

Latest canine sport hounds the trails of missing people or items

Top dog sleuths win by a nose

CANINE super-sleuths are the new weapon on Melbourne's suburban streets.

The latest craze in dog sports is pitting champions against each other to find the best of the best.

But it's also proving very practical, with some dogs sniffing out lost jewellery and other valuables, and hopes are high they could help hunt for missing people as well.

Already, retired champion german shepherd Vixen was harnessed one night to search for his missing mate, Scarlett, a golden retriever who took off from home for a sly late-night swim.

Owner Dawn Howard said 12-year-old Vixen picked up Scarlett's scent and raced straight to the recalcitrant retriever.

"Vixen tracked her down by leading me straight to where she was," Ms Howard said.

"When we found her having her late-night swim, she looked guilty and I was pretty annoyed with her."

Approved last year by the Australian National Kennel Council and enthusiastically embraced by Victorian dog lovers, Urban Track and Search Dog trials sees harnessed hounds followed by people in high-visibility gear.

Running on footpaths and pavements and ignoring the myriad suburban smells that assail them were the ultimate tests of a tracker, Ms Howard said.

Kelly Ryan

"They have to ignore suburban distractions such as cars, people walking their dogs, roaming cats and smells of food coming from homes."

Urban Track and Search Dog trials are reserved for dogs that have previously excelled to reach the highest level of tracking trials.

Having reached the top of their tree, they are then eliminated from regular competition.

By becoming street trackers, the dogs are tested in darkness, where their visual and olfactory senses are overwhelmed in an urban environment.

They wear illuminated harnesses and reflective collars, and a scout travels ahead to lay the scent.

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Trackers: Scarlett, Atlas and Vixen go through their paces (above) and with Dawn Howard (below).

Pictures: NORM OORLOFF

