

Mine Drill for Drevers

With its Mine Dog Centre in Pretoria, MineTech International has begun a two-year program to assess the potential of the Drever for development as an alternative breed for mine detection work. The programme has been initiated by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), which has provided six dogs for the project. The study involves keeping detailed records of all areas of the Drevers' development process to identify both the positive and negative aspects in training these dogs as mine detection dogs (MDD). The project began in October 2002, and although it is still in early stages, some interesting observations are emerging. Hugh Morris, Operations Director at MineTech, looks at some of the processes and progress of the study to date.



■ Playing by instinct. This Drever cut his teeth on a discarded pencil box, in this case a former Yugoslav PMA1 AP mine, and broke it!

by Hugh Morris, Operations Director, MineTech International

Introduction

The Drever is a relatively new breed of dog, dating back to the early 20th century. With its relatively short physique, short legs, big body and strong build, it is perhaps at first glance not the most likely candidate for the role of mine detection. Not so; there are real benefits to sourcing a smaller, trainable, portable, logistically efficient dog. The Drever's size and shape is what the GICHD called "the answer to Dyck's [Project Manager for MineTech] prayers." Bred from German Dachsbracke and Danish Strellufstövare, they are also known as the "drever-Swedish Dachsbracke." However, its cousins are Bassets, Beagles and Dachs, and not only do they make excellent family pets, but they are also reliable hunting partners with a finely honed sense of smell. *Drev*, or "to

hunt" in Swedish, is what the Drever does best, tracking hare, fox and occasionally deer, with the courage to pit himself against wild animals, including the wild boar.

Our dogs arrived direct from Sweden, and as part of a system whereby each new litter is named in alphabetical order, this group landed the letter "e"—appropriately enough for their designation, "experimental." They had originated from three different litters.

The oldest, Edward and Einstein, were born on March 29, 2002, Elvis and Eddy on July 7, and the babies, Eric and Ernie, arrived on July 19. The dogs are all males, and with other breeds we have achieved excellent results with both males and females, so there is no reason to believe that Drever females will not perform to a similar standard.

Acclimatisation

For dogs that had to travel from Sweden and then face exposure to a totally new environment and climate, they were not abnormally stressed or nervous. They settled down quickly, getting used to a new home, environment and handler. Einstein was the only dog with early problems, initially losing weight after not eating for the first four days. The dogs are weighed on a daily basis with their weight progress analysed at the end of every week. This weight management programme monitors whether or not the dogs are growing at a satisfactory rate, are medically sound and are adapting to their new environment. After the first few days, all dogs had gained

weight and continued to grow steadily on a high-protein diet similar to Eukanuba. Initially fed twice a day until they reached six months, they now get one main feed, on average 250-g for a 10-kg dog.

The Drevers also receive medical check-ups on a daily basis to ensure they are medically fit at all times, but also to ensure we understand when they are ill and know whether this is a factor in limiting progress with their tasks. These medical check-ups are of vital importance to us and, at the Mine Dog Centre, are carried out from birth right through the socialising, training and operational life of the dog. All the daily checks are recorded in the dogs' log book, alongside all other aspects of the dogs' daily performance.

The crux of MineTech's mine dog training involves three key processes—socialisation, retrieval and agility. The programme has developed through years of experience of rearing and training young dogs to excel at a specific task. Since 1998, 62 German Shepherds, two Labradors and 16 Malanois have qualified through this regimen, using different conditioning techniques to suit the temperaments of each dog. There are five key characteristics that will make a dog perform well in a minefield: a high motivation to please the dog handler; high ball drive; excellent focus on work; stable temperament; and good adaptability. Our programme is designed to both assess and develop these five key proficiencies.

Socialisation

Once the dogs had settled in, they were exposed to a variety of positive influences as part of a socialisation period to better equip them to deal with the outside environment. Socialisation minimises the chances of a dog getting distracted by unusual and unknown noises and sounds, which means they will adapt more easily and be more focused on their duties when they get into the minefield. Our aim at the Mine Dog Centre is to rear and socialise the Drevers into well-balanced adult dogs who are confident,



responsive and able to concentrate on their work.

The Drevers have been progressing through a series of socialisation trips, similar to the activities given to other dogs. They are exposed to a range of experiences—people, traffic, different environments and locations, gunshots, obstacles, shopping malls, etc., and each of the dogs has progressed well and continues to improve.

Retrieving or Ball Drive

Retrieving is an essential part of the whole programme since it is the retrieving or ball drive of the dogs and the motivation for retrieving that generally determine whether they will be suitable for use as future demining dogs. Our dogs are assessed initially on their enthusiasm in playing with a ball or a retrieval object. This is called a kong. It is made of rubber and very chewable. Once we notice that a dog has a high drive to play with the ball, the ball is tossed farther and farther away for him to collect and return to the handler. Gradually, the game starts to include small tasks for which the puppy is rewarded with the ball on successful completion. As the programme progresses, the dogs are tested and played with on different terrains, but the kong or retrieval object remains the same.

It is essential throughout that the dog works to please his handler as well as to gain a reward. At the Mine Dog Centre,

we believe that the praise and attention the dog receives after each successful exercise must be on the same level as the reward. Praise and attention introduce additional motivations, and these are used to direct the dog into other activities. For example, in agility training, dogs that clear an obstacle successfully become more and more motivated if they are praised and rewarded at the end of the exercise. Reward through play is a major motivator for every dog and produces a high level of trust and a strong bond between each dog and his handler.

Dogs that have no "ball drive" in the early stages of socialising very quickly fall by the wayside as the training programme progresses. Although it is possible to teach some dogs how to retrieve, our findings show that dogs that have to be taught the retrieval skill do not have the same output or drive as dogs that do it naturally. As a result, we do not commit resources to teaching a dog ball drive, since experience shows they will fail when it comes to performance in the field.

Agility

The agility tests are important in that they allow us to focus closely on the differences in character among the dogs. Over time, they have all shown more confidence and are more aware of their own physical abilities. Our studies have proved that agility can be seen as a stepping stone to a more mature and confident



adult dog, and a dog with this confidence will find it easier to adapt to new environments and different circumstances. To date, the Drevers have responded well to agility training, and there are no apparent differences here among the Drevers themselves or between the Drevers and other breeds.

Findings

It is still early in the study, but already we are gathering some positive results. The Drevers are no longer as dependent on each other as they were upon their arrival in South Africa. We are now giving them more time to themselves and have already seen, through this process, that the dogs have learned individuality and confidence. We continue to monitor their progress.

The dogs are responding well to both the socialisation and agility programmes, which play a very important role in the development of a dog's character. Most importantly, retrieval or ball drive in the younger dogs is proving to be as high for the Drevers as it is with the German Shepherds and Malanois. Edward and Einstein, however, are not achieving the same standard as their younger cousins. The two older dogs showed no retrieval progression at all, and at this point, we can only conclude that this was because they had not been exposed to the programme from a sufficiently early age. The pair only retrieves now and then and for very short sessions. What is interesting

■ Drever agility tests at the MineTech Mine Dog Centre.

Mine Drill for Drevers

continued from page 91

in general about the successful dogs is that the motivation for the retrieval behaviour appears to be different from other breeds. From a young age, they appear to be motivated to complete the task for themselves—no attention-seeking behaviour is present.

This may explain why there is more of a problem in getting the Drever to work for his handler without becoming distracted by things, which can be seen as totally normal for his genetic makeup. If a bird flies close by while the Drever is working, the Drever will lose focus on its task immediately and switch attention to the bird. A dog such as a German Shepherd or Malinois is much more focused on the issue of whether or not he is pleasing his

handler. With the Drevers, a dog bred to hunt, the motivation is clearly very different.

Operationally, however, the Drever does have other key advantages. One is its size and weight, which results in less ground pressure, minimising the chances of detonating a landmine, although it remains to be seen whether the size of the dog will be a problem when working in difficult terrain such as long grass. Size is also a factor in pure economics. The small size of the dog means that it can be flown round the globe as hand luggage or excess baggage, whereas other dogs would be limited to the cargo section.

Time will tell whether the Drever will be able to translate many of its inherent

skills and characteristics to play an integral part in mine action. We do expect to see some of these dogs in the demining field, but it is still too early to say which dogs will be successful. ■

**All photos courtesy of MineTech.*

Contact Information

Hugh Morris
Operations Director
MineTech International
22 York Avenue, Highlands
Harare, Zimbabwe
Tel: +263 4 776216
Fax: +263 4 746902
E-mail: hugh.morris@minetech.co.uk