handler returns to dog at the end to release

- **BARK ('Speak') ON COMMAND** To 'Bark' when asked

- **STOCK TEST** – behaviour in and around sheep, not under command, recall/down tested around stock

- **MOTIVATION –** dog walked loose under no command across a human scent – look for interest and willingness to investigate and look for the person hiding.

STAGE 1

OBJECTIVES:

- For the dog to actively hunt and range over a variety of terrain and weather conditions
- Good, solid, consistent find sequence
- Basic knowledge by handler of working areas, reading dog body language, directional control
- Good working relationship/bond between dog and handler

Basic Steps of the Find Sequence - Indication

- Reward can be visible then gradually withdrawn from sight until dog barks spontaneously but quickly produced on 'a bark'.

- Number of barks before the reward is given is varied to strengthen the indication. At start reward any bark, then wait until get a good strong bark.

- The 'find' command and training jacket introduced

- As confidence increases so does motivation and the indication.

Indication cont....

- Reward can be visible then gradually withdrawn from sight until dog barks spontaneously but quickly produced on 'a bark'.

- Game repeated with body requiring bark for the reward several times

- Number of barks before the reward is given is varied to strengthen the indication.

- The 'find' command and training jacket introduced

- As confidence increases so does motivation and the indication.

Basic ranging and hunting for human scent

- When indication is good and spontaneous, increase the distance and out of sight finds – 'Blind areas'

- Handler awareness of the dog on the hill -asked to raise hand when they think the dog has a 'strike' to learn to read the dogs body language

- Dog hunts and finds then Handler runs in, verbal praise,

- Variable reward given– by the body before Handler arrives, or, when the Handler arrives.

- Handler - positive attitude, keep it fun

- Increase time to the find, multiple finds, different terrain, wind conditions

Introducing the Return Sequence

- Good motivation, confident ranging and hunting to find the body and indicate spontaneously.
- Be consistent over a range of terrain.
- Once the dog finds and is indicating, Handler hangs back and does not go all the way to the body.
- Dog finds body and barks but when no reward is given and Handler does not arrive then it will look round for the Handler – timing is crucial as at this point the Handler will call to dog to them, ask it to 'speak' as it is arriving then send the dog back to the body following quickly behind.
- Dog returns to bark at the body (prompt). Good reward as soon as Handler arrives.
- Dog will soon realise, the quicker it gets its handler to the body, the quicker it gets the reward.

Introducing the Return Sequence…….

- On the return back to the body verbal encouragement gives the dog support – reassures it is doing what is wanted

- Vary runs to give first time in rewards and occasional return

- Repetition, consistency and timing by handler and body with reward is essential

- Introduce out of sight finds, once dog has found and indicated and leaves the body, clicks on radio signify the dog is on its way back to the Handler so they can ensure the dog indicates at them and they are ready to follow it back.

Consolidating and proofing the sequence

- Vary in sight/out of sight. Vary the sequence - First time in to maintain indication at the body with the returns.

- Gradually increase number of returns and reduce first time in rewards – move them towards 'in-sight' and reward when Handler arrives. Once the dog barks spontaneously, the Handler can verbally reward and run in to the body, then reward/game.

- Start varying Handler position as dog comes in to ensure it will indicate whatever way they are waking

- Drop off the prompt by the Handler to 'speak' on the return – vary the support and be quick to re-introduce if it looks like the dog is not going to indicate

- Handler must be firm to ensure they get the desired behaviours and only reward these.

- Increase time between finds and difficulty of terrain. Always push out and the drop back.

Throughout Stage 1:

- Regularly re-assess what motivates/de-motivates the dog – are we using the best reward/game?
- Keep it interesting, different places, different people
- Stretch out and keep it challenging – drop back to quick fun finds
- Increase the handlers knowledge of their dogs:
  - learning styles
  - body language
  - drive to work
  - Strengths and weaknesses
  - Keep it interesting/exciting

- Use of positive variable reward to maintain the find sequence and indication
- Obedience – re-assess any weaker areas
- Maintain stock soundness

- Training logs – completed by handler –areas that need improvement and how to do this.

Progression to Stage 2:

- To work a minimum of a blind 20 minute area
- A minimum of two bodies, 10 mins between finds
- To give a plan of how that area will be worked
- To effectively work the area, to find all the bodies and demonstrate a good solid find sequence with at least one return to the handler
- To show ability to observe and understand the dogs movements and communicate with the dog
- To demonstrate basic directional control