

## Preparing for the Handler Attack in PSA 1

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One of the biggest issues in PSA 1 Novice or PSA 1 Open is passing the handler attack with distractions. Too many dogs get caught off-guard in this surprise attack scenario because they have not been properly prepared for it, or the dog cannot maintain heel position because too many practice sessions have been trained with the dog being heeled toward the blind prior to the attack, initiating and conditioning forging behavior in the dog.

The handler defense should be trained in a systematic progression. Behaviorally, we are simply trying to de-condition the dog to the surprise attack first. During the catch and drive, distractions can be introduced, that have already been trained in a more controlled situation, like on a back tie. Thus when the dog sees these on the surprise attack, he should be well used to them. These environmental distractions include: jugs of water, jugs with pennies or stones in them, sticks, large objects, water hoses, etc. The training progression I like to use can be employed as follows:

- (1) Place the dog in a sit stay away (20') from a hiding place, handler at the dog's side, holding the dog on leash on an agitation collar. The decoy jumps out and agitates defensively, fades away from the dog and the dog is released into the grip. Decoy works the dog in channeling multiples before the dog is disengaged.
- (2) Place the dog in a sit stay closer to the hiding place, decoy jumps out and agitates defensively, send dog earlier and earlier until the dog is being sent on the decoy standing still (not fading) but still agitating defensively.
- (3) Place the dog in a sit stay away (20') from the hiding place, decoy jumps out agitating defensively, slowly charging the dog, release the dog on the approach of the decoy. Decoy catches the dog and works in prey first. Decoy works the dog in channeling multiples before the dog is disengaged.
- (4) Place the dog in a sit stay closer to the hiding place, decoy jumps out and quickly charges the dog defensively, dog is released ever closer to the decoy as he approaches. Decoy catches the dog and works the dog into a defensive drive after the catch. Slowly integrate the distractions in the drive, and variably increase the intensity and duration of the defensive drives. Decoy works the dog in channeling multiples before the dog is disengaged.
- (5) Place the dog close to a hiding place, decoy charges the dog from the front, from behind, or the side, dog is allowed to release on his own into the charging decoy. The decoy works the dog in ever-stronger defensive drives (variable in intensity and duration over time), then proceeds into prey and channeling multiples before the dog is disengaged.
- (6) If the dog can heel, heel around, and once in a while, have the attack come during heeling. Practice heeling past familiar hiding places with no handler attack. If you do too many handler attacks from heeling, the dog will anticipate the attacks and want to go to the hiding place and break heel position.

This kind of handler defense exercise will make the dog very alert to his surroundings. It is critical that the dog begin to be exposed to environments that are more stressful than his regular training area. For police dogs, these exercises should be done in and around buildings, parking lots, in dark rooms and in tight places. Attacks from behind doors will also get the dog used to looking around doorways for threats, and is a good initial step before teaching formal building searches. For personal protection dogs, these attacks should occur in places where the dog might likely work, near the owner's home, as you enter the home, or exit the home or car, and in parking lots, or on a walk at night on the street.

It is critical to remember, that if you change the dog's environment that will add its own defensive pressure, and you will be working with somewhat less of a defensive margin. The decoy should be aware to read the dog's body and grip, and work to increase the dog's confidence in these exercises, and the general defensive pressure builds up in scenario-based exercises. As a rule of thumb, always expect that the dog will likely have a problem, so you as the handler and/or decoy are prepared if the dog shows difficulty handling the defensive pressure of these scenarios.

When catching the dog in the handler attack, decoys should be careful not to position their hands too close to the target area. There should be an opening for the dog to come to the shoulder, especially when first training the dog with fades. 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. Practice absorbing the ball, so it doesn't bounce hard off your shoulder. 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.

### **A Note on Proper Catch Techniques**

The decoy should use proper technique in catching the dog from both behind and in the front. On runaway bites, 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. In training you can use the KNPV style arm tuck or the PSA style arms up presentation. 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. 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.

