

# SEARCH & RESCUE



## PARTNERSHIPS

When you ride into the wilderness to find someone who is lost, a good horse is much more than transportation. You'll need to respect his intelligence and learn to interpret his language.

BY IRVIN LICHTENSTEIN

YOU ARE MOVING DOWN A TRAIL AT THE WALK. THE SCENERY IS DRAWING your attention away from the trail, but your mount is paying attention to everything around him. You feel it as he starts to tense up—his head turns, his ears are up, and he is exploring, sensing something that you weren't initially aware of. Now, you see what has attracted your horse's attention, as do your teammates a hundred yards to either side. Their mounts have keyed in on the same item.

As you dismount to verify your find, you reach for a radio, a map, and a first aid kit. After several hours in the saddle, and perhaps several days of effort, your horse has found the object of your search, a person alone in the woods, at risk of hypothermia, dehydration, or worse.

This may be a once-in-a-lifetime event, but as a mounted search and rescue rider, you will likely invest years of training to accomplish your goal of finding someone who needs your help. The key to your success? Your equine partner, with his acute senses, speed, and maneuverability.

### The Right Horse

Becoming an effective searcher starts when you select a sensible horse to become your partner. Perhaps it's his conformation that attracts you. To be sure, you'll need a horse who is sturdy, just the right size and stride for you, and one who is capable of handling the local terrain. But you'll need something more. There should be something in his eye, his movement, his wariness that says he's smart, that he can take care of himself. He'll need to be bold but not reckless.

You and your horse will learn each other's habits, reactions and moods. This is not training. This is partnering. The purpose of your relationship is to develop communication with your mount—not to have his absolute obedience. This may be very different from your previous concept of training a trail horse. In the world of the

mounted searcher, the horse's inherent intelligence is a key factor, and you have to accept his input.

Since the early 1980s, reports about horses who have actually found people have circulated. It's interesting to consider, especially in light of the fact that air-scent search dogs had been introduced into wilderness searches just 20 years before. The idea that another animal could play an essential role was met with skepticism.

However, by 1986 there were enough reports and observations by people in the field that supported the idea that a horse's preservation instincts could be put to good use. Some believe the detection capabilities of prey animals are superior even to a predator's detection capabilities. Horses were already proven as patrol animals, so it was hypothesized that horses could be equally effective as search partners, as their senses to detect predators sufficiently far away to escape would be valuable in a rescue situation as well.

But using these skills means that a horse cannot be bomb-proof. He has to remain aware of his environment and not be trained out of his basic sense of self-preservation. To be effective, the horse must communicate his view of the world to his rider. This can be very subtle movements of the head or ears, or even just muscle tension.

All horses can be search horses if their owners will accept the fact that search horses are cultivated, not trained. And the result is not only a horse that is more useful to the community, but may be a better trail horse.

### Searching by Air Scent

Bloodhounds and other tracking or trailing dogs have long been used to find people. These dogs require a sample of the target's scent to be provided. When they hit a trail left by the subject, the tracking/trailing dog follows it to the subject, usually at high speed. The dog



An alert, intelligent horse makes an ideal search partner when a rider learns to tune into his body language. It's important not to train the interest and curiosity out of a horse who will be used for searches.

PHOTO BY BOB LANGRISH



PHOTO BY CLAUDIA LACHANCE

**Southeastern Pennsylvania Search and Rescue volunteers head out on a training mission. Their horses provide more than just transportation. They are acutely aware of their environment and provide important clues that can lead to the recovery of a lost person.**

may cut corners, but often follows the scent step by step.

In the 1980s, the concept of using “air-scent” dogs was imported into the United States from Europe. Unlike a bloodhound, the air-scent dog does not use a sample or a track. It detects the scent of a person blowing on the wind or hanging in the air, thus the term “air scent.” Initially, Schutzhund-certified dogs were used as the basis for air-scent training.

Many of these dogs initially could not discriminate between scents and merely detected “person,” rather than “specific per-

son.” This required the dog and handler to work alone in a cleared area. The dog would free range and return to the handler with evidence of a find, such as a piece of clothing or a barked alert.

The best feature of a horse, at least from the rider’s point of view, is that he does the walking and carries all the gear. And—unlike a dog that often appears as a threatening, barking monster that chases after the search subject—horses are attractive and, while huge, aren’t usually seen as threatening. After almost 20 years of slow-but-sure effort, the mounted search community is



PHOTO BY CLAUDIA LACHANCE



PHOTO BY IRV LICHTENSTEIN

**Left: Irv Lichtenstein (center) has developed a program to help train searchers. He provides information to some of SEPSAR’s volunteer riders. Right: Claudia LaChance communicates with team members via radio. Like a good search horse, her Spotted Saddle Horse gelding isn’t bothered by the squawk box. His breast collar has been rigged to keep the radio within arm’s reach.**

## What Your Horse Senses

Ever wonder what your horse sees, hears and otherwise senses on the trail? Experience tells Irv Lichtenstein, chief of operations for the Southeast Pennsylvania Search and Rescue unit, that it's far more than the average rider would guess.

Lichtenstein has been involved in mounted search efforts since 1986 and has ridden on approximately two dozen searches. His partner of 20 years is a 17.2-hand, 1700-pound Percheron gelding named Blackie.

"Blackie is a true search horse," says Irv. "When he is geared up, he transforms into search mode. He explores everything, listens to the wind, watches the trail, and does not relax when he is not the lead in a column of horses. He never makes a noise, but he is always communicating with me. And he knows when to get out of Dodge."

What makes horses such great search partners is they are constantly tuned in, surveying their surroundings, Irv points out. This attention to the world through sight, smell, sound and touch makes them great in the field, where small clues can lead to a missing person.

Irv helps you take a closer look at what your horse senses:

- **Your horse can hear the high speed whine of bicycle wheels.** He may not associate the person on the bicycle with a walking person, but sees the combined object. The high speed movement and the sound make bicycles a threat until the horse can differentiate the person from the machine.

- **Cars and trucks may not make much engine noise anymore, but their tires and running gear still do.** The flash of lights or reflections off windows, paint and chrome make vehicles visible to a horse who is looking

for movement to betray an object. On the other hand, dirt bikes and ATVs sound like chainsaws and can be very threatening to a horse. On a calm day, your horse may detect a vehicle long before you do.

- **Animals, especially deer, may catch your horse's attention.** This is because seeing one doe or fawn means others are nearby and may come out of the woods at any time. Horses do not want to collide with deer anymore than you want to hit one with your car. In some areas, deer, elk, or moose can be bigger than your horse.

Lichtenstein believes so strongly in the horse's role in helping to locate missing persons, he has been instrumental in developing training programs and materials used to help SEPSAR and other mounted search and rescue units form.

"We (SEPSAR) are different than a posse in that we are not affiliated with law enforcement, but we are a recognized emergency responder, dispatched by the 9-1-1 center (Emergency Dispatch Services, part of the Dept. of Public Safety) just like a volunteer fire department or rescue squad," he explains. "Pennsylvania is somewhat odd in that as a commonwealth there is no state level agency responsible for wilderness search and rescue by law."

For more information on mounted search and rescue programs, you can contact Irv Lichtenstein at [ilichten1@verizon.net](mailto:ilichten1@verizon.net).

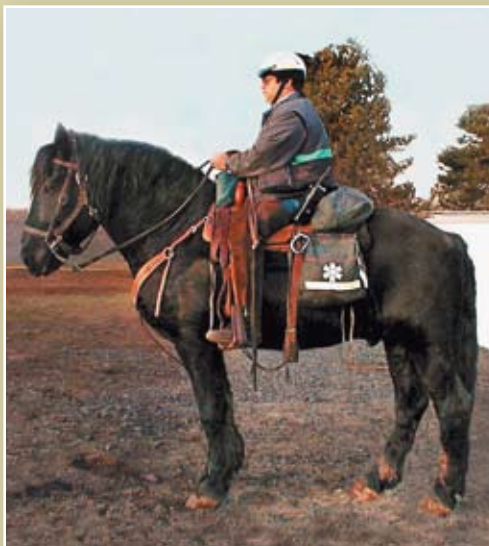


PHOTO COURTESY IRV LICHTENSTEIN

Irv Lichtenstein has been riding his 17-hand Percheron gelding on searches for 20 years. Blackie knows the drill.

beginning to accept the air-scenting horse as a fact, too.

Horses have as good or better olfactory equipment as most dogs. Unlike a dog, the horse has the added advantage of being able to vary his sensing level from the ground to as much as seven feet high or more. He can also aim his nose over a greater angle than a dog can without moving his body. And a horse has at least one more great advantage over a dog: He can learn which scents are what, and will ignore scents identified as not of interest. Thus a horse will ignore other horses known to him and their riders if so instructed.

### Horses as Sentries

The most significant difference between a horse and a dog is that a dog hunts by moving upwind toward the source, while a horse stays alive by detecting threats that may be downwind. This requires the use of other sensors—eyes and ears, and even by sensing vibration in the ground. The reaction can be significant.

Watch the sentry horses in a herd. They detect, see and identify a possible threat from any angle and any wind direction. They clas-

sify the threat and communicate a warning to the herd in fractions of a second. Most modern computerized weapons systems don't do as well as a horse does. A wild horse keeps this up 24 hours a day, and the herd switches sentries to ease this workload. The domestic horse turns off his internal radar in the barn or paddock and has often been trained not to turn it back on while he's on the trail. This is a dead horse, perhaps in more ways than one.

The horse used as an active partner in search and rescue does more than simply air scent. He listens, he sees, he feels. He expresses himself to his rider and the world.

### Training a Search Horse

When a horse and rider partner in search and rescue, it is a one-on-one relationship. Others have ridden my horse in the ring and even on the trail without him reacting to things around him like he does when I'm on his back. My horse is not working for them; he is transporting them. He considers his rider's requests and accedes to some of them. There is some adventure in trail riding this way.

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PHOTO BY CLAUDIA LACHANCE

Search horses encounter many unusual sights, but quickly tune out objects that aren't the focus of the search. The next time they come to this location, however, they may react noticeably if one of those cannons gets moved, perceiving that something is "out of place."

Riding search is different. It is unpredictable. You are not there for the scenery. Neither you nor your mount can be relaxed. You are working. You are both looking for clues, evidence that will locate the subject of the search, hopefully alive and well. The most you may find is nothing. Your horse knows you are tense. He is in

a strange environment, and the bogeyman is out there somewhere. Trust is essential; you must trust in each other. You are not watching the trail, your horse is, which frees you up to look for clues.

Your survival depends on your horse. His survival depends on you understanding what he tells you. Trust is what changes your horse into your partner. There's no bomb-proofing, no dumbing-down in your relationship. You want a horse who is sensible and obedient, but not numb to his surroundings.

Conditioning your horse to be a good search partner is not a conventional training regime. It is not a series of round pen exercises or a program for show competition. Educating—or re-educating—is a more proper term for the process. Both rider and horse must learn to communicate with one another.

The process begins with tacking. You'll be taking all the equipment you'll need into the field. Your serious approach to this important step provides a cue to your horse that this is serious business. Whether you are on a training mission or a real search, your horse should know this is not simply a recreational outing.

Next, you ride. You ride trails, you ride fields, you ride miles at the walk. You work at the walk. You let him pick his footing. He learns that you will trust him to follow a trail without direction. You do not interfere if he puts his head down to smell or taste the ground. Or perhaps he will raise his head and take an exaggerated breath to smell the air. Again, you let him.

When riding your search horse, you shouldn't be using a tie-down or heavy bridle that restricts movement. If you ride bitless, continue to do so. It's important for the horse to be comfortable and allowed to move freely. Any style of riding is fine, English or western, but a saddle



Irv Lichtenstein briefs searcher Peggy Kratz about the day's training drill before she rides out.

is essential. You want to have a relaxed-but-secure seat, so if and when your horse reacts to something on the trail or in the brush or woods, you'll be able to stay with him.

To be good at search and rescue, you don't have to be a perfect rider. No one will be judging you on your leg placement, foot angle, rein position or posture. The ability to endure long work hours while remaining alert and effective is what counts. If riding slouched in a deep-seated roping saddle works for you, then do so.

You'll need tack, clothing and equipment that are safe, comfortable and will protect you from the elements. The priority is on assembling a search group comprised of people and horses who can be effective in the field, regardless of discipline.

As you and your horse get to know one another better, your horse will come to realize that you want him to talk to you. He will point out wildlife, unusual sights and sounds along the trail, and observe changes from when he last was there. You'll want to key into his body language and note what your horse is paying attention to. This is important communication. You must acknowledge the message and encourage him to continue. Positive reinforcement via a kind "good boy," or a light stroke on the neck, is always useful.

The horse has what the military calls "sensor fusion"—he routinely combines input from all his senses to better identify threats and food. The horse provides an elevated view, another set of eyes, a sensitive nose, and a brain that can often discriminate between what may be a potential threat, the public, and the search subject.

He will tell you about his surroundings. Whether you are traversing eastern forests, western mountains, or the mid-American prairies, he will find hawks, eagles, vultures, owls, small and large game, and other users walking, hiking, biking, or even riding. Your mount will tell you about the world he lives in, and you will listen.

## The Search Rider's Role

When you can read your horse's smallest reactions, you'll be on your way to becoming an effective mounted searcher. But you'll require additional training and skills. Besides being able to ride confidently, you'll need to be able to operate within the search community.

You'll need to develop expertise in first aid, the dreaded map-and-compass navigational skills, communications, and incident command system. You'll want experience in trailering, and camping with and caring for your horse in the field. Some of this requires classroom work; other skill development requires on-the-job training. Tracking and clue identification requires both. And the more you do it, the better you'll get at it.

It is necessary to gather like-minded riders to form an effective organization. While ad hoc efforts can be successful, an organized effort is usually more efficient. A broad range of resources increases the chances for success.

Your biggest challenge is gaining the trust of your mount. In the barn, your horse may readily depend on you for feed, shelter, and safety from predators. But when he gets away from the comfort of home, your horse almost always relies on himself or his herd mates for a sense of security. In the field, it is you and him, and you may not always come first in his mind, until he develops a true partnership perspective.

You'll need your horse to be willing to go where you point him—even when where you want to go is not known to be safe. You and your horse must develop a certain type of synergy. Your goal is to find the lost person. If you or your horse is injured on the job, you become a detriment. Your duty is to keep yourself and your horse out of trouble so you remain an active resource for the search team. This is one effort where coming home safe is important. **PH**



In SEPSAR, all breeds and disciplines are welcome. With new recruits, the ranks now include 25 members. Participating in a June training day are (left to right) Ken Bright, Peggy Kratz, Dave Fryer, Anya Warda, Claudia LaChance and Brenda Jo Jones. Good navigational and survival skills, combined with a high level of trust between horses and riders, are essential. Center of page: SEPSAR volunteers proudly display this patch. Being a part of the organization, which formally organized in 2005, requires classroom as well as on-the-trail training.