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# Targeting the Bite Suit for Police Service Dogs



**K9** *training*

**Targeting** the dog's aggression is one of the most basic fundamentals in protection training, yet one of the most misunderstood. Some trainers insist on sending the dog to forearm bites in a bite suit. I wonder what the purpose is of the other 95% of the bite suit if the dog is only taught to bite in that area. The dog will come to identify the bite suit as a prey item, no different from a sleeve if this is allowed to occur over time. Most of the time, this happens because decoys are not schooled in proper technique, and thus are afraid to have a dog come inside in the front. Further, if dogs are not taught to properly target the inside front, decoys certainly have good reason to fear a bite in the front. The dog's indecision as to where

to grip usually leads him to make a last second decision, and usually leads to a grip in the torso which is difficult to catch safely, or

perhaps a bite near the collar on a run away, and these are difficult for the dog to maintain during a fight with the decoy causing the dog to let go and re-grip who knows where.

The bite suit also allows the trainer much flexibility in devising scenar-

ios for both sport and police service dogs. For a dog that likes to bite high, take away the upper body and you can teach the dog to go into the legs. That may be all he can get in some bite scenarios. Similarly for leg biting dogs, they must also learn to come up high to round out their biting education.

One of the main reasons for teaching targeting is decoy safety. Dogs that do not target, or are unclear regarding where to bite, usually take the suit at the seams between jacket and pants, or on the buckles of the jacket, increasing the risk of injury to both dog and decoy. Back bites increase the chance the decoy will fall down on runaway bites as well. Further, dogs that hit the back or the torso in the front will hit a brick wall. Decoys can absorb impact easily in the shoulders (both front and back) and in the legs in a safe way. They cannot absorb back and torso hits, especially during a test of courage. For sport dogs, the grip will tend to be shallow, and thus unstable, increasing the risk that the dog can be run with pressure from the decoy. There are some who term this kind of biting as "biting in the core" and tout it as essential to police dog training. I could not disagree more. It is at best unsafe, and the idea of biting the man in the core (away from extremities where it is relatively safer) can be easily communicated more safely by teaching targeting into the shoulders (front and back) and the upper legs (front and back).



**by Jerry Bradshaw**  
photos by Britney Pelletier





Another reason for teaching targeting, aside from decoy safety, is that dogs will possess more commitment to bite under stress if they are clear on where to bite on the man. This conditioning will also lead to more confidence and clarity in a real street confrontation.

Dogs that are allowed to “bite everywhere” usually are less committed to the grip. Their entries are slower, because they must make a decision out of innumerable choices about where to grip once they get to the decoy. This slows the dog’s entry, not to mention the effect it has on the grip over time.

The dog becomes comfortable with frontal grips, and the dog’s grip not ever allowed to fill up. This gives the dog a feeling of being in less control of the decoy, thus more vulnerable to being fought off or scared off by some environmental distraction. A full and punishing grip gives the dog a feeling of control and power over his adversary.

A dog that knows where he is going before you send him is a dog that will come hard on the decoy and hit with force and commitment. It is true that you must teach the dog he can grip elsewhere if his preferred spot is not available, but this needs to be shown to him on an occasional basis. For example, in a high targeting dog, we teach them to go on the inside of the arm in the left shoulder from the front, and to the shoulder/triceps



area on a fleeing bite.

I teach targeting, man orientation, and how to handle environmental distractions during the foundation work of drive development and channeling. The dog is likely not on the bite suit yet at this point in his development, and teaching the dog targeting and how to take his aggression out on the decoy in different equipment configurations (sleeve, bite suit, hidden sleeve) is key to his proper development as a civilly aggressive dog, especially for police service work.

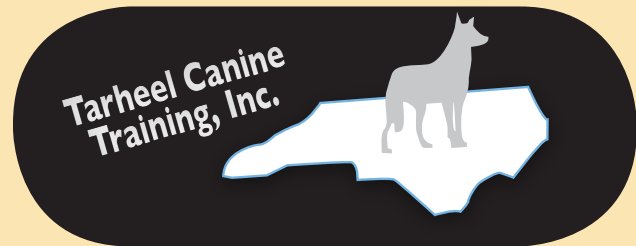
In this article, I will discuss targeting the suit up high (triceps/biceps), as well as targeting the legs. There is a key point in all training, which is to limit the number of variables you change on the dog at any given time. When introducing targeting to the dog, keep the other variables such as distractions and releasing on command, to a minimum.

## Targeting High on the Suit

Inside arm bites in the shoulder can be taught long before you ever move the dog to the bite suit, using a Belgian made sleeve, or a leg sleeve placed on the arm. The bite surface is turned to protect the inside of the arm. The beauty of this piece of equipment is that even young dogs can be taught to go inside in the front, once they are comfortable with the forearm presentation in the initial bite development. If we teach the young dog to feel strong on the inside of the arm in his prey drive development, he will get secure in that area for a lifetime.

Before we get too far into the discussion of targeting, let me outline those areas of the bite suit I like to teach the dog to target. If you look at the front of the bite suit, the inside of the arm on the left side of the decoy is the spot I like to teach in the front.

Why the left side? Because most decoys are right handed and should manipulate the stick or distractions for safety reasons with their dominant arm, the right arm. Now some dogs will naturally want to go to the opposite side, and if this is where they prefer to target



(you will see the dog cross the decoy up a few times) then I allow him to go to that spot on the right. I don't like it as much, but it may be better for the dog.

From the front, the shins and the thighs of the suit are also good places to target. When working leg bites, the dog must be taught to turn his head on entry to the outside of the body, and that skill is learned through presentation by the decoy in training. From behind the decoy, the shoulder/triceps area is preferred up top, also keeping the dog to one side or the other for the time being. The backs of the thighs and the calves are also good areas in the legs.

These areas give the dog full access to the man: shoulders (front and back) thighs (front and back) and/or calves (front and back). From 360 degrees around the decoy there is a familiar and comfortable spot the dog can take, and his decisions are limited to just a few. This allows the dog to make a choice and commit to the grip well before coming to the decoy.



## Targeting the High Target Areas: Forearm Bite Baseline

Teaching the target areas properly requires proper decoy work. Nothing will stymie proper target development more than incorrect decoy work. The basic principle is this: only allow the dog to get the spot you want him to get. With unskilled decoy work, this is a near impossibility. Decoys must pay attention to a number of things in order to develop target areas properly. First, all dogs being taught targeting should be on a back-tie and not held by the handler.

We begin with a dog that is comfortable biting on the outside of the forearm on a hard sleeve, has a good grip, and that can take pressure from environmental distractions. Now, just as before, we want to remember some key fundamentals. Let the dog's bark draw your movement. This begins with the alert. The command word to alert must be given before any agitation comes from the decoy. The alert command precedes any movement so that a classical conditioning to the alert command can take place. The dog will fire up in aggression upon the command, not the agitation. This comes in handy later on in training when we teach passive attacks (no decoy movement at any time prior to the grip). The grip must always be watched, to insure a full, firm, grip. Back-tension on the line, maintained by either the decoy or handler depending on the situation is the key. Tight lines are maintained to activate the dog's opposition reflex, and loose lines are used when the dog is being encouraged to counter. Lastly, watch how much pressure you put on the dog when teaching new equipment like the bite suit. Changing where he is used to biting, or introducing new areas to him, will cause stress. Train for a successful outcome.

Begin the dog's experience on the suit with a forearm bite on the bite suit. With the dog on a back-tie (see my article in K9 Cop magazine July/August 2012), and the handler having given the alert command, make a few misses with the forearm. Then step into the circle and deliver a forearm presentation. Make sure the dog is comfortable on the forearm, maintains the grip, is willing to counter in, and shows little stress with the change in equipment. Remember, changing the variable of what the dog bites is the only variable we are changing here. After a few repetitions, work the dog in drive channeling on the forearm, and make sure he

## Triceps Target

can take pressure from the stick and a drive before attempting other presentations.

With a grip in the triceps area of the bite suit the decoy initially should be prepared to slip the bite after a short time working the dog. Prey circles are the key to this with the dog missing the first few grips before the triceps area is presented. The decoy should develop a keen sense of where the end of the leash is, in order to get close enough that the dog snaps his teeth with the bite area just out of reach. This happens during the initial phases of prey work on the forearm sleeve. The prey is carried high, with the target arm (usually the left arm for right handed decoys) up. The forearm is drawn in at the elbow to keep the dog off of the forearm should he get the grip. The sequence is:

**Alert -> Barking -> Decoy movement to pass by -> Repeat -> Grip**

The grip is given after one or two misses. The decoy is looking for the dog to snap at the target area before the grip is delivered. Watch the dog carefully, if he is looking at the legs, no need to step in and deliver! He is going to get the leg, not the intended target area. The delivery, unlike the miss, requires the decoy to step into the circle, and square the triceps area to the dog. The bite surface should be level (triceps area parallel to the ground), and square to the dog's mouth, so the molars on both sides can grip the suit. Bend at the knees, not at the waist, so the grip surface is square to the dog's entry, and the elbow is not pointing to the ground.

Once the grip is delivered on the triceps, the decoy puts tension on the back tie to set the grip, then immediately slips the jacket to the dog. If the grip is clean and full, the decoy can work the dog longer in each grip on subsequent deliveries, and later add more and more fight to the session. If the grip is not full, the decoy must encourage the counter with proper technique before slipping the jacket. The handler can then come in and support the dog's head while he enjoys the grip. Once the dog outs the grip, or the handler forces the release, the decoy is immediately back on the dog, encouraging his barking through prey guarding, steals the jacket and begins the sequence again. Anywhere from two to four repetitions of this sequence are nec-



essary. Then the dog should be put away to rest.

The decoy should make sure to have the dog come up to the grip, rather than jam it into the dog's mouth. Teach the dog to come to the bite, not that the decoy will deliver it to him. Also, decoys should be careful not to present the grip too high, so the dog back-flips against the back-tie. Keep the presentation at chest level, and use your lower body to bend at the knees when delivering the grip.

Once the dog is biting this area reliably, after a couple of weeks of repetition on the back tie, short sends can be taught. The dog is placed on a 15' long line. The handler holds the line with about 4' of room for the dog to set up in front of him, and the decoy does the same miss deliveries as he did on the pole. After the dog clacks his teeth one time at the target area the decoy squares the triceps area to the dog, keeping the right arm tucked inside his body, and the dog is sent to the target area from 3 or 4 feet away. The dog should readily come to the familiar spot. The handler then puts immediate tension on the line, to set the bite, and the dog can be worked in channeling exercises. The grip is watched, and counters are encouraged. The dog can then be slipped the jacket, or lifted off of the grip, as the decoy goes to ground. Allow the dog to punish the decoy after the fight in his target area, before taking him off of the bite, or slipping the jacket to him. Allow him to enjoy his grip, and enjoy his effect on the decoy. This is what builds his desire to fight with the decoy.

These sends can then be lengthened, as the dog is sure in his target area. Over time the triceps area can be dropped a few degrees from parallel, until the decoy runs away from the dog with his forearms inside the front, and the shoulder hanging more naturally. The dog will learn to turn his head slightly to make a clean and square hit. It is important to keep the forearms tucked in to the body when doing these runaway bites, at least for a while, so the dog only gets the target area you want him to get. Dogs will get lazy and grab at the forearm if it hangs.



## Inside Front Bites

There is one over-riding issue with inside arm bites: It is a scary place to bite for the dog. This is even scarier than a body bite. Bites from behind are easy to teach, because even in a bite suit, the dog is not threatened by the frontal posture. This is why we teach these inside bites early in the dog's prey development on a sleeve, rather than go right to the bite suit. However dogs that are imported rarely have had inside technique unless they come from Holland where the KNPV expects inside front bites.

Before going to the suit teach the sleeve inside the front shoulder first. Set up on the back-tie, and use the Belgian-style sleeves, turned inside out. You cannot use anything other than this kind of sleeve for this, or a leg sleeve. Do not try this with a bite bar sleeve. The part of the sleeve that normally goes up to protect the triceps area is reversed, and now comes high on the inside of the arm up to the shoulder. The decoy's body position is crucial. The decoy must lead in to the dog with his left side (assuming we are teaching the customary inside bite to the left side). The forearm is tucked back on the hip, so the shoulder/biceps area is forward to the dog. Barking draws the decoy in to the dog and misses are made to the target area. It is important to keep your right side away from the dog at delivery so that the dog doesn't crossover to your unprotected side.

Once the target area is taken, the line is immediately made tight, and the forearm is uncoiled around the dog's head, in a cradling effect. A full grip is encouraged through countering measures already discussed. The first few of these grips should result in quick slips of the sleeve, without too much fighting. Then channeling exercises can be included, and distractions added to the work, as in the triceps biting.

Next we develop the same area in the bite-suit. The jacket should be slipped the first few times, so be ready to unclasp it quickly. The decoy assumes the exact same posture as with the sleeve delivery, dog back tied on the pole. In the suit it is easier to tuck the forearm behind the back if your suit allows sufficient mobility. The decoy comes in as the dog barks for his movement (remember the alert should be properly given before any decoy movement on the first sequence). The misses are done close in with the left shoulder leading, and then the grip is delivered. Decoys should not square their body on impact, but make the line tight, and encourage a full grip, while only then uncoiling the arm and squaring up.

Sends are developed in the same way as before, with misses and short sends being developed into longer sends. When catching in the front, the decoy can watch the dog all the way into his shoulder/bicep. Initially, all these sends should be done with the decoy backing up as the dog comes in. This lessens the impact, and allows for a smoother catch. The same caveats apply here to the decoy. He should not spin the target area away from the dog to lessen the impact. The dog's impact should be the impetus for absorbing the hit. The decoy's left leg should move back on impact and the body counterweight the dog's momentum. This will keep you standing.

## Problem Solving High Bites

There are a number of things you can do to problem solve if the dog has difficulty establishing the target area. First, read the dog. Is this a stress issue or a habit you are trying to break? If the dog is stressed over biting in the front, more work to develop the dog's instincts to prey and defense, along with channeling must be done. In other words, the dog isn't ready. If all you can do are triceps bites, stick with that for a while. It is better to take a step back in training, than push the dog too quickly, and condition the dog to be uncomfortable in the front as he associates stress with biting in that area.

If the dog hesitates in biting the suit, because it is just unfamiliar, give him a grip on the forearm of the jacket a few times, to get him used to biting the new material. With your young dogs, vary the sleeve you use, form size to material (jute vs. synthetic) so he doesn't get fixated on one item. Then, slowly move him up the arm to the triceps area, in successive bites until he shows confidence in that area. Thereafter, don't give him any more forearms, only triceps presentations until you start to develop other target areas such as in the front bicep and in the legs. If you have a dog that won't stop looking at your legs, or refuses to come up, put him up on a table, or in the bed of a truck. You can easily deliver the target area you want up high. Or, do the grip over a short fence or window jump.

You must give him a reason to come up to your target area. If the dog is just very well-conditioned to the legs, it may take some time to get the dog to come up high in the front. Don't be surprised, if the behavior is very strongly conditioned, to see the dog only go up top if the legs are taken out of play.







## The Proper Catch Technique

The decoy should use proper technique in catching the dog from behind. Too many decoys try to spin the dog on impact, pulling the target away from the dog to soften the impact. This is not correct. The impact of the dog should push the arm forward at the shoulder, and simultaneously, the decoy should push his left leg forward, and counter weight the catch with his upper body. This does a few things. One, it places the decoy's center of gravity on his left hip, to balance the weight of the dog (and his forward momentum) with the rest of his body.

Two, the countering effect of the upper body keeps the dog from pulling the decoy forward. The whipping effect of the dog hitting the decoy from behind will make the decoy spin, and ultimately fall on his back. This can twist the dog's neck or spine in the process. Proper technique of placing the left leg forward and counter weighting the hit, will at a minimum cause the decoy to fall to his knees, rather than on top of the dog. This is a much easier position from which to recover.

In the frontal catches, the dog is targeted to come to the inside shoulder or bicep area. The position of the decoy prior to the catch can be one of two positions. We use the KNPV style arm tuck or the PSA style arms up presentation.





Again the dog's momentum will initiate the decoy to absorb the dog, and the decoy should not spin the shoulder away from the dog as he enters. This can be practiced by having someone stand in front of the decoy with a soccer ball, and the decoy in the suit should at first walk toward the person, who throws the ball at the shoulder area.

The decoy should be able to catch the ball softly, as the ball's momentum is cushioned by the catch in the crook of the arm. It is the same principle as catching an egg tossed at you. You must not keep your hand still when catching the egg; otherwise it will break on impact with your hand.

You instead gauge the momentum of the egg, and softly "go with it" as it comes to your hand. Then the decoy should practice coming faster and faster toward the thrown ball. Then begin practicing catching a shoulder-sure, experienced dog. If you are not comfortable running through the dog's entry, you can perform the stop catch, coming to a slow walk or a stop prior to the dog hitting the target area. I prefer the decoy not to stop completely, as this ensures a higher likelihood that the impact will take you backwards too fast, and you can fall.

Body position is important in the catch as well. The decoy should not slide to the left or right before the catch. The dog will be in the air at this time, and will not be able to make a targeting adjustment to the decoy, and the decoy risks having the dog initiate contact in the chest, or worse cause the dog to fly by the grip.

Body position on impact is as follows: The dog will come to the shoulder, and if he comes to your left shoulder, your right leg should move slightly forward, bearing most of your weight at the moment of the catch, and your body should lean to counterweight the dog, slightly forward. Your left leg will slide back and behind you, as the dog makes contact, so you absorb his body. Your left arm will naturally come out and around the dog's head in a wrap up motion (see below). Then your weight can transfer back to your left leg as you spin with the dog, putting your center of gravity under the dog's and your body. This puts you in a perfect position for the drive.

## Targeting, Transferring, & Case Law

Criminal defense attorneys are always looking for the opportunity to show that the bite from a police service dog is grounds to have a court declare the dog "lethal force." Targeting training where the targets are clearly defined as in this article show the trainer/handler has taken care to make sure the dog has been conditioned to bite only in non-lethal areas.

As in many other cases, training records that clearly indicate where the dog is being allowed to grip will be a record of training that would explain that all care and due diligence has been taken to assure the dog will perform an apprehension in the safest possible manner for the suspect. In this legal climate, every session of criminal apprehension should include information on where the grip took place, and that the grip was stable. Further, teaching transferring (moving from one grip position to another) for the police dog in my opinion, will only open you up to the criticism that you are actively teaching your dog to become unstable in the grip and therefore more likely to grip in a higher risk area (head, neck, groin).

In police work we rely on the grip to provide pain compliance to subdue the subject. Rather than spending time teaching a dog to transfer, train combinations of canine apprehensions with other less lethal protocols, such as tasers and ASP batons. Your dog needs to be conditioned to be able to have you join in the fight in this way. Teaching transferring will only increase the possibility that the dog will come off reflexively during handcuffing or in a scuffle as you join in the fight. Everything we train in our dogs has pros and cons. While transferring may seem like a good way to keep the dog safe in a real fight, the instability inherent in the grip that will result is a poor trade-off and may open you to liability you don't need. Relying on a firm, full, hard grip in a target area that will produce pain compliance, and allow both handler and back-up to join the fight if needed, is better, safer, and will keep you safe in court if you document the targeting work with every training apprehension you do. ■