**Basic Police Working Dog Training Academy: Things That Should be Considered Before Making Your Choice**

Traditionally, basic police working dog training courses have been offered to police and sheriff’s departments in two different ways for dual purpose dogs:

1. A twelve-week, day for day, training course in which handlers and their dogs work together from the introduction of the training course all the way through to the completion of training and certification.
2. A five to six-week course of training with the handler and dog after the dog has received eight to ten weeks of pre-training.

Either one of these is acceptable provided that the academy chosen is legitimate in what they advertise and produce.

In years past, most traditional basic police working dog courses covered the following areas (let it be known that some courses did not cover all of these):

1. Basic on/off leash obedience in areas with no distractions to deal with.
2. Basic agility work with no real street application.
3. Evidence recover in small, grassy areas.
4. Basic runaway apprehension exercises in controlled environments with no street application distractions other than decoy gunfire.
5. Open area searches for suspect.
6. Building searches for suspect.
7. Odor detection training usually in rooms and multiple stationary vehicles.

While these are all areas that should be covered, I have found over the years that the way these areas were usually covered in the training courses were insufficient in preparing police working dog teams for real-time street situations.

The following is my opinion, and I hope that it will help handlers as well as administrators across the country realize the importance of understanding that some modern K9 training establishments focus too much on sport style training and making more money. Although it’s flashy, it has very little street value to police working dog teams. These establishments are often run by European style trainers who are adept in certain aspects of K9 training, but they usually have very little to no training experience in law enforcement and the laws that govern how we are to properly use our police working dogs here in The States.

So, let’s look a little deeper into this…

If a department chooses to send a handler through a police working dog academy that offers the 12 week, or more, day for day training course, they should research the training curriculum to ensure that real-time street scenario training begins no later than week seven and intensifies each week right up to graduation. If their established curriculum isn’t set up to cover this amount of time working on street situations, I’m of the opinion that their police working dog team’s street worthiness is questionable.

Another issue that arises in this type of course is the K9 team gets into week 5 or 6 and its discovered that, for whatever reason, the handler and dog are not compatible or the dog begins to show issues that were not detected initial testing and training. At this point, something would have to be done. It’s been my experience that most places would attempt to cram the full 12 weeks in the replacement dog to allow the team to finish on time (usually for monetary reasons) or the department will have to deal with the K9 team staying a lot longer.

These are just a couple of things to consider if a department chooses a police working dog academy that produces pre-trained dogs for placement with handlers when they arrive to begin their handler training course. there are fewer negatives that may arise as long as you are dealing with a proven, legitimate police working dog academy. There are times that department administrators will spot a flashy website that promises the world and decide that this is where they want to go without doing the proper research.

In any legitimate police working dog academy that implements a pre-training program, the dogs should receive no less than nine weeks, or 360 hours, of pre-training prior to placement with a handler.

Throughout this regimen of pre-training, each dog should be worked in all the areas that were mentioned in the twelve-week course previously mentioned. This is to include the introductions to advanced street application exercises and to occur in many different locations. This is necessary to show that the dog is credible and stable in many different street applications.

The dog’s pre-training foundations should be laid by certified police working dog instructors that have extensive backgrounds in the utilization of a police working dog and a minimum of five years working a police K9 on the street. This will ensure that the dogs are very familiar with actual street problems before the handlers arrive for their five-week training courses (minimum 200 hours). With this type of training regimen, the dogs are properly vetted and less likely to have weaknesses arise during the handler training course that would cause the dog to have to be replaced.

Following is a list of criteria that all green/titled pre-trained police working dogs should be familiar and confident with before a handler arrives for their course of training:

1. Complete basic obedience with familiarization in off-leash control (will be completed in handler training course).
2. Basic tracking and evidence recovery complete with introduction to advanced tracking.
3. Intense environmental testing during full street scenario applications.
4. All detector odors finished that apply to the type of detection that is expected and familiarization in street-based search scenarios.

Upon completion of the police working dog academy, each police working dog team will have to complete a certification course that reflects the training they have received. All certification venues will be set to street scenario application. This certification requires the following must be successfully completed:

1. On and off leash heeling with sit, down, and stand. The handler will then place the dog in a down and step away to approximately 20 feet. A distraction will then be called for by the certifying official and the dog will be required to hold the position.
2. Multiple 4-foot fence jumps during decoy pursuit. Decoy will have all equipment covered with everyday clothing. The pursuit must cover a minimum of 75 yards. A minimum of two four-foot fences must be cleared by the dog without assistance from the handler. After apprehension, the dog must out upon command from the handler.
3. Evidence search will be tested during a simulated vehicle pursuit where a weapon (or other item determined by the certifying official) has been thrown from the suspect vehicle into a thick grassy/wooded area. The police working dog team will be called to the scene and will have to successfully recover the weapon or item.
4. A one-mile tracking scenario will be set up with a one hour cook time. The track will be set with a minimum of two turns and three different terrain changes. The police working dog team must successfully complete this scenario.
5. A vehicle pursuit with bail-out in which the handler will release his K9 from the vehicle and must direct his K9 to apprehend the fleeing suspect. All equipment used by the decoy will be covered with everyday clothing. The K9 must successfully apprehend the suspect and out the bite on command from the handler.
6. A simulation felony traffic stop will be set up. The occupant will fail to respond to commands to exit the vehicle. The handler will release the K9 to apprehend the suspect by entering through an open window of the vehicle. The K9 must successfully engage the suspect without assistance from the handler. Once the K9 has engaged and the decoy has fought the dog for approximately 30 to 45 seconds, the decoy will exit the vehicle while continuing to fight. The handler will safely approach and out the dog on command.
7. A simulated traffic stop will be performed by the police working dog team. At some point during the stop, the handler will be assaulted by the decoy. The handler will punch the K9 out and the dog must successfully engage the decoy. The handler will then out the K9 on command. All decoy equipment will be covered in everyday clothing.
8. A grid search of an open/wooded area will be conducted to locate a hidden decoy. The area searched must be a minimum of 100 yards x 50 yards. The police working dog team must successfully locate the suspect. The K9 will then out the upon verbal command.
9. A building suspect search will be conducted by the police working dog team. The team must locate the hidden decoy, the dog must alert the handler that the decoy has been found by barking and/or scratching.
10. Hidden suspect under a house, building, and/or vehicle. The police working dog team is presented the area of a possible hidden suspect. Once the team located the hidden suspect, the dog will be encouraged to drag the suspect out from under the structure. The suspect must be pulled to a position that is safe for officers to approach and make the arrest.
11. During a vehicle pursuit (or another designated scenario), the suspect vehicle will stop and a suspect will attempt to escape by running away. The handler will punch the dog out of the K9 unit and once it is in pursuit of the suspect, the handler will then recall the dog from the pursuit, the K9 must respond to the handler.
12. Odor certification will consist of a parking lot scenario using a minimum of five cars with only two cars having a hidden odor, a traffic stop scenario with one hidden odor on a busy roadway, and a room search scenario consisting of three rooms at a minimum of 200 square feet each. Two of these rooms will have one hidden odor each.
13. A written exam will be given to each handler the last week of his/her training course. This written exam will contain questions that pertain to current police K9 case law, operational scenarios, dos and don’ts, and medical.

I compiled all of this information as a way to help handlers and departments when looking to start a police working dog program or to build upon one that they may already have. Far too many are drawn in by the flashy websites of some training establishments that often claim to do much more than they actually do. This leads the handlers and departments to invest a lot of time and money for substandard, basic classes that are not adequately preparing their basic police working dog teams to perform properly.

If a police working dog team has finished their basic training course and has not been successfully introduced to (at least) the training scenarios that were previously listed, how can anyone say that they are ready for their first day or night on the street? I hope that this information will be helpful to all who see it in some form or fashion.

Let’s stay safe out there guys,

Bubba Howell