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Dogs sharpen sniffing skills at UW-Whitewater

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WHITEWATER — Ed Presnall has used dogs to help locate five adults who had walked away from nursing homes, one who walked away from a hospital and three missing children.

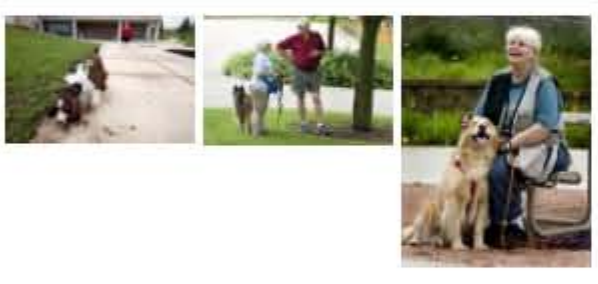
This week, Presnall, of Walworth, is on the UW-Whitewater campus teaching dogs and their handlers how to find Alzheimer's victims and other people who may wander away from home. Presnall's an expert on training dogs in a technique called variable surface tracking.

Parker, an English springer spaniel, works on tracking skills with owner Debbie Mahen, of Walworth, on Sunday at Camp Pawmark in Whitewater.

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Eight dogs and their handlers came from all over the country to attend Camp Pawmark. The three instructors have used their skills to find missing people, but most of the students are just here for sport.



"It's fun. The variables are endless. There are so many things that you have to train for," said Maureen Foley, a retired chemistry professor from Ann Arbor, Mich., attending Camp Pawmark with Rock, her fluffy, 3-year-old Belgian Tervuren. "It's a great relationship that you build with your dog."

Instructor Gretchen Stephenson, from Manassas, Va., laid the course early, dropping socks and other items to simulate a lost person. Most people who

are lost wind up dropping personal effects: a handkerchief, a scarf, a sock, Presnall said. Those items simulate the last known point where the missing person was seen and become the starting point for the dog trackers, who walk normally on grass, across sidewalks, through mulch or over rocks. People make turns around buildings or go up stairs, all fair game for the dogs and their handlers.

"We age these tracks anywhere from three to five hours old, take the dog to the start, let him sniff the article ... and he picks up the lost person's scent as well as the individual DNA of that person. And then he follows her footsteps across campus," said Presnall, who has been doing variable surface tracking for 15 years and written several books on the subject.

Instructor Mary Thompson, from York, Maine, and her black Lab, Storm, now deceased, worked for 10 years with a local police department as a civilian. They found three lost children and eight suspects, before Maine ruled that only state-trained dogs could go after suspects, she said.

Variable surface tracking takes a lot of mental stamina, she said. The dogs have to eliminate all the other scents from their brain to focus on the one they need to follow, Thompson said.

The dogs are not robots, she said. "They can have bad days, too, like we can."

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