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The first article in this series discussed component training in tracking as a way to sharpen individual skills associated with tracking. This philosophy needs to be adopted throughout police K-9 training but nowhere is it needed more than in obedience training.

COMPONENT TRAINING FOR POLICE K-9S OBEDIENCE

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Many handlers only exposure to obedience will have been what was presented in their basic school. That normally consists of a very traditional negative reinforcement based process of teaching obedience exercises. The dogs are forced into position, usually with a choke collar causing discomfort, and the discomfort is released and the handler is instructed to praise the dog once the position is achieved. In many cases this method is used because it is assumed that reward-based training takes too long to develop the behaviors reliably, or tradition dictates the method. "We have always done it this way."

The result of all this compulsion is to create a dog that is not very reliable in general, and sometimes fearful to make mistakes so the dog is constantly engaging in safety seeking behaviors. In my seminars when I talk about this issue, many handlers will echo that their dogs were over controlled when young and it affected the dog in detection training and other areas where independence is required. This is what I refer to

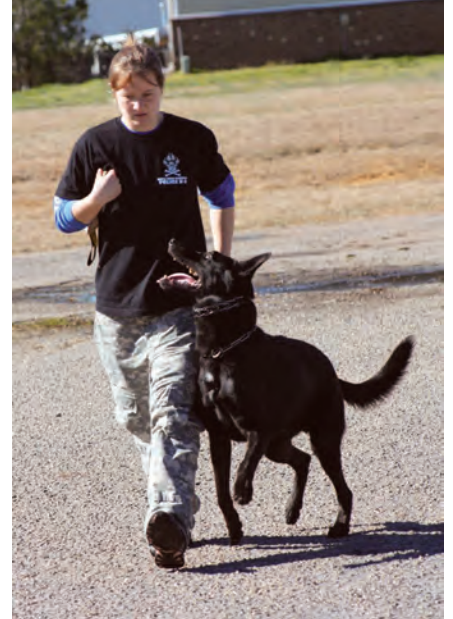
as the "cross-over effects of compulsion." Striking the balance between control and drive is not an easy one to achieve when you are not given the right tools.

In my experience, many handlers struggle with obedience training. Handlers often get bit during obedience as dogs react to the compulsion aggressively. Handlers fail to realize that dogs react to "unfair" compulsion defensively. Many young dogs are shut down by compulsive obedience training and as a result are afraid to express their drives and be independent for fear of corrections. The dogs are slow in executing commands, and often not very reliable. Handlers are often frustrated at the inconsistent behavior that they have unknowingly created. You hear a lot of this at police K-9 seminars: "My dog hates obedience, he tries to get out of doing stuff when I am at a distance, and when I am close, he does it but he is slow in doing his commands. But in bitework or narcotics, he is high drive and performs great (usually except for outing)."



Let's break that down: The dog gets rewarded a lot in bitework for searching areas and buildings (except usually for releasing and the dog is slow to out normally). In detection they are rewarded virtually every time they successfully locate their target odor. But in obedience they are almost never rewarded unless the routine is over and the handler throws a ball.

It is time for a paradigm shift in police dog training. A paradigm is a model or thought process to describe an approach to something. Reward-based component training is a relatively new paradigm that has to replace the old paradigm of compulsion-based teaching of obedience. If you see the state of most police dog training going on today, you see rewards being used to great effect in detection training, tracking, and controlled aggression for some things, but in obedience if there is a reward it is normally at the end of a "routine" that looks and feels the same to the handler and dog every time. No wonder dogs and handlers find obedience training boring.



I was giving a talk on reward-based obedience at a conference full of K-9 officers and I asked how many in the room had been to a sport trial like Schutzhund or PSA. Very few people in the room raised their hands. In my talk I encouraged them to do so, because I said, “there are housewives and plumbers and stockbrokers who train sport dogs as a hobby, and they have better obedience on their dogs and better control over them in bitework than most K-9 handlers who do it for a living professionally.” That comment earned some ugly stares initially but I stand by it to this day. There is much room for improvement in the professional standard of obedience training in police K-9.

This all begs the question, “what are the differences in sport obedience training and traditional police K-9 obedience training?” Obedience has nothing to do with the uniform the handler is wearing. It is giving a command to a dog and having him execute it the first time without extra handler influence or excuses for non-performance. I understand that in sport there are certain quality of performance differentials such speed, i.e., as a fast sit in motion is worth more points than a slow one. In police work we are more concerned with solid functionality. The answer to me is component training. By breaking exercises down into component parts, and understanding how to develop each part, rewarding performance for each part, and finishing the teaching process by employing a variable reward system, sport trainers are able to achieve a better overall performance.

Why is Obedience Different?

Suppose I told all of you that have narcotics dogs to stop giving your dog his toy when he found the source of target odor, and just praise him, because you are the alpha and your dog loves to work for praise. Would you think I was onto something profound? Often when I ask K-9 handlers how they reward their dogs in obedience that is exactly the reply I get. If you don’t reward your dog in obedience for specific

behaviors, you are essentially doing exactly the same thing for “obedience” behaviors that would make you cringe were we talking about detection. This is not logically consistent. Trained behaviors, whether they are detection behaviors or obedience behaviors, are the same. It is only we who look at them differently.

In our police dog programs at Tarheel Canine, we use a reward item for obedience that is different from his drug toy. We use a 12” tug for obedience. The tug is not thrown, it is presented and the dog bites it, and you play with him as the reward. I want him to want to see me as the source of all things good, so that when I reward him the tug it comes from me (I hold it in the small of my back inside my belt, so he cannot see it), and when we are done playing, it returns to me.

For example, I would be heeling with him, and if he is giving me good attention or is in excellent position, I will reward him. The reward comes out with a signal that marks the behavior I am rewarding (some trainers call this verbal marker a “bridge” or a “secondary reinforce”). This signal is a verbal noise like “pssst” or “yes” and in one motion I reach behind and bring out the tug and present it chest high for him to come up and grip. I play tug with him, and adjust his grip on it (helpful in bitework), and then out him at my discretion. This helps me keep a clean release, as I am in a position to correct him if need be for not letting go. When he does let go, I can either re-command him to heel or sit and stay as I put the toy back in my belt, or I can reward his out with another grip on the tug before putting it away. This is simple, effective and very efficient. The play enhances the bond and rewards specific behaviors. I start and end the game. He can’t chase the toy and then decide to play the “keep away” game with me like he could if I threw it away from me. I stay firmly in control, but I have now signaled to him that a specific behavior will get him something, so it is a good idea to repeat that behavior.



Component Training by Deconstructing Obedience

If rewarding the dog is a good idea to increase the quality and responsiveness of his obedience, then I need to know when to reward him. The answer is not entirely simple, but suffice it to say that anything I want him to do well should be rewarded. Let's take the heeling pattern for example. What mini skills are in a simple heeling pattern? The start (step off into the pattern), position at heel, halts, left turns, right turns, about turns, fast pace, slow pace, normal pace, down and recall to heel, gunfire neutrality, and the figure 8 to name most of the skills. In order to develop high quality responses, you must reward the dog for each mini skill often enough that he knows that a good effort will likely result in a reward for the behavior.

You can see that if I hold such a philosophy, I would look with utter disbelief at someone who, after doing a 15 minute obedience routine, at the end, would throw a ball for the dog. Unless you are rewarding the dog for getting to the end of the 15 minutes that you will never have back in your life, it does no good at all. However, if you are using a variable reward schedule and sometimes make him wait to give you a series of well executed skills before you reward him, you are doing a great job of understanding how to motivate consistent performance.

The proper approach is to employ a variable reward schedule in the elements of your routine. First, look hard at your dog's strengths and weaknesses in his heeling. For example, does your dog lag at the start of the heeling pattern, or does he crowd on his left turns, and lag on his right turns? If so, you have some things to work on and you need to come up with a training plan to address the issues.

Example: Getting a better start to the heeling pattern. Come to the start line and ask the dog to get into heel position. As

soon as he takes heel, and I mean as soon as his butt hits the ground, give him a quick, energetic reward bite on the tug. Give the verbal bridge and then present the tug in a fluid motion. Tug with him, play with him, let him enjoy it, and then out him, and hide the tug. Then quickly ask for heel again. He should come to heel faster in anticipation of the game. Tell him heel, and step off forward quickly. If he comes off the line fast as you step off, reward him again. Start over again and reward him three steps into the pattern, and then start over and do 5 steps in, and then end with a reward at the very beginning just as you did the first time. Then put him back in the car. You are going to do about five, five minute sessions, instead of one twenty five minute session. As he improves your sessions will be somewhat longer and you will do fewer repetitions.

In this mini session you would be rewarding the dog for just getting into heel position. Many dogs are never rewarded at the start, so they slowly take heel position, perhaps sniffing a little, or going in slow motion because they anticipate a series of unpleasant jerks for the next 15 minutes. Don't you procrastinate over tasks that you find unpleasant? So does your dog.

Reward Placement

How you place your rewards in your training is critical to maximizing performance. You will strategically place a reward for the first step of the heeling pattern, and then a few paces into the pattern, and then a few more paces in, and then back at the start. This variable placement increases your dog's drive to get the reward, as your dog thinks it is equally likely to come at any point, and he will stay fast and focused if he believes there is a good likelihood to get the reward. You can elongate the time between rewards as his attitude and behavior improve to what your standard is, and then you can return to numerous rewards



again. Varying the placement and frequency of rewards is key.

Example: Rewarding turns. Suppose your dog's heeling is nice and clean on the straight legs, but he lags on his right turns all the time. First, you must figure out why he is lagging. Is it because you are speeding away from him when you turn to the right, taking him by surprise and leaving him in the dust? If so, you need to work on your footwork. Stepping off hard right and jerking the leash will induce an opposition response and you are likely to create more lagging than you solve. Good footwork that allows the dog to see where you are going and a little focus from being rewarded while heeling will help keep your dog with you through a turn. But even better, reward him for the change in direction. If

he stays with you upon executing a right turn, pop out his tug and reward him. Do it often. Set up a pattern with 5 right turns only. After the first turn, if he is with you up to your standard, reward him. If he lags on the first turn then pull out the tug and just tease him ("look what you could have had if you were up here!") and put it away, then do another turn, if he is with you, reward him, if lagged, tease again. If your dog is driven for a toy, you will see him want to get in a position to get the toy and the lagging problem will go away over time. The key is to reward the skills individually and often. Then vary your rewards as the general proficiency of the skills increases. Don't expect to solve a problem you have created over months or years in one session either.



Variable Reward

Suppose now that your dog is heeling the straight-away legs well and is now driving for the reward on the right turns. In fact you have worked on each identified mini skill to get the performance picture you want. To keep the level of performance high, you must variably reward each of the mini skills in the heeling pattern. You do not need to reward every step or every turn, but rather, reward strategically.

Example: The heeling pattern. Now that you have developed each of the individual skills you identified by deconstructing the heeling pattern, you can now string the behaviors together and variably reward the dog's heeling pattern. You call your dog to heel position, and reward at the start with a nice tug session. You out the dog, and call into heel again, tug tucked inside your belt in the small of your back. You then heel forward. Evaluate your dog. Let's assume he is in good position and showing some attention and you go for a number of paces while his enthusiasm is still high, and then turn to the right, and BAM! Give a reward on the first right turn. Play and out the dog. Back to heel position, and BAM! Another reward is given, tug and quick out this time. Back to heel position and forward again. While on the straight away, pull out your tug, and turn in a fast circle right, make him miss it and put it back behind you and continue straight. Frustration will increase his drive. You make a right turn which he drives into and you continue straight for another 15 paces and BAM! Another reward is given. Play and tug, let him enjoy, and then out

the dog. Get the dog back to heel. Go forward and now do your change of pace. You have already individually worked on rewarding each pace transition from fast to slow pace with reward separately and then slow back to normal, or whatever transitions your certification asks for. Now within the context of a heeling pattern, reward one of the pace transitions. If you step off into a fast heel from a normal pace and he stays with you, BAM! A reward is given. Play and restart. Go straight again and go fast pace. If you see he drives to keep with you, recalling the last reward, then shift to slow. You look for the quality of response. Does he slow himself without leash help? If so, then BAM! Reward that transition!

When you deconstruct a larger exercise, you work the components, and then put it together into a sequence of behavior. Make sure you variably reward the skills you developed individually. It takes some pre-planning, but the outcome of an obedient, fast, flashy, and most of all compliant dog is well worth it.

Balancing Reward with Compulsion

Creating a standard of behavior is critical in good obedience training. If you set an expectation and hold your dog to it with both correction when he performs below standard and reward when he meets or exceeds the standard, you will likely get a performance that meets or exceeds your standard each time you ask for obedience. But you as the handler must set that standard and stick to it with both



reward and correction. Allowing behaviors which are below standard (leash pulling is sometimes allowed because the handler is being lazy enforcing the heel command when the dog is running toward the kennel to get fed, for example) will signal to the dog that when there is something he really wants to do instead of obedience, he can get away with it. So don't get mad when he decides to blow you off on certification day. You created the permissive atmosphere.

Once you create the standard, ask for it, enforce it clearly, and reward the good behaviors variably. This looks like more work than, say, just jerking on the leash when he gets out of position, after all the reward process does take time to get the toy out, and play with him. I would rather take that time than have a lifetime nag-war with my dog or see him go low in drive when we do obedience or worse, see him get over on me when I need his obedience most.

You can see I am not suggesting a completely motivational approach here. What I am suggesting is a balanced approach. Set a standard of behavior. Expect it and do what is necessary to get it every time, no matter what the context. Whether you developed behaviors motivationally from the start or used a compulsive method to train the obedience, it doesn't matter. From today forward let him know there is light at the end of the compliance tunnel. Reward signals to the dog there is something in it for him.

Do obedience especially when the dog doesn't expect you to enforce it. Do it when you stop your car to do a bathroom break. Put the leash and collar on the dog and when he is done, call him to heel position. If he comes back fast,

reward that dog! If he ignores you, correct the disobedience. When he comes into position reward the dog for complying, perhaps with the tug to let him know that even if you force the behavior, compliance gets rewarded. Dogs will repeat behaviors that are successful.

Many police dogs as well as competition dogs completely lose any obedience when they are around a decoy in a bite suit. It is possible, and we train this every day, to create obedience to a level where decoys can stand on either side of a series of jumps and the dog will jump each obstacle without taking a bite. During an obedience recall exercise, decoys can run alongside the dog and he will not bite but come to the handler. The dogs are put in stays, and decoys jump around the dog making noise, yet hold their stays. Sound difficult? It is, but it is doable.

Obedience is Everywhere

Every aspect of dog training is getting obedience to task, whether that task is searching for drugs, or hunting on a trail, or releasing a suspect once apprehended. Obedience however is not synonymous with punishment or negative reinforcement. Obedience means reliably performing tasks. Learning how to develop behaviors through a balance of reward and thoughtful compulsion will bring the best results. Reward is the most powerful tool we have. If you learn to use it to your benefit you will see results you never thought were possible. ■