This article is the first of a series building upon Scott Sargent’s article, Best Practices in Canine Policing, published in the Winter 2020 issue of the Canine Courier. In that article Mr. Sargent emphasized that K9’s future hinges upon well-crafted policies, sound tactics, use of body-worn video, proper training, and on-going self-critical analysis. With four key principles in mind, we will examine training’s critical role in each of those domains. This article will not talk about training methods but instead will provide key points for canine handlers, supervisors, and managers to consider.

**Core Principles**

1. **Training must be driven by operational tactics rather than by certification standards**. Training-to-test is a route to failure on the street. Instead, one should train a narrow skill set with the robustness and fluency to handle the dynamics of the street. In so doing, the astute K-9 handler will build skills which ace the certification test.
2. P**olice dog handling requires more on-going mindfulness than any other law enforcement discipline.** With the exception of horses, all other police tools are inanimate objects. As the only law enforcement tool that continually interacts with the environment, police dogs’ behavior changes over time. As a result, the dog’s training is never “done.” Since a canine handler and the police dog spend most of their waking hours together, the canine handler is the person solely responsible for that dog’s performance. That is not just a matter of policy, it is pure behavioral fact. Even in units large enough to have dedicated trainers, their span of control and administrative load mean they cannot begin to approach the degree of influence over the dog the individual handler has.
3. **We must lean into our failures**. All outcomes yield information, and failure often yields the most valuable. This concept applies in both macro and micro scales. From after-action debriefings to how your dog responds to a single cue in a training session you have a continual stream of information you can use to inform the continual adjustments needed to improve performance . . . at both ends of the leash. With that in mind, it is wiser to fail in training than on the street.
4. **The police dog’s irreplaceable asset is scent work**. Although dogs can be useful tools for delivering force, we have other tools we can use to deliver force. There is nothing else in the police inventory that can track a robbery suspect from the crime scene five blocks through the city to where he is hiding under an innocent family’s back deck. In so doing, the dog provides corroborative evidence tying the suspect to the scene long before other forensic tools can produce results.

**Tactics Drive Training**

Let us start with tactics as we examine how these principles apply to key to the domains from Scott Sargent’s article. There is a broad variety of tactical approaches applied in modern canine policing. In the end, they all have the same goal—to bring criminal suspects to justice as safely as possible for all concerned. The safest arrest an officer can make is one in which he or she generates compliance from the suspect. That is what de-escalation is all about. Tactics that decelerate events during a confrontation with the suspect should serve you well. Often that means taking steps to generate compliance that before confrontation. It is unrealistic to expect officers and dogs to perform at their best in arrest situations in which they attempt to generate compliance if they have not actually practiced these tactics and techniques in training.

That training should include pre-deployment warnings, taking cover, mid-search warnings, and suspect challenges. It should also include exposing the K-9 team to a variety of suspect responses to de-escalation efforts such as: silence, passivity, verbal resistance, walking away, running away, aggressive resistance, and an outright fight. For officers’ commands to be heard and tensions reduced, dogs must be taught to be poised and quiet during de-escalation efforts. The public, police superiors, and the courts look favorably on such efforts. More importantly, they make everyone safer by reducing the likelihood of a violent encounter.

It is also important to train for those times when, after your best efforts to de-escalate, a violent encounter with the suspect ensues. The courts have made it clear that proportionality is now a major consideration in addition to the *Graham* factors of severity of crime, resistance or flight, and threat to officers or others. The problem is that while modulation is a key component of proportionality, police dogs have little to no capacity to modulate the force of their bites. That means limiting duration is the only way we can effectively modulate a police K-9 bite. Once it is clear the suspect poses no immediate threat to officers or others the bite must end. It is no longer satisfactory to speculate about what a suspect might do. We must be able to articulate who was at risk from the suspect at that moment and by what means. The bottom line is K-9 bites must be as brief as needed to get the job done.

Ideally, this can be done with a verbal Out issued by the handler from behind cover. Sometimes verbal Outs fail because suspect resistance generates sensory exclusion in the dog. If the dog does not respond to the verbal out, or suspect threat levels diminish, the handler must break through that sensory exclusion. There are a variety of approaches to doing this, including the use of electronic collars or moving forward to give the dog a tactile collar-cue to release (a trained behavior rather than just trying to choke the dog off). Each approach has pros and cons, but both rely upon being trained well before needed on the street. Over-training them by getting quick, smooth releases in the face of resistance levels greater than you expect to encounter on the street is an absolute must. In today’s world, both techniques to overcome canine sensory exclusion should be in every handler’s repertoire. Some may reply that fluent, reliable verbal or tactilely-cued outs are a tall order. I agree they are, but they are achievable and are what is expected of us.

The Out is just one area where operational tactics, not certification standards, should drive training. The same principles should be applied to detection, building searches, area search, tracking or trailing. Also, canine handlers and their supervisors must be so familiar with department policy and relevant case law that they can anticipate issues and address them before they become problems.

**Perpetual Mindfulness Required**

My early mentor, Seattle Police Canine Unit Training Master Tim Tieken, taught that “Anytime you’re with your dog one of you is training the other.” The bad news is that if you have not made the decision to be the trainer you are, by default, the trainee.

Dogs have a much easier time of it. All they must do is figure out how to get their assigned hairless primate to say “Good!” and give them stuff. We, on the other hand, have very complex lives intervening with our ability to be mentally present with the dog. While the dog begs for attention from us, we wonder if we turned off the iron, locked the front door, or if there will be peace in the Middle East. This break in connection prompts dogs to misbehave for the attention they can get if they can’t get the attention they want. When we suddenly need the dog to perform, we must get them back from their own little world and into ours.

While the solution to this problem is simple it is not easy. Although you have the title K-9 Handler you must forever and always think of yourself as a K-9 Trainer. You must create a training culture in your unit. Even if you are a unit of one, adopt the training culture because from the dog’s perspective there is no such thing as a K-9 handler. There only trainers and trainees, so if you don’t want to be your dog’s trainee, you must set your mind to being the trainer at all times. That means adherence to all the rules all the time . . . for both you and the dog. We have all seen:

. . . that dog that heels flawlessly at certification but whose handler cannot approach the door for building search without being skijorred there by the dog;

. . . that dog that spits the sleeve out in an instant during certification but holds on as if its life depended on it as soon as the decoy offers the slightest movement;

. . . that dog which reliably responds only to compound cues, such as a preparatory command of “Sit!” followed seconds later by a command of execution something like “Dammit, I said SIT!”.

These are all problems created by the inconsistency born of a lack of mental presence. They are made worse when frustrated, angry, or embarrassed handlers try punitive measures in the heat of the moment. If it is to be served at all, punishment is a dish best served cold. Remember, **if a dog fails it is only because you have asked it to do something you have not prepared it to deliver . . . yet.** Don’t blame the dog. Put responsibility for the performance where it belongs; on your own shoulders.

It is better to prevent such issues with mindful training consistently applied throughout the dog’s life in all circumstances. Problems are cured by going back to basics, reinforcing early success under circumstances where the dog is likely to be successful. From there you can systematically rebuild fluency, resistance to distraction, and stimulus control under progressively more challenging circumstances. Remedial training workloads increase when little things fester, so keep a constant eye on performance to ensure that you catch lapses in performance before they become problems.

**Harness Failure’s Lessons**

As a K-9 handler or trainer, your daily job is to find the edges of team performance and then systematically push those edges outward to higher levels of fluency, robustness, and serviceability. The key is to objectively assess the current state of fluency of every behavior in the team’s repertoire under simulation of real-world challenges. Resist the urge to throw the dog in over its head. Instead, begin by estimating the point at which you think the dog would likely succeed. Then add just enough difficulty that it would challenge the dog without absolute failure. If you are right, the dog will succeed but the performance will be slightly wobbly.

There are two ways your estimate can be wrong. If you underestimate your dog’s abilities, it will breeze through the challenge. In that case, use the outcome to design a slightly more challenging test. Rinse and repeat until you find the dog’s true baseline performance, being careful not to create a skill plateau by continually making things too easy for the dog. If you overestimated your dog’s fluency of the target behavior, the dog outright failed. If so, adjust the exercise to a point where you think the dog is likely to succeed. A word of caution here: because every failure is a permanent part of the dog’s reinforcement history, do not let it fail too often lest these failed performances resurface later under stressful conditions. To minimize failure’s impact, adopt the Three Try Rule in which you take a break and rethink your training plan if the dog has three failures in a row. Behavioral research indicates that there’s no more reliable predictor of success in the ratio of successful training trials to unsuccessful training trials. The less you rehearse failure while still moving forward the better your long-term performance will be.

This process of assessing baseline performance should begin every training session, even your brief impromptu ones. The baseline-adjust-reassess model should become second nature to you. With each discrete trial in the training session, you should be aware of how the performance compares with the previous one so you can make appropriate adjustments for the next. This need to daily, and perpetually, pursue improvement is why K-9 is more than just a job. It is a mindset and a way of life that lasts as long as you and your dog are a team.

If at any point a behavior issue seems resistant to remedial training, it’s likely because you’re “lumping” rather than “splitting.” Lumping is the either asking too much during the behavior shaping process or addressing an entire behavior chain rather than any weak component behaviors in the chain. For example, many think of a formal retrieve as a single behavior when in fact it is a chain consisting of Wait, Go-out, Take, Hold, Carry, and Deliver. When a retrieve’s fluency degrades it is usually best addressed by cleaning up one or two of the component behaviors. If you want big results you need to think small. To think small, search the dog’s past for clues about how the dog’s behavior became the it is. This is where training records come in.

If you ask ten K-9 handlers why they need training records, nine will reply, “For court.” While courts need our records to see if we are doing due diligence, tracking and informing training choices and results are far more important. That is why your training records are much more than a for-court document. They are your breadcrumbs out of the woods when behaviors get wobbly. Many a handler has come to me with a problem the early stages of which were apparent in their training records weeks or months earlier. Unfortunately, because the handler failed to recognize the problem early these conversations often occurred long after the issue could have been more easily fixed. Root cause analysis gets easier the more clear, concise, complete, and accessible training logs are. Don’t be afraid to record evidence that your dog is not perfect. Be wary of not showing that you are aware of the imperfections and have taken steps to correct them. Be familiar enough with your dog’s performance, and your records, that you can spot things before they get out of hand.

There are a variety of ways of keeping training records, including pen and paper logs, software spreadsheets, or purpose-built K-9 recordkeeping programs. To be useful K-9 records must balance **ease of entry, completeness of data, and ease of retrieval**. Purpose-built canine recordkeeping programs have all three qualities. Spreadsheet records are easy to enter and access data, but it is very easy for records to be accidentally deleted or modified, so use spreadsheets with caution. Handwritten logs may have to ease of entry, but data extraction and analysis is very difficult. Word processor documents are easy to use, but like spreadsheets their data is subject to user-error loss. Purpose-built recordkeeping programs, such as Kanine, KATS, or PackTrack record both training and deployments along with other vital information. They each have advantages and disadvantages, so users should try them out to see if one suits their needs. Whether you use home-grown or purpose-built programs, one of the sure signs you have built a training culture in your K-9 unit is the quality of training and deployment records.

**Focus On What Is Most Important.**

Effective teams are best built when members’ unique skills and talents are harnessed such that each does what they do best. The same goes for any K-9 team. Patrol dogs serve as both tools of force and as trackers/searchers. When it comes to using force, dogs only offer three main advantages:

1. They may have a psychological deterrent effect—some suspects will gladly fight with an officer but comply when confronted by a trained police dog.
2. Although we do not have a throw-away dogs, they do have a higher degree of expendability than their human counterparts. Police supervisors would far rather console a handler on the loss of their dog than console an officer’s spouse on the loss of that officer.
3. Dogs are also the only police use of force tool that can adjust course or stop once released toward the target.

These may be sufficient reason to keep well-trained dogs in the police use of force tool inventory, but critics argue otherwise. There is no debate though that well-trained police dogs are the only tool with the ability to help us solve crimes by processing scent.

As use of force case law has evolved some agencies have adopted K-9 procedures emphasizing de-escalation and proportionality. They have found that many canine deployments that would have resulted in bites in the past are now being resolved without force by applying de-escalation principles. When that happens, everybody wins: officers are safer, citizens are safer, and suspects are safer. That is because **the safest arrest an officer can make is one in which the suspect voluntarily complies**. This beneficial shift in search-end tactics means that even greater relative value is derived from the dog’s nose work. We as officers can apply force in the process of making arrests. There is virtually zero chance we can do what dogs easily do with their noses. Your first responsibility then is to prepare your dog to do the scent work that no cop can.

Our dogs’ unique ability to follow suspects’ trails or scent plumes is irreplaceable. Thus, scenting should be our primary area of focus in selecting, training, and deploying dogs. But is it? How often have we seen selection processes that focused on suspect apprehension as opposed to scent work? What do most canine training logs reveal about where we spend our time? Business consultant Mark Horstman says, “Show me your calendar and I’ll show you what’s important to you.” Well, I say, “Show me your dog log and I’ll show you what’s important to you.” Where do you spend the bulk of your training time? I am not alone. More and more agencies are more closely scrutinizing K-9 training records, as are the courts. Train for what matters most, and you will withstand such scrutiny.

Diagram

Description automatically generatedWhen it comes to Police K-9 training balance is the key. In the micro sense, building fluent behaviors relies on balancing three components: accuracy, latency, and intensity. Once you have accurate, crisp, intense behaviors then your goal is get them under stimulus control with adequate duration, resistance to distraction, and at various distances.

In the macro sense, building street worthiness depends upon balancing intensely focused scent work with crisp obedience and clear-headed suspect control work. The key to success in each of these realms is finding the optimal level of arousal for the task at hand. The Yerkes-Dodson Law postulates that learning and performance suffer when the learner is either insufficiently aroused to be interested or so over-aroused it cannot absorb the lesson. Because these three domains are interrelated it is important to train the dog to shift gears from one task to another as needed. This can be a challenge since dogs’ brains have less capacity for executive function than humans. Selecting dogs for clear-headedness and training such that you gradually increase the dog’s ability to recover from arousal constitutes a two-pronged approach for success. You’ll know your efforts have been worth it when your dog can quickly bounce back from a confrontation with one suspect to track another or search for evidence.

Because dogs come out of the box knowing how to do everything we want, just not how to do it when and the way we want, **everything is obedience**. Detection, tracking, agility, and suspect control all involve enhancing the dog’s existing set of behaviors to do what we need on cue. Obedience requires discipline. Drawing from the root word disciple, discipline is about devotion rather than punishment. We cannot expect our dogs be devoted to executing the tasks we set for them if we are not as or more devoted to ours. Our devotion should involve continual improvement through self-critical analysis coupled with meaningful training. Never again should we say, “Got my hour of training in today.” Instead, we should derive satisfaction in finding a performance edge and pushing it outward just a bit. When it comes to scent work that little bit more each day means a little longer delay, a touch more contamination, different hard surfaces, unpredictable weather, or anything you can think of that puts your and your dog’s skills to the test. We are not training for points. Our score sheet is the booking sheet. It is a merciless pass/fail test for which you alone can prepare. There are no crib notes, open book, or quick answers from a browser. There is only hard work in the most mentally demanding field in law enforcement.

While you alone are ultimately responsible for how your dog performs, you cannot do it alone. You need the support of your family, agency, community, and leaders. There will be more articles in this series about how to accomplish the training goals described above. To this point this article has been directed at you, the K-9 handler and trainer. The rest of this article is for the leaders in your agency. Share it with them and circle back to lay out how you plan to train and deliver the best K-9 services your agency has ever seen. Ask them to help you build a training culture that will be a model for the agency.

**A Message to K-9 Supervisors**

Hopefully, you have read everything up to this point in the article. If you have not, please take the time to do so. It will help you more fully appreciate the incredible responsibility and commitment being a law enforcement K9 handler entails. K-9 requires more mental presence than any other aspect of law enforcement. SWAT may have higher per-event risk exposure, but K-9 has the highest day-to-day exposure. Your K-9 officers walk point for Patrol officers as they search for the ones that got away, using the only tool in your inventory that literally drags them to a confrontation with the suspect.

Because the skills required for this are perishable at both ends of the leash, they require continual training, not just bi-weekly trips to the local K-9 training venue. Give your K-9 teams at least an hour a day to focus on training. Send them to work with other competent, like-minded K-9 trainers every week or two. Help them get the equipment they need. Help them attend one or two professional K-9 seminars per year. Our communities continually ask more of us, so K-9 training must be committed to evolution. If you help your K-9 handlers develop a training culture, your efforts will be repaid many times over as your K-9 teams become models of professionalism of which you, your agency, and your community can be justifiably proud.

"The views expressed solely reflect those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Seattle Police Department."

In his 45th year of a K9-centered law enforcement career Steve White is the only person to have served as a handler, trainer, training-sergeant, and commander for Washington State's largest police canine unit. First accredited as a Master Trainer in 1993 by the Washington State Police Canine Association, Steve is also a past Executive Board Member of that body. He served as Vice President of the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers, and is a consultant and instructor for the K9 Academy for Law Enforcement. Steve has instructed at seminars in the U.S., Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Finland, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, and the United Kingdom. He has served as a primary instructor for Karen Pryor's ClickerExpo and the Karen Pryor Academy for Animal Training and Behavior. His articles have appeared in police K9 and dog training publications in the U.S., Canada, Australia, Finland, and Japan. He specializes in behavior problem-solving, tracking, and scent work through the use of positive reinforcement-based operant conditioning. He provides consultation and training to K-9 units on administrative and legal issues, and has been recognized as an expert witness by Washington and Federal courts in Police K9 and dog behavior matters.