Reading the Dog: What Happens Before the Final Response Matters

Understanding canine behavior changes and why recognizing them is one of the most important skills a handler can develop.

USPCA Best Practices Group

One of the most important skills a police canine handler can develop is recognizing and interpreting changes in a dog's behavior. We teach dogs to search, locate odor, follow tracks, and perform trained final responses. We should be equally deliberate about teaching handlers to recognize what their dogs communicate before those responses occur.

During training, an experienced trainer may notice a subtle change as a dog works a track and ask, "Did you see that?" When the handler answers, "See what?" the gap is not effort but observation—a skill that can be taught systematically rather than left to experience alone.

The Final Response Is Only Part of the Story

In detection work, the trained final response—a sit, down, freeze, or another behavior—provides a recognizable indication that the dog has located target odor. But it is the conclusion of a behavioral sequence, not the beginning.

Before the dog performs its final response, it may change its breathing pattern, adjust its pace, raise or lower its nose, alter its tail carriage, or suddenly turn toward an odor source. These behaviors may indicate that the dog has encountered something significant and is attempting to locate or identify it.

Consider a dog searching through debris, broken vehicle parts, or difficult terrain. The dog may encounter target odor but find it physically difficult to sit or lie down. An older dog experiencing stiffness or discomfort may also hesitate to perform that response. In other circumstances, the dog may become so focused on reaching the odor source that it fails to complete the trained behavior.

Search, Locate, and Report

Detection work can be viewed as three general behaviors: search, locate, and report. The dog searches for target odor, works toward its strongest available concentration, and reports the discovery through its trained response.

The same process can also be described as interest, investigation, and detection.

During the interest stage, something attracts the dog's attention. The dog may briefly orient toward an odor or change its movement.

During investigation, the dog begins examining that odor more closely. It may determine that the odor is relevant and continue working toward the source, or it may recognize that the odor is unrelated to its assigned task and resume searching.

Detection occurs when the dog recognizes target odor and communicates that discovery.

Not Every Behavior Change Means the Same Thing

Consider a tracking dog that suddenly stops at a telephone pole or fire hydrant. Its feet become motionless, and it begins investigating the location. A moment later, the dog starts licking or displaying other behaviors associated with investigating urine left by another dog.

The handler who recognizes the initial change in gait may anticipate the distraction before the more obvious behaviors appear.

Compare that with a dog working human odor. Instead of stopping completely, the dog may continue moving, increase its pulling, change direction, or adjust its nose position while attempting to locate the next available odor.

Steve White described a detector dog that displayed a brief pause in its tail movement when independently locating an odor source. The pause lasted approximately one-quarter of a second before the tail began moving in a wide, loose pattern.

The size of a behavior change does not determine its importance. A subtle behavior that occurs predictably and repeatedly may be more useful than a dramatic behavior with no consistent relationship to odor.

When the Dog Cannot Locate the Source

In one training exercise, a decoy was hidden beneath a false floor in a computer room. Human odor escaped from multiple locations, preventing many dogs from establishing a

single source. Approximately two-thirds displayed interest and wanted to remain; several returned after leaving.

The repeated interest was important. Sometimes a dog provides enough information to identify where further investigation is needed even when it cannot pinpoint the source.

Reading the Dog During Tracking

A track is not an uninterrupted line of odor. Environmental conditions, crossing traffic, surface changes, and other factors affect availability, so the dog may lose the track, overshoot a turn, and work to reacquire it.

The handler must recognize how the dog looks while following odor, losing it, and reacquiring it. Remembering the last meaningful behavior change can provide a starting point when the track becomes difficult.

The objective is not to take over the dog's work, but to recognize when the dog is working successfully and when appropriate assistance may be necessary.

Where did the dog last display behavior consistent with following the track? Where did its pace change? Did it suddenly raise its nose or begin casting? What happened immediately before and after those changes?

The ability to recognize when the dog is no longer working odor may be just as important as recognizing when it is.

Negative Information Matters Too

Negative information also matters. A detection team searching aircraft cargo must not only locate prohibited material but conduct a sufficiently thorough search to support decisions about which cargo can proceed.

Handlers must distinguish between an area searched without detecting target odor and one that was not adequately searched.

Can We Teach Handlers to Read Dogs More Effectively?

Handlers traditionally develop dog-reading skills through repetition, experience, and trainer feedback. Experience remains necessary, but deliberate methods can accelerate learning.

During live training, attention is divided among the dog, environment, officer safety, and search responsibilities. Subtle changes may occur too quickly to recognize, while video allows trainer and handler to review them repeatedly.

A trainer can stop the recording, identify a change in breathing pattern or gait, ask what the dog was doing, and then continue the video to show what happened next.

Steve Mackenzie's *Thousand-Hour Eyes* approach emphasizes systematic observation and developing the ability to recognize canine behavior. The discussion surrounding this method suggests that structured video review can substantially accelerate the development of dog-reading skills compared with relying on live experience alone.

A commentary track offers another method. As the dog works, the handler verbally identifies significant changes rather than narrating every movement.

This teaches the handler to recognize changes, explain their significance, and determine afterward which observations were meaningful.

Training Must Provide Different Experiences

Handlers cannot fully understand their dogs if training occurs only in familiar settings with predictable odor problems.

Detection dogs should encounter varied odor presentations, locations, distractions, and environmental conditions. Tracking dogs should experience different surfaces, crossing tracks, changing odor availability, and problems they must solve independently.

These experiences train the handler’s eye as well as the dog, revealing what the dog looks like when the task is easy, difficult, distracting, or uncertain.

The objective is not merely to produce a dog that can perform a particular exercise. It is to develop a team capable of recognizing and solving the varied problems encountered during operational deployments.

Reading the Dog Has Operational and Legal Importance

During patrol operations, behavior suggesting that a person is nearby may influence positioning, search tactics, and officer safety.

Body-worn cameras create another challenge: a change obvious to the handler may not be visible on the recording.

Attorney Gene Ramirez has suggested that handlers, when appropriate, verbally identify significant behavior changes during deployments so important observations are preserved.

In court, a tracking handler may need to explain why the person found at the end of a track is believed to be the person who left the original scene.

The handler should be prepared to describe the dog's training, odor-discrimination ability, and observed behavior—not merely state that the dog followed a track.

The Handler Must Become the Expert on Their Dog

Every police canine handler should strive to become an expert in recognizing and interpreting the behavior of their individual dog.

That expertise develops through deliberate observation, varied training, video review, and meaningful feedback.

A trained final response is important, but the behaviors before it, the surrounding circumstances, and what the dog does afterward can provide equally important information.

KEY TAKEAWAY

A successful canine handler does more than recognize when a dog has found something. The handler learns to understand what the dog is communicating throughout the search.

That is the difference between simply following a dog and becoming a knowledgeable partner in the search.

And it is a skill we should be deliberately teaching, developing, and evaluating throughout a canine team's career.