

Drive Development & Hold and Bark

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INTRODUCTION

There are a number of important skills that are common among protection trained dogs, whether those dogs are police K-9s, sport dogs (schutzhund, KNPV, ringsport), or personal protection dogs. Those skills most broadly shared include biting (most obviously), releasing on command, some form of guarding, searching, transporting, defending against surprise attacks, call-offs, and distance work.

In this article I wish to concentrate on the skills, which are pre-requisite to the hold & bark. Most commonly associated with schutzhund, there are variants of the Hold & Bark exercise in most of the European protection sports. And though I don't wish to get into the debate over find-and-bark vs. find-and-bite in police dogs, many police K-9s need to actively guard (with barking) to serve as a more intimidating force, and often are trained to hold and bark after the out. Many, though not all dogs, that are trained to guard without barking can lose focus on the job at hand.

As with any skill we train a dog to exhibit on command, there are as many ways to accomplish the task as there are trainers. I will present some techniques here that I have found to work well over the long term with a number of different dogs. In this article I will slant the perspective toward the context of schutzhund, but I want to make it clear that I do not see much difference in the quality of the exercise as performed in any other context, be it KNPV, ringsport, or police work. Also, I am not necessarily saying that the exercise must be performed with the quality I expect in order to receive full points in any sport, including schutzhund. I am looking to train within the rules, but beyond the minimum standards for excellence. For example, in schutzhund, a mechanical dog that is clean and barks immediately and continuously will probably earn full points whether or not there is perceptible violent intent. He may look like he is barking for his food or a toy. This is not the picture I want ideally. In my opinion, I can make it better by adding violent intent.

First we must identify our goal. To me an excellent hold and bark exhibits the following characteristics: unwavering focus, an underlying violent intent, a continuous, serious bark, and close holding (as close as the rules of your sport allow). In schutzhund, the hold & bark exercise commences immediately upon the conclusion of the blind search as the dog enters the "hot" blind. The blind search is the judge's first picture of the dog in the protection phase. If your dog is fast and correct, the judge is expecting a quality hold & bark to be consistent with this first impression. If the dog is not really fast, his first impression is that your dog is not in a hurry to get his bite, and there is likely a problem, which he is going to discover presently. A quality hold and bark can change his mind. The hold & bark is above all a confrontation, a standoff where the dog must show all of what he is made of, yet resist the temptation to strike the first blow in the confrontation. It combines an exhibition of his inherent genetic make-up and obedience to the design of the exercise. Given this, we must first discuss the instincts we must have present to achieve the highest quality performance, then we can discuss the training methods used to bring these genetic traits to the fore and create obedience to the exercise as we have defined it in the rules of our sport or, in the case of police K-9s, the rules of engagement in real life.

DRIVES

Much has been written recently about “drives” possessed by our protection dogs. We used to talk about only “prey” and “defense” drives in dogs. Other writers speak of “fight” drive also as a genetic trait. I am not an ethologist, and don’t pretend to know *exactly* what is going on in the psyche and DNA of a dog. I am a trainer. I know what I see. Through experimentation I know how to develop behaviors I can see consistently exhibited by certain types of stimulation. In my experience we can create the desire to fight through proper use of the instinct to chase prey and the instinct to defend (which includes defense of prey, defense of territory, and defense of the self) coupled with a high degree of self-confidence, which comes only with experience. (As a side note, I find it silly to talk about a young dog having a lot of fight drive. In any young dog you can extinguish his desire to fight with one foolish action, whereas with a confident and experienced dog you are much less likely to do so).

To me, what trainers call fight drive, is rather a combination of characteristics that are present when we properly and with purpose, stimulate both prey and defensive instincts over time in a dog with a high capacity for self-confidence. In other words, a dog wants to fight if he knows he is going to win! He only knows he is going to win if he has done so many times in many different places and situations, with many different opponents - that is what experience is. The more successes under his belt, the less likely some bad experience will extinguish his desire to do it again. On the other side of the coin, if we make winning too easy, the dog gets a false sense of security. I have seen dogs work well on a particular field with a single helper, but the handler fails to give the dog wide-ranging experiences with other decoys and training fields. Suddenly, a stick hit from a stranger drives the dog off the bite. Is the dog necessarily weak? No. He has not been trained to properly build his self-confidence through experience. As the dog matures the level of the fight must escalate in intensity and duration, always ending with the result that the dog wins. The dog learns, the harder he is fought by the decoy, the harder he must fight back, because the dog learns through his experience that this is always the road to victory. This is not to say that each fight in succession must be longer and more intense than the last. The dog must not be tested to his limits each time out. I have seen some great decoys fight a dog to the edge of what he can handle, and then upon the very next attack the initial impact of the dog drives the decoy on his back to the ground. By design the decoy teaches that the dog can win right away, too. This is a simple principle of motivation. Hard fought battles followed by quick successes are variable reward, which builds desire and motivation.

cannot see “fight” drive as a separate drive for another reason. I don’t believe it can be present absent the drives of prey and defense. We have all seen dogs exhibit primarily prey drive, or primarily defensive instinct. Show me a dog with only fight drive. In my experience, dogs with very dominant prey instinct or very dominant defense instinct can be balanced to some degree. The highly defensive dog who learns over time to carry the sleeve and calm gains confidence. The “prey locked” dog can learn to bark more fiercely when threatened, and will, through experience, exhibit more characteristically defensive behaviors because it is successful when it exhibits them. But can we start with *only* “fight” drive without the drives that first stimulate the dog to fight?

Today, many trainers are afraid of the defensive instinct. They fear training through it because in the beginning, when it is present, there exists the possibility of pushing the dog into avoidance. I recently read an article in a major sport publication that went so far as to say defense has no place in the training of a protection dog! Nonsense! We must teach the dog to be successful when it exhibits defensive behaviors, because it is defensive instinct that provides the violence and strength in the grip, and the serious tone of the bark, and indeed is a major component in the level of focus exhibited in the dog’s work (would you be more concerned with missing one meal, or with being physically harmed?). There is no question that overstressing the defensive instinct can ruin a dog in a hurry. Prey training is safer and easier, but is incomplete for the picture we want. In schutzhund, we see dogs that are primarily prey trained, and the handler later wonders why the dog “yips” in the hold and bark. We want the dog angry, not scared, but angry at the helper. The key is stimulating the defensive instinct and teaching the dog that showing aggression brings success. This is done in small steps. We also can stimulate the prey instinct

without stimulating defense, at the same time. Work each side of the coin and then bring them together slowly.

PRELIMINARIES

When are we ready to begin the hold and bark training? In general, the dog should be fairly mature, biting full and calmly and respond both to prey stimulation and defensive stimulation with confidence. The dog should have had a number of months worth of fights with a combination of prey actions and defensive actions in the fights. Also the dog must be able and willing to work on his own without the handler near him. I often back-tie my dog and walk away when my dog is worked to build his confidence. Handlers often think that they must always be right beside their dog during protection, and often, as a result, create a dependency. You must praise your dog on the sleeve, yes, but he must also not be concerned with where you are at every moment. Ever see a dog go into the blind to hold and bark and come out 5 times during the exercise to see where you are, then go back to work? A confident dog would just as soon have you stay in the truck while he works protection! Finally, the dog should be neutral to body contact, petting, stick hits, handler influence (touching, talking, movement), yelling, and pain. The dog must not be afraid of pain, but rather become angry when there is some pain.

This can be achieved by back-tying the dog to a pole on his agitation collar, while the handler holds a second line with a prong collar attached. The handler gives pops on the prong when the decoy excites the dog. These pops are easy at first, and get more intense as the dog gets more intense. Remember, these pops are NOT corrections but stimulation. It is like the difference between stubbing your toe, which gets you angry, and having a safe fall on your foot! If you see the dog go down in drive when you do this, you are doing it too hard, back off on the stimulation. Over time, I end up back-tying my dogs on the prong collar. Remember, though, to let them out to the end slowly so they don't get a jolt. The point of this is to make the dog harder to the pain. If your dog is on the softer side you may not be able to back-tie them ever, it may be too much.

Above all, do not start hold & bark training before the dog develops a love to fight, through experience and elevated confidence, and especially before the dog learns to work under defensive pressure in a confident way. You will set yourself up to create a weak hold in bark if you are missing the defensive component. Remember, it brings the seriousness in the bark, and the inherent violent intent in the picture you are trying to create.

A TRAINING PROGRAM

To me the first step is to teach the dog that barking brings the decoy's actions. The dog must be ready to learn to bark continuously if he does not do so already, to bring the decoy to him to initiate the fight. At this point there is no influence on the dog to have him sit while barking. The dog should be back-tied and the helper already hidden in the blind, waiting for a bark to bring him out of hiding into the dog's full view. A tap of the stick, a hiss, just the minimum required to trigger the bark is what we are after. You must keep your goal in mind at every step in the training program. Both the decoy and the handler must share the same goal at this stage: The dog must bark continuously and with violent intent in order to get the reward of the bite. Usually, a dog at this level will give us his prey bark to draw the decoy in. But this is not enough, unless you are having trouble getting the dog to bark at all. In such a case you take whatever bark you can get and then build the quality of bark you desire subsequent to initiating the barking behavior.

Timing and concentration on the part of the helper are crucial at this stage. Do not give in to the desire just to see your dog get a grip if he doesn't give you the quality of bark you want. In addition, you are teaching the dog that barking brings action, which means the decoy must respond with some movement toward the dog as he barks each time in the proper manner. A spectacular serious bark might bring a bite and a good fight before the decoy manages to actually get close, but the decoy must recognize the achievement of the goal and the need to immediately

mark that behavior with a bite reward (immediate noise from the decoy buys time to give the bite reward, and marks the event clearly for the dog).

Dogs working primarily in prey can benefit from the helper threatening without equipment at first to bring the desired response, then keep the sleeve behind the back and present at the instant the bite is to be given, not giving the dog the chance to focus on the sleeve, and become prey locked. Staring at a distance with a full frontal position offered to the dog, often will stimulate the aggression. Be patient, and wait for the decoy to elicit the desired response, and do not accept anything you don't want to see in the trial!