

# K9 COP

MARCH/APRIL 2012  
MAGAZINE™

FOR POLICE AND MILITARY WORKING DOG HANDLERS • \$6.95

*inside:*

K-9  
demos

featured  
contractor:  
VCSi

team  
bitework

dealing with  
dominance  
aggression

pseudo  
scents:  
get the  
facts



K-9 Cop Magazine presents

Police & Military Working Dog Conference

October 1, 2, 3, 2012



*dealing with*

# DOMINANCE AGGRESSION



*by Jerry Bradshaw*

Training Director,  
Tarheel Canine Training, Inc.

Photos courtesy of Britney Pelletier

***The mission of the Police K9 handler is a “usage” mission. The police dog is a means to an end. The use of the K9 should provide an efficient solution to the problem at hand, whether that is a patrol, tracking or detection application.***

Efficiency means minimizing the expenditure of resources to solve a problem. Behavior problems can impede the efficient training of the K9. It can also prevent the efficient use of the K9, and may result in officer safety issues during deployment. Behavioral problems can also decrease confidence in the use of the K9 and affect the perception of the quality of the K9 held by the patrol officer, and can, in some instances increase liability risks.

There are some common temperament-related behavioral issues that we see: Dominance Issues such as resource guarding (Food/Rewards), manipulating the handler with aggression, over-protectiveness, reactive or displaced aggression, all of which have implications for obedience and general management of the K9. There are also sociability disorders, sharpness, social conflict disorders, dog/dog aggression, obsessive-compulsive behaviors such as tail chasing/barking/spinning/self-mutilation.

Selection testing eliminates many of these issues but not all. Temperament testing during selection (e.g. sociability, drives, and nerves) can weed out many problem dogs but such testing tends to be incomplete and reactive. If an agency has had problems with dog aggression they may look at it in selection, but if not, it may not be an issue that is looked at. Additionally, behavior problems may take time to manifest -especially dominance problems which require a relationship to be established, something not necessarily observable during selection testing. And some

behavior problems which are estimated to be minor at the time of selection can grow into more severe problems over time so they creep in under the radar.

When a problem is identified we naturally do a cost-benefit analysis. Is the problem worth putting up with, or is it a deal breaker? In many cases, the dog is just canned from a practicality standpoint. It seems easier to send the dog back to the vendor. This tends to happen with dogs that are identified as behavior problems early on in the training process. The irony is we often have dogs with excellent drive and nerve, and if we could only ameliorate the behavior issue we would have an excellent K9 and avoid the expense and cost of replacing dogs, which drives up prices of canines every year. If you are a training class that washes a lot of dogs after selection, you are going to pay more and more every year for dogs. In the end, the buyers pay for the costs of replacements.

Police dog trainers tend to concentrate on practical training issues, not solving behavioral problems. Many handlers/trainers don't know what to do with certain behavior problems, whether they are dominance issues getting in the way of daily training, or environmental issues. I think a better understanding of behavior and how to resolve such problems will lead to fewer wash-outs, fewer replaced dogs, and more productive and safer training and deployments.

Behaviors can be genetic.  
They can also be the result

*Use the stay to play on your terms, makes the dog show subordination in order to get what he wants.*





of a learned response. They can also be genetic and learning augmented. For the purposes of this article I will concentrate on the behavioral problem of dominance aggression issues. In future articles I will discuss other behavioral issues, including dealing with environmental problems.

## LEARNING

Behaviors can be learned by observation (and participation) which we call mimicry (e.g. teaching open stairs or slick floors in a group of dogs – we will talk about that one in a future article). They learn by classical conditioning, which is learning by association. In classical learning, dogs respond to a signal in anticipation of another event. (e.g. they get excited seeing a decoy because they are anticipating biting). They also learn by operant conditioning, which is learning by consequence. Reinforcing consequences are those that increase the likelihood of a behavior and punishing consequences are those that decrease the likelihood of a behavior.

In operant conditioning, positive reinforcement is providing a desirable consequence to increase the likelihood of a behavior (a dog sits on target odor, and he gets his ball), while negative reinforcement is removing an undesirable consequence to increase the likelihood of a behavior (pull up on choke collar and push the butt to the ground, and when the dog sits, give him his air back). Timing, intensity, and intervals of reinforcement shape learned behaviors.

For example, when it comes to timing, rewarding a dog by throwing a ball at the end of an obedience routine is generally pointless. You must reward individual behaviors immediately after they are performed. Intensity is this: rewards can be too big, and thus distracting, or too small, and as such inconsequential. Reward intensity

should fit the behavior, circumstance and achievement. Interval of reinforcement means: Initially, continuous reinforcement by which a dog is rewarded every time for a correct behavior leads to rapid learning. Continuously reinforced behaviors are the easiest to extinguish, however. Intermittent (variable) reinforcement schedules create the strongest learned behaviors, and as such are the hardest to extinguish. So training should progress from continuous reinforcement to variable reinforcement to establish strong behaviors.

On the other side of operant conditioning is punishment. We refer to positive punishment as providing an undesirable consequence to reduce the likelihood of a behavior (like a collar correction). Negative Punishment on the other hand is simply withholding a desirable consequence to reduce the likelihood of a behavior (dog fails to bark at the door in a building search when he located the decoy behind it, so we withhold his bite reward until we get some barking). Timing, Intensity and Intervals also impact the effectiveness of punishment. Timing must be immediate and consistently applied for punishment to be properly interpreted. Inconsistently applied punishment can create a neurotic condition called learned helplessness. Positive punishment must be perceived as serious and be somewhat traumatic in order for it to register. Nagging punishments should be avoided. The consequence must be undesirable as perceived by the dog in question, and to some extent that will depend on the temperament of the dog and how “hard” or “soft” they are.

## TECHNIQUES FOR CHANGING BEHAVIOR

There are a number of techniques for changing behavior, and the key is identifying which technique is the best in any given situation. It often requires some



experience and careful observation to do so. One such way is to remove the reward for or punish the behavior. If a learned response is not rewarded any longer, the behavior is gradually lost and the frequency of the behavior will return to naturally occurring levels. If naturally recurring levels are high, no noticeable change will be observed. In detection training we use extinction to proof dogs off plastic bags, for example. Placing plastic baggies in known blank areas will allow the handler to move the dog off plastic bags and not reward the response on bags. Gradually the dog will lose interest in plastic bags because there is no reward for showing interest or responding on them. Punishment can be used (either positive or negative) as well. However we need to carefully understand the consequences of punishing certain behaviors. In the case of dog aggression, for example, if your dog becomes aggressive when in proximity to another dog, and you then punish your dog for the aggression, the associated pain can be interpreted as further reason to not like other dogs, as pain is applied in the presence of the other dog. Your dog learns this through association: pain from you comes when near other dogs. This technique will likely make the dog aggression worse, not better.

We can Modify behavior in a few different ways: (1) Re-Direct the Behavior, (2) Train Mutually Exclusive Behaviors, (3) Habituation: Constantly exposing a dog to a neutral (non-harmful or non-rewarding) stimulus, or gradually introducing the dog to a neutral stimulus. This will allow the dog to habituate to the stimulus (basically learn it is meaningless) (4) Flooding: Habituation through constant heavy exposure to a non-neutral stimulus, or (5) Systematic Desensitization: Habituation through gradual exposure. Some of these techniques, improperly conducted, can cause the opposite reaction and make the problem worse. This is especially true of

flooding, and should be used as a last resort.

## K9 DOMINANCE ISSUES

Dominance can affect both new and experienced handlers. The typical response to dominance is to establish rank by force (positive punishment). Fight fire with fire. This may work, or may initiate a cycle of constant struggle for supremacy in the relationship if the punishment doesn't get the desired result. The problem with this approach is that once you go there with the intent to establish rank on the dog, if the dog doesn't back off immediately, you are likely to be in for a sometimes serious physical altercation that you better be ready to take to the end and win. Too many times, when this all



*Attention is a mutually-exclusive behavior you can use to counter-condition dog aggression.*



blows up, the handler is not prepared to carry through with showing the dog who is boss, and it is the person who punks first, not the dog. Fighting with a determined and mature dog who himself has won a lot of fights is no joke. Changing this behavior through negative punishment is used less often, and may be seen as less proactive, but may be safer and more effective.

Dominance itself is a pack-relative social behavior. As pack animals, dogs expect all relationships to be unequal, in other words, somebody has to be in charge. Dominance aggression is usually shown by male dogs (85% of cases) and is most intense as social maturity is approached (2-2.5 yrs). Social maturity takes a lot longer than sexual maturity. Dominance aggression is one of those behaviors that is partly genetic and partly learned. The genetic component is formed while still in the womb when a testosterone surge “masculinizes” the brain. Therefore, castration has little effect on correcting this behavior.

However, since learning is involved, extinction of the behavior is still possible. Dogs tend to direct their dominance aggression toward those that are threats to their social position (i.e. the K9 handler). Some of the common triggers: Affection, especially when ceased. Placing or removing collars/leads which initiate control on the dog. Positive punishments (i.e., collar corrections) are a big trigger, as well as negative punishments (withholding rewards).

Withholding rewards can trigger dominance aggression in this way: keeping the dog under obedience control when he thinks he may do bite work, and decides to redirect aggression on you to get something he wants. Some other triggers can be: Grooming (often a postural trigger) or contextual, i.e. place associated where a previous dominance altercation took place. Dogs can also be psychologically dominant and physically

submissive (e.g. allow physical touching/handling) but react to other triggers, like control.

Many new handlers think being the “alpha” applies to the dog they just took out of the crate the first day they get him. The idea that “if I let him get away with anything, he will lose his respect for me.” leads to constant nagging of the dog about every little thing. Alphas don’t sweat the small stuff, so when you become a nagging, over controlling handler you are exhibiting non-alpha behavior, and likely are encouraging the dog to show dominance. The smart handler who sees dominance issues will avoid confrontations he cannot control or are not certain you will win. Instead a behavioral plan must be put in place.

## **JUDO FOR K9 HANDLERS**

The key to turning around dominance problems is to gain the dog’s respect using your brain, not your hands. Reject the model of “Alpha” that you have been taught and had drilled into your head. You are not a dog, and your dog does not relate to you as a dog. Think of yourself as the “Super-Alpha.” You control all the dog’s resources, all of his activities, yet dogs are still able to push us around! Dogs don’t expect equality, so your job is to put all the odds in your favor. Imagine you are training a grizzly bear and not a dog. What would you do?

First, you must disorient his expectations, and set the dog up to have to show deference or submission to get anything he desires, including affection, rewards, food, including toys, bite sessions. This is commonly called the “No Free Lunch” program, and uses a principle called the “Premack Principle” It states that a dog will perform a less desirable activity (obedience or social subordination) in order to get to perform a more desirable activity. Use obedience as a pre-cursor to his favorite activities or those where he gives you problems.



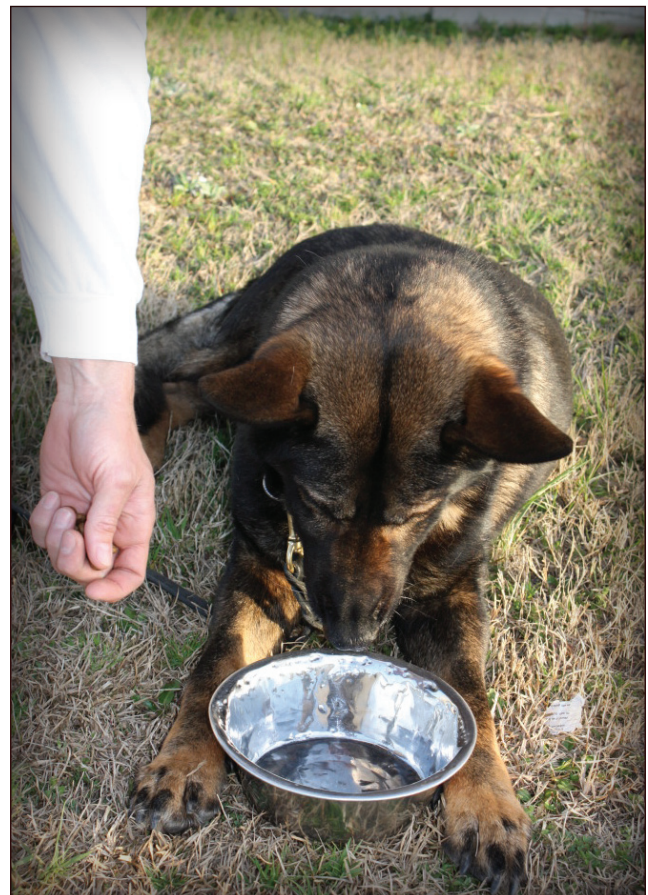
You must always keep a level head, and do not take dominance expressions personally. You must reward the obedience when he complies. Examples are sitting and staying before meals, before going in and out of doors, before playing fetch games, etc. Anything he likes to do, he must perform obedience in order to do it. This extends to going outside to the bathroom! Be results oriented, and do not become upset if you need a few trials to get the desired behaviors. When he refuses you, ignore bad behavior, and start overstart over, use retreating reprimands (my favorite is “knock it off!” just as I change the subject matter of whatever conflict we are having, then ask him for something he will give me, maybe something very simple such as obedience for a piece of food, or to go in the car. Then try again. Remember this is a long term fix, not a short term one. We are changing how the dog fundamentally relates to us.

Second, regiment his life. He makes no decisions, and he makes no choices on his own. Use negative punishment (withholding rewards) to reduce unwanted dominance behaviors. Positively reinforce appropriate behaviors. Use rewards in obedience (food rewards work well and there is little chance of fighting over possession of the reward). Focus on the pre-cursors to aggressive responses, and plan your training to set yourself up to anticipate and re-direct possible confrontations. For example, you may know he gets frustrated and impulsive prior to bite work, and challenges your authority to control him when you correct him. Apply systematic desensitization to the triggers such as corrections, by focusing the dog outwardly during the use of physical correction. When you throw his ball, hold him by a flat collar, and “tap, tap” the pinch collar or choke collar while he is straining to get the ball. This will desensitize him to the action and some of the force of corrections.

Use mutually exclusive behaviors to deal with

some of the dominance expressions. For example, some dominant dogs will jump up on you, similar to climbing on the back of another dog. Use a trained sit command to interrupt these behaviors, and reward with food when he does the behavior. With one of my very dominant dogs, I would always walk him with a pocket full of food, so that I could manipulate him into obedience and reward it, when he showed unwanted behaviors. He would sometimes not want to get in his crate, after walking, so I just baited the crate with food rewards every time until getting in was a habit, rather than get into a fight over crating him.

Now I have absolutely no problems with loading him in a crate. Know the things that trigger his dominance



*A hand coming near the bowl with a treat of high value can be used to counter-condition food aggression.*



## [ **K9** training ]

responses and use the behavioral techniques to get the dog to give you what you want. If you view that as “bribery” rather than conditioning a response, you are making a human judgment that has no place in dog training.

Another dominance example is food guarding. I would put down a bowl with a little bit of his food in it. Make him sit and wait to get it, only on my release (behavioral deference). While he ate, I would toss pieces of hot dog or other meat into his bowl while he is eating at first from a little distance. I slowly systematically desensitized him to the approach of my hand to his bowl, as he came to expect that my hand coming near his bowl represented something he really wanted. Then he came to accept it as a good thing instead of a challenge. When he was done eating he would still want to guard the bowl, but I used food to exchange for the bowl. The food distracted him while I grabbed the bowl. And soon he looked for the food more than worried about the bowl. Now I can take his bowl without challenge, but I still sometimes reward his non-aggression with a food exchange for his bowl.

Dealing with a dominant dog is a complex thing. If you are inexperienced, you may not understand why the dog is triggering. Talk about it with a trainer who has experience dealing with the use of these techniques. The old way of just punishing the dominance will often make it a lot worse, and possibly get you hurt severely. Use your brain, and your knowledge of canine behavior to solve these problems rather than relying on physical force. Even if physical force suppresses the dominance, it will not change the dog’s fundamental relationship with you. He will always be looking for the time when he might be able to go to battle and win the conflict. Set up your relationship so he knows all good things come through demonstrating obedience and behavioral



*Climbing on the handler can show dominance behaviors, use a sit as a mutually exclusive behavior to discourage this dominance play.*

deference to you. This will change how he views you, not as a rival, but the source of all the things in life he wants and desires. Dominance behaviors blossom because they get the dog something. Teach him those behaviors are not as successful as being deferential, and working his wants and needs, through your system. If you have specific questions about dominant police dogs, please email me below with your case and I try to answer as many of these issues as I can on how to help you resolve the problems. ■

---

**Jerry Bradshaw** is Training Director of Tarheel Canine Training, Inc. in Sanford, NC. Tarheel Canine's School for Dog Trainers holds Police K9 Instructor Courses for Police K9 Trainers as well as civilians. Tarheel Canine trains dogs for police departments worldwide. Contact Jerry at [jbradshaw@tarheelcanine.com](mailto:jbradshaw@tarheelcanine.com)