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# FROM K9 SELECTION TO THE STREET





In my last article for The Journal I wrote about selecting a K9 for your police department. In this article we will discuss how to proceed from selection to getting a dog on the street. The issues we will be concerned with are: choosing a training program, certification, managing a rookie dog on the road, and maintenance training.

## Choosing a Trainer

There are basically two routes to go with training your newly selected dog. The first is a standard 16 week class run by police officers dedicated to a training staff. These are often regional academies, or academies run by large municipalities, or the state police. They often run multiple classes a year and some offer combined classes (patrol/tracking and detection) or single purpose classes (patrol only, detection only). For some of these academies, to fully dual purpose train a K9 it could mean detailing your officer to two classes over a total period of 32 weeks, 16 weeks per class. That is quite a long time for the officer to be off the road.

The other way to get a K9 on the road is by employing a private training facility. Private facilities often pre-train the dogs in all required areas and then do a handler class, anywhere from 3 to 6 weeks with the dog and officer, with an in house certification at the end of the last week of class. The main advantage of this kind of approach is that it will significantly minimize the number of hours your officer will be away from his agency in training with the canine, yet still produce a productive team. With manpower at a premium, this is often a serious concern.

Administrators must understand that quality dogs can be produced both ways. The real issue is in you selecting a training program that can produce productive and well trained K9s for your agency. I don't necessarily believe that the type of academy you go through, whether it is a 16 week academy with green handlers starting with green dogs, or with a private company where the dog goes through a 10-12 week training period with professional trainers prior to the handler coming for a 4-week handler course with a trained dog, is really the issue.

In the end, I believe the different type of courses are about equally as likely to produce a solidly trained dog, as long as the trainers in charge are good ones. That, in my opinion, is the real issue, not the structure of the training course, but the content of the training course, and the skill of the trainers. Both content and skill can vary widely across both public and private academies.

## Public Academies

In the public academies associated with municipalities, virtually all of the trainers are former handlers dedicated to the training academy. Some are road officers (handlers or trainers) who come off the road to teach the classes. There are the occasional retired handlers who become academy trainers. It is important to note that a K9 handler, no matter how many years of experience he or she may have, is not a trainer unless they have had formal training instruction. Just because a police officer uses a gun or a police car in his job, does not necessarily make him a subject matter expert as a shooting instructor or a driving instructor. Unfortunately, because K9 is so foreign to many administrators, complete faith is put in handlers who have "experience" but this does not qualify them as trainers. Often they lack basic problem solving skills and a deep fundamental theoretical knowledge of canine behavior, neither of which is a necessary skill to be a handler but is necessary to be a trainer.

Being one who can teach others requires a level of broad experience in both the practical and theoretical aspects of the subject they are teaching. This broad experience should include both training seminars and formal instructor training outside the one academy with which they have the closest ties. In my opinion there is too much "inbreeding" of trainers who are produced by other train-





ers who only have one approach to training. Lack of training skill will lead academies to wash out large numbers of dogs during the training course, which is not a sign of “demanding standards” but usually a signal of inability to properly select dogs or to solve rudimentary problems, or the tendency to rush dogs through training and change too many variables at one time, all marks of inexperience and poor execution as a trainer. Additionally, many people can be intuitive dog trainers who cannot really explain what they do to others, so despite their own success, they will have trouble communicating with new handlers. Some trainers only know one way to achieve a result, and are not capable of making adjustments in their methods when a particular dog’s temperament calls for such adjustments. This is also a mark of a poor quality trainer. These concerns apply equally to trainers whether they are in a public or private setting.

Washouts are a big issue for some of these municipal academies. The reason is that the incentive system is set up improperly. When an outside agency brings a dog to an academy for a 16 week class, and the academy trainer washes the dog out (to that trainer there is no direct cost to a washout, none at all, so often when a problem occurs a dog is simply washed to avoid dealing with the training problem), costs are incurred by the agency that owns the dog. Travel expenses in returning the dog to the vendor, additional veterinary expenses to vet the replacement dogs, and the time crunch to finish the class on time which may require overtime paid to the handler (or worse more time needed to be tacked onto the end of the 16 weeks which keeps the handler off the road for even more time), are concerns administrators often do not see until they are well into the class. The fact that many of these classes are “free” to the participating agencies because they are run by police academies, disguises costs that do occur.

Finally, if the dog team experiences productivity issues after graduation from the academy, or a temperament issue develops, there is no recourse for the agency running the dog. The academy trainers trained your dog for free, but they hold no responsibility, and provide no warranty for the training or for the productivity of the dog after graduation. Again, incentives are not properly placed. In other words, it is your problem now. Good private trainers will provide a warranty after the dog certifies for productivity and temperament, because it is in their interest as a private business to do so. Because they provided the dog, it should be able to be trained and certified and be productive, otherwise it is a reflection of the business that sold your agency the dog. The academy trainers can skirt this responsibility by claiming they didn’t provide the dog nor did they charge for the training. A vendor who sells a green dog to an agency going through

a public academy will typically guarantee health for one year, but the trainability warranty is over when the dog graduates the academy. Thus nobody holds the bag after graduation if the dog doesn’t work out except for the agency who owns the dog.

There are a great number of municipal academies run by very experienced K9 trainers whose success is seen in low numbers of washouts post-selection and high productivity statistics. You should look for good numbers for successful apprehensions on tracks, building searches, and other deployments, and low bite ratios, with large amounts of contraband seized. Just because your brothers in law enforcement are running the academy doesn’t mean you shouldn’t evaluate carefully the history of the last few classes for washout rates, and productivity of graduates from 1 to 5 years into service.

## Private Academies

There are many private academies available for police agencies to select from that can provide quality service and set your department up with productive teams. Many of these academies are run by world class dog trainers, some of whom are former police officers who were at one time handlers, some by former military handlers, and some who are just the cream of the crop dog trainers. Just because a trainer isn’t a former handler doesn’t mean they cannot teach tactics along with providing a well-trained K9. However, just as before, you as an administrator must perform your due diligence. There are a number of private academies being run by good salesmen who are mediocre trainers who do not put out a quality product nor do they stand behind their guarantees. You must check references and see how other agencies feel about the service they were provided. If there was a problem, how did the business handle it, and was the department satisfied with the resolution. As mentioned before, the large benefit to many medium sized and smaller agencies is the shorter handler courses and minimal time off the road. Though the up-front costs can be greater, the guarantees provided post certification, and the limited time off the road for the handlers can provide significant long term savings and afford smaller agencies the opportunity to employ K9s without having to pull their manpower off the road for too long.

One of the benefits of a private academy is that by the time the dog gets in the hands of your handler, it has been trained professionally, and most of the key skills have already been trained into the dog. In the 16 week academy, a green dog is paired with a green handler. This can produce some benefit (bonding is given more time with



## SOP & Certification



the handler) but also comes at a cost. The green handler is expected to train the green dog under supervision of the training staff. This is often the cause of a lot of the washouts in municipal academies. Unskilled handlers often make mistakes of timing or lack of knowledge with brand new dogs, creating problems. I use the “Jiffy Lube” analogy to explain what I mean here.

Traditional academies are like going to Jiffy Lube, and then having the technician hand you coveralls, tools and oil and telling you how to change your oil, step by step. It would take a lot longer and you would be likely to make a lot of mistakes over having the professionally trained technician change your oil and do the 25 step check in 15 minutes or less. It seems very inefficient to have someone do a job who doesn't yet know how to do the job. In fact, it isn't until the handlers graduate the academy that they are really somewhat qualified to train a dog in an academy. It is a traditional, yet somewhat ironic methodology.

Some argue that the shorter handler courses of the private academies do not give the officer and dog enough time to work together to produce a successful team, but I would disagree here. In a 16 week public academy course, by the time the dog has most of his behaviors trained to a point where you can actually practice deployment scenarios, you are at least 10 to 12 weeks into the class. Remember the green handler starts with a green dog and all the behaviors must be developed from start to finish. This is about equivalent to a handler coming into a private academy for a 4 week handler course, after the dog has been professionally trained for 10 – 12 weeks. In other words you are about equivalent in terms of spending time with a trained dog practicing deployments in the last 4 weeks of either course.

The downside of the shorter course is that the handler has less time “on the leash” and this in some cases can be a significant disadvantage, whether in training basics or deploying. However, on the other side, the private academy dog has been trained by an experienced professional at the top private academies.

As an administrator you have to balance these competing issues out. Do your research, by contacting references, look into productivity and guarantees. Privately trained dogs have better guarantees on productivity and temperament (if the guarantees aren't so attractive, keep looking!) but if the trainers do not honor the guarantees they aren't worth the paper on which they are printed. In the end, no matter which route you go, do your homework. Check references and see what other agencies have to say about the academy you choose.

Every K9 unit should have a SOP. If you need a SOP contact your trainer or another agency near you to get a copy of their SOP, review it, and adopt it before implementing your first K9. A good SOP provides mutual protection for the agency against a misbehaving handler or one who does not perform the necessary training, and as well for the handler in deploying his K9 according to written procedures.

Certification is an important topic all administrators must become familiar with. There are basically two routes to certification. The first is what is referred to as in-house certifications. These certifications are offered by the training academies that produced the dogs, whether public or private academies, and normally occur at the conclusion of the training period (handler course). The second is what is referred to as a third party (apart from your agency and the trainer who produced the dog) certification. These are normally organizations such as USPCA, NAPWDA, IPWDA, NNDDA, NTPDA and others that offer standards to which the canine must perform and independent evaluators to judge the team's performance to the standard. Certifications are typically performed annually. Case law allows for some leeway in recertifying within a few months of when a certification will “expire” so that as long as recertification is performed around the anniversary date the handler and agency are covered in court.

One of the problems with certification standards is that they become the end all and be all of the level to which the dogs are trained. Remember these certification standards are minimum standards. Police dogs should be trained to a much higher level for success in deployments. Many of the certifications are very contrived exercises that do not necessarily represent the kinds of deployment scenarios the team will face at work. Some of the certification organizations are now moving toward more scenario-based certification standards and in my opinion this is a critical time in which administrators should push their units to achieve more than basic competency. K9 is a dangerous specialty, and training shouldn't be short changed nor the level of competency compromised. Scenario based training and certifications will become the standard in the next few years, and the time is now to start pushing your unit to embrace this kind of training and certification program.

Many agencies will do their annual in house cert as well as a third party certification, thus performing two certifications per year, to add to the canine team's resume making it difficult to call into question one particular certification protocol.





## Rookie K9s

The K9's handler is the advocate for the dog. Rookie dogs, just like rookie officers, should be thoughtfully employed. As experience is gained, the handler will feel confident in more and more situations where he will use his dog to maximum effectiveness. Supervisors should not try to force the handler to deploy his dog into a situation the handler feels is a weak area, until sufficient training and experience are gained. For example, one area that many dogs have less experience in performing apprehensions might be attic insertions. Basic K9 classes have only so much time to practice deployment scenarios, and until sufficient training has been done with a rookie dog, this may be an area in which the handler and K9 both feel relatively weak just after coming out of school. If this is the case, scenarios and training should be designed to get the dog up to speed in this kind of deployment before the handler is asked to do it on a call. Work to your capabilities, but every handler knows, each dog will have relative strengths and weaknesses. Weaknesses or deficiencies in training must be addressed in monthly maintenance training.

## Maintenance Training

Case law states that mandatory minimum for a well-trained and maintained K9 is 16 hours a month or 4 hours a week. This is a minimum. Many administrators do not realize the critical importance of ongoing maintenance training. I cannot overstate how important this training is to the success of your K9 unit both on the street and in court if it ever comes to that. Negligent supervision can be alleged in a civil suit if administrators do not require, and audit the minimum training standards of their units, and review training records. Handlers must also train on shift in the context of their work environment, and continually document their training and deployments in training records. These records must show training deficiencies and remediation plans, if any, and they must be complete and accurate. Lack of training records will get your cases thrown out of court and open the agency to civil liability of negligent training and supervision. Good records, good supervision, and mandated training are the antidote for this.

Many agencies will allocate one 'day' a month for training, but to be most efficient, training must be conducted weekly, and frequently. Consistency and repetition over the long haul will maintain a well-trained dog, and focusing all your training into one day a month (these training days are not always the most efficiently run) is insufficient in my opinion. Each dog individually must get 4 hours of training a week at the bare minimum. During big in service training days, many dogs are idle while other dogs work. If you commit to a K9 program, and realize the benefits that program produces of efficiently locating dangerous felons, contraband, and providing for enhanced officer safety, keeping the training at a high level is an integral part of success. Training is the key to that success.

Getting a dog from selection to the street is no easy task, and there are a lot of variables that can come into play. Carefully choose reputable, competent trainers, who will provide your agency the needed service and ongoing support you require. Perform checks of references, and make sure past customers are satisfied. Check the productivity of recently graduated units. Administrators who understand that rookie dogs must be nurtured, and that training is the key to the best K9 units, will see these investments pay off in officer safety, and efficiencies of manpower and the quick and effective location and apprehension of dangerous criminals and substances.

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Tarheel Canine Training Inc. is a nationally renowned training facility for police service dogs, and has placed trained police dogs at federal, state and local law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally since 1993. Jerry is often a featured speaker at national police K9 conferences, and travels extensively giving seminars to police departments, the US Military, and sport trainers across the United States. Jerry has written a book, *Controlled Aggression*, which is rapidly becoming the standard text for understanding the fundamentals of canine aggression training for police service, personal protection, and competitive dog sports. Jerry also maintains a free blog at [www.tarheelcanine.com](http://www.tarheelcanine.com).

