

CANINES TO THE RESCUE



TIM KIMZEY/STAFF

Maria Claxton and German shepherd Fenja find scuba diver Craig Bradley, left, before he pops up out of the water during an exercise for training search dogs held at Lake Saranac in Spartanburg Tuesday. The exercise was held with the Converse and Cherokee Springs fire departments and volunteer divers, using dogs to locate divers underwater to simulate drowning victims.

Dogs training to find drowning victims

BY ALEXANDER MORRISON
Staff Writer

Perched at the boat's helm, Cyra led Tuesday's Lake Saranac expedition as if she were a furry, wet George Washington directing the crossing of the Delaware.

But Cyra, a slender 2-year-old German shepherd, was not looking toward the water's far bank. She was sniffing for what was beneath: a diver with a tasty treat.

The South Carolina Search and Rescue Dog Association canine was

one of three area pooches being trained to locate drowning victims. The all-volunteer association's Upstate chapter hopes to have the dogs fully trained by next summer.

When Cyra got the diver's scent, she leaned over the skiff's edge and pointed the way with her nose, whining when the boat went off course and away from the smell of success.

"They learn that there's something good in the water and they're going to be rewarded," said association Vice President Maria Claxton. "This dog is beginning to search."

Cyra, in fact, soon found the diver, who surfaced and tossed her a "Snausage."

"She's a food dog," explained owner Nancy Jocy of Fort Mill. "She loves tennis balls and she loves playing, but when the chips are down, she wants her food."

The other dogs were rewarded with toys.

Tuesday was Cyra's second day of training.

"They're hitting faster," said Ron Hunter, a diver with the Cherokee Springs Fire Department.

On Monday, it was taking the dogs four minutes to find the divers in a section of lake about half the size of a football field.

On Tuesday, the pooches smelled out the divers in 30 to 40 seconds.

Even though the divers are submerged, the dogs can catch their scent in the wind.

The smell of a live diver is the same as a recently drowned victim.

Later, the dogs will be trained to smell out cadavers by locating

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scented pills that are dropped in the water.

The search and rescue dog association, Cherokee Springs Fire Department and Converse Fire Department cooperated in this week's training. More sessions will follow in coming months.

Cherokee Springs provided the divers, and Converse provided the boat, complete with a specially built dog ledge.

Hunter explained that the dogs' training would be

extremely helpful in a search because many area lakes are so murky that divers can see only inches ahead of them.

Even if there are no branches or other debris on the lake bottom, it takes divers about an hour to search a 100-foot square area, according to Hunter.

A trained search dog can scan a small lake in about 15 minutes, according to Jonni Joyce, a search and rescue dog trainer from North Carolina, who was hired to lead the training with a grant from the

American Kennel Club.

For all the dogs' enthusiasm and progress, however, the training did not go completely smoothly.

Cyra, for one, took an inglorious tumble into the lake after getting too excited about picking up a diver's scent.

But after a 30-yard swim to shore, she was eager to get back in the boat to search for divers — and sausages.

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