

Prey Training the Young Prospect*

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In the last article we discussed the applicability of defense training a young dog. If we identify the young dog's dominant drive to be the defense drive, then we must address the strength of that dog. I explained that in some dogs, where the defense drive dominates and there is a relatively weak prey response, trying to do prey training will only teach the dog to work weakly.

In many cases, young dogs do not have a defense drive that is developed enough to work with. If these dogs show prey to be their dominant drive, then we will want to address this strength in our early training, and bring in defense work as the dog matures and this drive begins to show itself.

This article will address how to begin prey training, and how to begin to bring in defense work to the prey training, through the mechanism of drive channeling. Most of us are aware that "prey drive" or the instinct to chase and catch and kill prey is a key part of protection training. Prey drive provides the speed, the pursuit, and above all the confidence to fight the man. How we begin this training, and how do we develop this drive fully in the young dog is the subject of what is to follow.

I prefer to begin prey training by staking the dog out on a 2" flat leather collar, or agitation harness, and letting him watch the big dogs work. In a dog with a nice prey drive, over the course of a few sessions, you should see the dog watching and following the action on the field. Our first few sessions are done without any direct work with the dog, letting him acclimate to the pole, and frustrating him somewhat.

My training instrument of choice for the beginning of prey work is the flirt pole. For those of you who are not familiar with this piece of equipment, it is a 0.5" PVC pole (broom handles are too stiff) about 4 feet in length, with a 5foot length of parachute cord tied to the end, like a make-shift fishing pole. I then tie a piece of soft leather, or a jute rag to begin with to the cord. The reason we do this, rather than work with a rag in hand, is to keep the agitator out away from the dog. This keeps the dog from becoming concerned with the proximity of the agitator (this is especially key when working with the defensive dog to begin prey channeling). More importantly the PVC pole allows us to incite fast, herky-jerky movements in the rag.

Prey movements should be side to side, you can also shoot the rag tangential to the dog's circle, past his side. These movements should be fast and frustrating, but not too frustrating. Making the dog miss the rag a few times, then swing the rag above the ground and present the dog the opportunity to grip the rag, at about his mouth level. Be sure to remember the mouth-eye coordination is not well developed in some young dogs, and if you smack him in the head, he may not want to play anymore.

If the dog grabs at it weakly, pull it from his jaws, and begin agitating again. Some dogs, however, need to have the rag dropped in the circle first, so they can identify it and put their mouth on it, before they will make a commitment to bite it when offered. Once the dog grasps the rag, begin teaching him to pull to win the prize. If he has a good grip, pull him to the end of the line, and then release the pressure. Do this a couple of times and most dogs will get the idea to pull back. As soon as he pulls back a little bit, allow him to pull the flirt pole out of your hands. I usually let the pole slip through my hands, as he learns to pull harder and harder, so each tug is rewarded by my weakness. At this point, we do not worry about teaching the dog to adjust, or counter into the rag from a less than full bite. It is your job as the agitator to present the rag to the dog's mouth, so that he can get the majority of the rag in his mouth to begin with. This takes some practice.

Once the dog is grabbing and pulling well, we begin to make our way down the cord to put hands on the rag. Some dogs have no problem with this, some dogs get nervous as you intrude closer on them. The best technique is to turn your back to the dog as you back in closer and closer. Move in and away, in and away, feel the dog's grip and commitment as you move, reading his response to your body coming closer. You

* Forthcoming in The Malinois Handler, 1999.

may need to take many sessions to get close enough to touch then grab the rag. Be patient with this process. Do not rush it. This is the beginning of channeling prey into defense. Your body's proximity to the dog will

bring up defensive moods in some dogs. Some dogs could care less that you are close and putting your hands on the rag. If this is the case, you can begin working the grip. Otherwise, take your time, until he is comfortable with you being close to him.

Working the Grip

Notice, that I haven't said anything about the handler of the dog. This is because I believe that the handler should be completely out of the picture during the prey work. The dog must learn that he can work without the handler's support, so as to not create a dependency on the handler. The handler comes back in to remove the rag from the dog, and kick it out back to the agitator. The handler then steps back to an inconspicuous place watching but not influencing the dog. No praise is offered during the work, this is too distracting. In prey work, the biting is the dog's reward, this focuses the dog into his work, not outwardly to the handler. Now, having said this, some dogs require the presence of the handler to give support to the work. But I caution you to work your way out of the picture as soon as the dog feels enough confidence to work independently.

Once you can work down to the rag, you can begin moving around the outside of the circle your side and back to the dog as you go. Begin slowly offering more frontal views, than back to a side or back view. This is channeling the dog from prey to defense, as your frontal picture may produce defensive feelings in the dog. Always remember, in the beginning, the dog feels vulnerable while on the bite. Obviously, if he is holding the rag, he cannot simultaneously escape and bite the rag! We slowly show him he wins, when we give frontal views, we can let him win the rag, or we go back to a side view as he pulls us around the circle in prey.

When the dog is neutral to your frontal view, and you can hold the rag in both hands while he is biting, you can begin to work the grip fuller. Remember, up to now, your delivery of the rag is supposed to be giving an opportunity for a full grip. If you need to work the grip, you can stop moving, hold the rag parallel, relax your arms, and give slack to the line, so he can come in fuller. Your body should be in side view, not frontal, as many dogs will not adjust if they are feeling defensive. When he re-adjusts to a fuller bite, pull the rag toward you, taking slack out of the line keeping it tight, then release the rag. This is called, setting the bite, using the dog's opposition reflex to make him dig in hard on the rag. Many trainers make the mistake of not setting the bite before slipping the rag after an adjustment. This makes for a weak mouth after a readjust, or counter.

During the counter, whether it is with a young dog on the rag or with an intermediate dog on a sleeve, the key to the re-adjust is relaxing your arms or sleeve arm at just the right moment. In my experience, new helpers have a hard time relaxing their arm during bitework, and dogs that are learning to readjust won't readjust on them. Put an experienced helper in the sleeve and they will readjust time and time again. I believe this is the case because an experienced helper knows how to show the dog weakness, by relaxing the arm. The dog perceives this momentary weakness to "counter-punch" and drive in deeper on the bite. In the wild, the feral dog or wolf will bite deeper, not when the deer he is catching is fighting, but when he becomes instantly still, the dog sees this opportunity to get a better grip to continue the killing process.

Readjusting a dog on the pole can also be triggered by pulling tight, inciting opposition reflex, then giving slack and relaxing quickly, the dog who does not want to lose the grip will take this opportunity to bite in deeper and get a better position on the grip. With dogs not on the pole, counter pressure from a long line held by the handler, or by lifting the dog up by the sleeve, allowing gravity to provide the opposition, can also be very productive. Another trigger to counter, for more experienced dogs, is a violent but quick fight with the helper, and instantaneous stillness to signal the dog he is winning the fight, and present him with an opportunity to get a better bite position. Going down on one knee at the instant of stillness, or chest on the ground, can give the dog a feeling of power at just the right time, so he will take a better bite position. This technique in particular, if done properly will teach your dog to counter in during the pressure of a fight, as he is conditioned to learn he can put an end to the decoy's hostility with a hard counter. As the defensive pressure is the antecedent to the counter, by classical conditioning he will anticipate the counter and adjust upon presentation of the pressure itself, no longer waiting for the stillness after the fight.

The decoy must allow the dog quick wins, but don't forget to set the bite on young dogs before slipping the sleeve or rag to him. As the dog becomes experienced, and the grip is hard after the counter, you can slip immediately after the counter. This teaches him he neutralizes your aggression with commitment to the bite. It is a beautiful thing to watch a dog adjust into a bite during defense work. It speaks volumes about the dogs desire to fight and win through aggression.

An intermediate step between the soft leather rag/burlap flirt-pole and a sleeve can be a chrome leather strap, like a belt. It is important that the strap be slick, so the dog will really have to develop a hard grip to keep his grip on the object. This works extremely well when you try to snatch the strap from his jaws as you work him in prey around the circle. Give the

dog many opportunities to readjust fukller if the grip is solid but not quite full. If you can snatch it from his jaws, make a big deal of agitating him after he loses the rag, then run into a blind, frustrating him.

The techniques are similar when the dog is biting on a sleeve. Once we introduce the sleeve we continue working under the same plan, as we have only changed the object on which the dog takes out his aggression. Since we have started the dog using a flirt pole, it makes sense to go back to his comfort by attaching the sleeve to a leash and using the same manner of inciting his prey drive to develop his interest in the sleeve. Again, some dogs will require an opportunity to “check out” the object with their noses before they will bite it. Also, be aware to retreat if he shows apprehension or avoidance to the object.

Typical prey sessions with the prey-dominant dog can go as follows: Helper starts from the blind (especially for schutzhund dogs) and makes pass-by runs with the sleeve. Start with the sleeve held high over the shoulder and as you get closer to the dog, the sleeve comes to parallel at chest height as the helper’s path goes tangent to the dog’s circle, the sleeve passing within inches of his jaws. You know you did it right when you hear the tell-tale clack of the jaws. This reflects the dog’s commitment to take the bite. The helper needs to run, laziness here can change the dog’s mood from prey to defense if the handler loiters in front of the dog. Prey is movement away from, or tangential to the dog. Mixing up misses and grips is essential. Helpers can teach the dog to wait until pass by number 3 or 4 to make a commitment if they never give him a grip on pass-by’s number 1 and 2.

The action of the helper when delivering the grip is essential. The helper’s path should appear the same as he approaches for the miss or the grip. Sleeve position high, tangential approach, but this time the helper steps through the circle, giving the dog ample room to make a full grip and strike the sleeve high and hard. One common mistake is to only pass the sleeve into the circle. The dog should, on the strike, feel himself jar the helper. Let him make body contact, let him hear your wind be knocked out (as you absorb his impact be vocal). If he blasts you in the family jewels with his paws, you won’t need to act!

Upon taking the bite, the helper’s immediate thought should be what? Look at the grip, and use your techniques to make it fuller. Suppose he gets a full grip on the strike? You immediately make the line tight, inciting opposition reflex and set the bite, go in prey. Keep action in the sleeve, and keep it parallel to the ground. I always tell my helpers what one of my teachers taught me (sleeve parallel, line tight in prey on a full grip, “shake, shake, calm”, then again “shake, shake, calm.”) In your mind you can repeat this. Now walk backwards with the line tight, re-tracing the circle, and slip the sleeve, keeping the rhythm, “shake, shake, calm.” The helper must always be in motion away from the dog.

If the dog takes a less than full grip we must induce the counter. As soon as the dog strikes and makes the grip, even if it is not full, we still immediately pull tight. Because we want to use opposition to induce the counter. Pull tight very quickly and keep it tight for a second or two, puling so that the dog may be concerned he will lose the grip. Then, instantly, step into the circle, set him on all fours, simultaneously relaxing your arm and body, looking away, and presenting weakness to the predator, and he will as he was taught earlier, counter in deeper. You react by immediately pulling tight to set the bite and work him in prey. “shake, shake, calm”, and again. Traverse his circle, keeping constant line tension to keep the bite set, any your body presenting no threat.

This is pure prey work. When this is mastered for our prey dominant dog, you can move on to channeling prey to defense. Be aware, however, that before you move on you will want to be simultaneously working the barking (I will cover this in detail later). For now, when he barks, let him draw you closer step by step, before you make the prey run.

Prey to Defense to Prey

Continue as above, when the dog is solid on his bite and you can move around the circle, you will introduce frontal positions, by turning into the dog for an instant, then resuming your prey movements. These turn ins are so fast he doesn’t have time to become concerned with your posture. These turn ins can gradually become turn ins with stick coming over his head, to turn ins with stick petting, helper vocalizations, and any combinations there of. The variables you have to manage are the duration of the frontal presentation, the frequency of these presentations during a session, and the intensity of the presentation. Always remember, stress accumulates. So always taper your defense work to be more in the beginning of a session, and less and less throughout the session. As the dog works longer and tires, he must see he is defeating you, and you are becoming weaker.

For example, with the dog in prey on the bite, as he progresses with these turn ins becoming more frequent along the prey circle, and sometimes longer in duration, I will turn in and let him drive me backwards along the circle. In this position I have made a defensive presentation, but he is moving me backwards away from him (prey) and controlling me. If he

bites in deeper as we are doing this, I let him “rag-doll” my arm, let him have the satisfaction of bullying me, while I am facing him frontally.

Another exercise, again with the dog in prey on the bite, I quickly turn into him, and simultaneously drop to a sitting position, where in he feels he is taking me down, yet I am still facing him. I may slip the sleeve immediately here the first few times to give a biog sense of control.

As the dog gets comfortable with controlling you immediately upon your presenting a defensive posture, you can lengthen the turn-in into a drive, going from one to two to three steps over time. Do not place prolonged pressure. Always match the increase in pressure to a more exciting win. Go to the ground, let him dominate you. Remember you must always end with prey, either a slip of the sleeve, a dying prey going to ground, but you must end by relieving the pressure.