

Australian cattle dog Tex belongs to Hamish Skead and has done a lot of recoveries for Hamish's clients at Lowlands Safaris.



Blood Spoor Dogs Worth their Weight in Gold

Hilton Gary Sanders

With heads bowed and backs bent we scanned the ground for the passing of the tiny steenbuck, which my client had hit low down in the left front leg. The sun was getting higher and the mercury was also rising. Two trackers and I had been at this for almost four hours and had now lost the tracks. It was frustrating to say the least! I really wished that Toffee, my Jack Russell terrier, had been with us. One thing would have been for sure – this steenbuck would have been in the salt by now!

My blood spoor dogs

Over the years I have owned several really top-notch blood spoor dogs – some tall, some short, some lean and

one built like a barrel. Yet all were definitely an integral part of the hunting team and most definitely worth their weight in gold! A little dog that stands out in my mind was a little yellow wirehaired "terrier"-type bitch called Scruffy.

Scruffy came to be in my possession by default, as it were. One Sunday afternoon as we were sitting on the veranda of a now deceased landowner of mine in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg, we heard a vehicle that was literally screaming along the tar road that passed about 100 metres (110 yards) below the homestead. The landowner and I looked at each other and both of us voiced at the same time that if the driver did not slow down he was going to come to grief in the pass.

Our verbalised thoughts were not out of our mouths for more than 20 seconds when we heard the screeching of tyres on the tar, a bang and then silence – the quiet before the storm. A tremendous smashing,

crashing series of bangs and tearing metal sounds followed the silence. Then an eerie silence settled over the whole area. The landowner, one of his labourers that had come to report the crash, and I climbed into his Toyota pickup and headed for the scene of the accident and commotion.

We peered over the destroyed AMCO barrier and were witness to a sight of absolute devastation. There were bodies, body parts, luggage and bits and pieces of the old VW Combi Microbus strewn over an area of about 100 square metres. The vehicle had all but disintegrated on the multiple impacts as it had tumbled down the rugged and jagged gorge. In silence the labourer and I made our way down the gorge, stopping here and there on our perilous descent to check for life in the motionless, battered bodies.

All in all we counted a total of 22 people ranging in age from an old woman well into her 80s right down to a little boy of about 3 years old – all

were totally still and lifeless, the only movement being the ruffling of blood-stained clothing in the breeze and a blowfly crawling across the vacant face of a teenage girl. It looked more like a plane crash than a car crash. An interesting point is that no steering wheel was ever found – the top of the steering column was graced by a pair of vice grips that had been spot-welded in place!

It was amongst this carnage that I saw Scruffy for the first time, her yellow grizzled fur matted with blood, dirt and dry grass. Her eyes were wild and darting from one mangled body to the next as she climbed up towards us from under the pile of twisted metal. I knelt down and gently coaxed her towards me by making little meowing-like sounds. She lowered herself down onto her belly and inched towards me. On reaching me she rolled onto her side and exposed her belly and let out a plaintive whine while gently licking my hand.

This was to be the beginning of an eight-year friendship and working relationship between Scruffy and myself. During those eight years Scruffy recovered a lot of animals that had been wounded by clients. Some of these animals we would never have recovered again had it not been for Scruffy. She eventually met her end at the sharp end of a wounded warthog.

Another terrier that was a champion blood spoor dog was an Eastern Cape-bred fox terrier x Jack Russell bitch called Smiley. She could curl up her upper lip and really give a smile that melted your heart. Smiley was a bold and forward pushing little terrier that was not afraid to tackle even the biggest of antelope or wounded buffalo. On one occasion when hunting at home, I had left Smiley at the house as she was heavily pregnant and looked like a barrel on little stumps. Approximately 20 minutes after a shot being fired, along came Smiley, giving her best smile as if to say, "What must I go and find for you?"

These two bitches, along with another bitch that I had called Bimble (an imported long-legged wirehaired Jack Russell), were really phenomenally versatile little terriers. They were first and foremost friends and playmates for our children and their friends; they would join in the soccer



Barry Cole and the author with blood spoor dogs Brin and Toffee.

and rugby matches on the lawn or could be seen lying in the shade on the edge of the lawn watching our children playing cricket. Unfortunately I have no photos of either Scruffy or Smiley as they were all lost when moving home.

They were dynamite ratters and were always eager to go off to the sheds at night for an evening's sport with the boys and later on with little Ashleigh. Once a rat broke cover all went crazy – the terriers in full yipping cry and the kids yelling encouragement. This ended with the final death squeak of the rat, accompanied by a head shake and growl of the terrier and a yell of jubilation from the kids. The process would then start all over again.

These little terriers were also used by us on numerous occasions to dislodge bushbuck rams for clients

out of thickly wooded ravines where we knew that a ram was living. With all three of these little bitches I found it very interesting that after several hunts of this nature they soon learned to only push out the rams which was very handy for us! Another thing that I found interesting is that even though we used these terriers to push out rams that had not been wounded, they far preferred to work the spoor of wounded game.

I have over the years heard of many blood spoor dogs that were lost due to their owner's or handler's stupidity and feel that it is only right to speak out on behalf of these fearless, wonderfully loyal and eager-to-please members of our hunting teams. The many dogs that I have had the pleasure of owning and working, and the multitude of dogs that I have met and watched working over this same



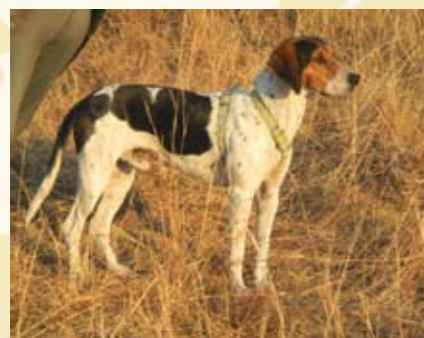
This bushbuck was shot late in the afternoon and lightly wounded. It was recovered in the dark by the author and Rambo, a blood spoor dog belonging to Mark Lister, as the clients were leaving early the next morning.

period, have all had the same attributes – they wanted to please their owner or handler more than anything else on this earth!

Now, let me say right off that their line of work is a very dangerous occupation as every recovery that they undertake has the potential to result in injury or death to themselves. However, there are certain situations that are tantamount to sending your dog to death! My blood curdles and the hackles rise on my neck when I hear of guys putting their dogs on the tracks of a wounded sable, gemsbuck or a zebra that is still running with the herd. These three species, above all the other species, have a degree from the University of Duelling in killing dogs; most of these trails end in the dog being skewered or trampled to death.

Selection of dog breed and training

Over the years I have had a number of guys ask me how I go about training my terriers to take a blood spoor and what breed of dog I would suggest as a blood spoor dog. Let me start by saying the best dogs for blood spoor are those that belong to a breed that you like. There are a lot of breeds that do well at this kind of work, the most common breeds being those of the terrier families and the various hound breeds. In South Africa bluetick coon and big game hounds



Turkish, a treeing walker x beagle belonging to PH and outfitter Hamish Skead of Lowlands Safaris.



Toffee in camp.

are popular, especially for game farm owners, and so are the Parson Jack Russells. As I hunt all over Southern Africa I like to use Jack Russells as they take up far less room than a hound for instance, in an always overloaded safari truck.

Regarding the training of a dog to take a blood spoor – firstly, a blood spoor dog must have excellent manners so that it is not a menace or a headache to its owner or to the people with whom it comes into contact. There is nothing like an unruly, over-the-top dog that jumps up at one or onto furniture etc to get clients' backs and hackles up. A well-mannered dog is a pleasure to have in camp. Manners, manners and more manners need to be drummed into the working dog and then the training to take a blood spoor can begin.

The first place to start is to get a dog out of working strains; a dog with hunting instinct that has been bred into it over many generations has a better chance of becoming a top-class blood spoor dog. This does not mean that a dog that has not come from a long line of hunting dogs will not make the grade. Scruffy, the little yellow terrier that we pulled from the wrecked taxi, was a real gem and more than likely was not of hunting stock.

Once the pup knows the basics of sit, stay and does not take food unless allowed to do so by myself, I begin by laying easy-to-follow trails in the garden and flower beds using a trailed piece of liver. These tracks must be simple and very easy to follow. The whole idea is to build up the dog's confidence and the ability to use its nose; it is therefore counterproductive to lay a trail that will beat the pup. Rather take things one step at a time. Plenty of praise and a small piece of liver at the end of the trail will go along way in encouraging the pup on his or her journey to becoming a top-notch blood spoor dog.

I have found that by laying a trail in the foresaid manner and increasing the difficulty of the trail one can get the dog to a fairly advanced level of tracking before even venturing into the hunting field together. It is very good practice to take your pup with you down to the skinning shed whenever animals are being skinned.



Toffee and a buffalo bull hunted earlier this month in Zululand.

This allows the pup to get used to the scent and sight of its future quarry in a non-threatening environment. I always encourage the pups to pull a bit of hair from the back skin as well as to bark at the dead animals when I cause the carcass to move. This barking will become invaluable in the future when your dog has trailed and found a wounded animal for you.

I need to mention that it is of the utmost importance to introduce the pup to firearms in such a way that it sees firearms as the beginning of a fun experience and not a terrifying threat. We always start our pups at about eight weeks with an air rifle and a piece of liver dragged no more than two metres and then left under a shrub in the garden. It is at this stage that we start taking the pup with us in a vehicle in order to accustom it to travelling.

From here we progress to a shotgun fired at a distance of about 50 metres. The pup is then taken to the site of the shot and put on the trail once again. I have found the boom of a shotgun less intrusive on the acute sense of hearing that dogs and hounds possess in comparison to the sharp, high-pitched crack emitted by a .22" rimfire.

Once our pups are consistently finding the hidden pieces of liver and gut content on increasingly difficult trails, some of which are just a trail of intermittently dribbled gut content, and barking at the dead animals at the skinning shed, it is time to take the budding blood spoor dog to the



The author with clients and the indomitable Bimble. This leopard knocked Bimble flying, only for her to return to the hunt with much gusto.

hunting veld.

When I first take my pups into the veld I put them on every animal that we have seen our clients kill or knock down from our shooting position. Here one is able to work the pup on downed game in a controlled setting. You know where the animal was standing when it was shot, you know where it ran after receiving the shot and you know where it fell. The pup then has strict parameters to work in and it is a "sure thing" trail.

Remember, the whole aim of all of these training exercises is to build your pup's confidence and abilities. The more you put in the more you will get out in the future. I need to repeat the point that it is absolutely counterproductive to rush the training of your pup. It is also not advisable to

over-face your young dog on slightly wounded game as he can get hurt and this can set back his development as a working dog fairly drastically, especially if he is a sensitive youngster.

My present blood spoor dog, Toffee, has been working with me for four years now and is an absolutely amazing tracker with the heart of a lion. I have used him to recover everything from Cape grysbuck to buffalo. In 2010 he did 29 recoveries for us where, had it not been for him, we would not have recovered those animals for our clients. I salute him and all of his fellow blood spoor dogs, no matter what breed, size, shape or colour. You are an amazing bunch of dogs and you are all worth your weight in gold!