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SELECTING A POLICE DOG CANDIDATE

Your department has decided to start, or re-start a K9 unit. While there are a number of critical issues that need to be addressed, this article will assume you will be using a private company to do the training and handler course for your new K9. If you have done your research, and spoken to agencies that have used the facility, you still have to choose the K9. You should go to the vendor's facility and work with them to select the appropriate K9. We will assume you are selecting a dog for dual purpose: patrol and narcotics detection or Patrol and explosives detection. Tracking functions need to be specified with the vendor.

The facility should have an appreciation for the temperament of the K9 you will need. Most agencies want social dogs, which have a good "on" and "off" switch. They can be social but also can be solid in a fight if it comes to that on the street. You should go to the vendor to select the dog with the handler who will be getting the dog in order to ensure the dog and handler will be a good match for one another. Allow the new handler to meet the dog and interact with him, as well as see the dog work. Watch the dog's behavior around the trainer who handles him and other people in the testing area. We are looking for his pack sociability (how he relates to his handler including the bond in evidence, or possibly any negative attributes like hand shyness) and his public sociability (how he relates to you and anyone else unknown to the dog in the testing area). Evaluate whether the dog is social or neutral, or worse, decidedly unsocial. He should be confident, not timid. He should be bold, but not dominant. He should be fluid on slippery floors, be willing to go up and down stairs, and be at ease in a group of people. The dog should not show any aggression toward other dogs when he is out on leash. Dog aggression is a difficult problem to deal with in a patrol dog. Whatever you do, keep your eye on the dog at all times for anything unusual, such as spookiness at unfamiliar objects or unwillingness to cross surfaces and thresholds.

These dogs are bred to be "high drive" so they may seem restless, and always wanting to be in motion. That is normal. Just make sure you see the dog in these situations before you do any formal testing. You should be able to see a few dogs to select from. Don't expect the vendor to show you an unlimited number of dogs. If the vendor is a quality one, they will select a few candidates that are suitable for your agency based on conversations with you from which you will be able to select.

Once you have seen these temperament basics, the formal testing should begin. Normally, testing for detection functions will be done first. What follows is a basic test for suitability for detection functions. The basic things you are looking to evaluate are the dog's retrieve and hunting drive, and his environmental stability.

DETECTION TESTING

Test the dog's sociability, he should come out and be happy, excited, and eager to see people. If he is aloof and ready to work more than socialize that is fine. Reject dogs that exhibit fear of people or are unsure about approaching the people who are doing the testing. Test in an unfamiliar place if possible. If at the vendor's site you can test there first, but make sure at some point you

take the dog to a place the dog has not been to and see if the dog will still hunt and retrieve there.

Test with the toy you will use for training. At my facility, we start our training with odor in a PVC pipe. Other facilities use a ball or ring. Just make sure you test at a minimum on the toy your dog will use in training. Once the toy comes out, he should be focused on the toy, not socializing with people anymore. You should see a marked change in the dog's demeanor, where he appears to have an obsession to the exclusion of all else, for the toy he is shown.

The start of the test should begin with tossing the toy where the dog can see it land clearly, so he knows what he is looking for. Do 4 or 5 of these retrieves out in the open where the dog can see the toy. You are looking for how fast the dog goes out, and looking for a fast pick-up. Dogs that run out and smell the object and pick it up gingerly are not preferred. You want a retrieving beast that hits





the object like a linebacker, and kicks up some grass and dust in the process. The reason for doing this 4 or 5 times is you want to see the dog's desire to quickly possess the object and be sure it sustains and doesn't satiate in one or two throws. Once on the street he will have to work for a long time.

Next we will start testing his hunting drive. This drive is the dog's natural desire to hunt for something he cannot readily see. It is possible for a dog to retrieve strongly, yet have low intensity in hunting, and that is not preferred. We suggest 4-5 throws into tall grass (to hide the toy when it falls) with the wind direction coming towards you if possible. Let the object land, and then spin the dog in a circle. Many dogs will use their eyes to mark location, so make sure he doesn't see it land. While he is hunting, make note of if he is using his nose or eyes. You want a dog sniffing and moving rather quickly for the object not looking for it with his eyes. Some dogs may use both, but you want a dog using his nose rather than scanning the area with his eyes. You should see him quarter in his searching, and make a hard head turn when he gets close to the object, and pick it up fast. The hard turn and fast pick up indicate his desire to possess the object when he finds it.

At this point you will want to go to a strange location for the rest of the test. If the dog maintains his hunting intensity through the retrieve and hunt outside, take the dog indoors and do a few retrieves on slick floors, into tight spaces and into dark rooms, and make sure he will go up stairs and down them for the toy reward. If the dog balks at any environmental challenges, if he is unsure, see if he will do it for the toy. You need to know if he will overcome environmental problems for his toy. There will always be something that will be new to him. If the toy doesn't get him over the issue, using the toy to motivate him, select a different dog. If the dog shows fear, do not try to reassure him, use the toy to excite him to overcome the problem.

Reassurance is praise, and you do not want to praise him for fear.

Next, have someone hold the dog on leash and tease the dog with his toy, and pretend to hide it in a bunch of places in a room with furniture (not a giant room, but an office or a section of warehouse or classroom), then place it where it is not visible but where he can get to it, and see if the dog will search it out without seeing it be thrown. Compare his hunting behavior in this exercise to the one where he saw the object thrown into the tall grass. You should see undistracted and consistent hunting. Some dogs will naturally check high and low when allowed to hunt like this, and that is preferred. They will quarter, and often will pass by the toy a couple times as their noses narrow down the location.

Finally, do a couple of throws into a car (not your patrol car) and see if he will hunt for the toy in the car. Don't make it difficult. Make sure he will not get distracted while inside the vehicle and stays focused on the task of finding the toy. After that, make sure the dog will go into your vehicle cage for his toy or some water, and then drive him to a location like a strip mall, where there is a crowd of people, and walk him around and make sure he is comfortable going in and out of the car and going past crowds and with sounds of traffic. If the dog passes these tests, you should have a good candidate for detection. Your goal is to select 2 or 3 candidates out of the dogs the vendor pre-selected for you, and then put these candidates that pass the detection test through the patrol test which should narrow your selection down to the dog you want for your agency.

THE PATROL TEST

We've discussed the basic detection evaluation of a dual purpose K9 candidate. Now, I'll describe the test done for the patrol portion of the test on a green dog you are going to have trained by a vendor for your agency.

The patrol test begins similarly to what you did when watching the dog come out for detection, by evaluating the dog's demeanor as he comes into the testing area. This will give you a chance to confirm your observations from the detection test. For the patrol evaluation, again, it is preferable to choose a neutral testing area that is unfamiliar to the dog. If you are doing it at the vendor's facility initially, make sure you do some of the testing in an unfamiliar area, or building. Once the dog comes out for the second time, he may know it is time for "bitework" because he likely has been worked in the sequence of detection then biting.

DEFENSE EVALUATION

Use an experienced agitator (decoy) for this test. The testing begins on the back tie. If it is a young dog in early adolescence, the dog can be held by the handler on leash. Be fair to young dogs 12-14 months and allow the trainer to stand by the dog and give some encouragement. If the dog is 18 months or over, you should allow the dog to work alone, unsupported by the handler.

We begin by testing the dog's defensive instincts. From a hiding place, the decoy (dressed in street clothes, he may have a hidden sleeve on) comes out slowly and makes defensive contact with the dog by staring in his eyes and moving very slowly toward the dog, from a distance of about 20-25 feet. There should be no protection equipment in the testing area, and no warm up bites for the dog. No prey items at all should be in evidence. It is important that this test be done first, before the dog bites a sleeve.

The slow approach allows the dog time to think about what is happening, the posture of the decoy is to be threatening, forward, always engaged with his eyes on the dog. Watch the dog's response. You are looking for how the dog handles the stress of the approach, when his aggression doesn't immediately scare off the threat.

Look at the body language of the dog. You will likely see a mix of signals. Maybe some hackles up, snarling (short mouth), ears up or flat, tail up, out or slightly tucked. A dog in defense is posturing to look scary. As the decoy comes further in, look for changes in behavior: does the tail tuck further, up ears flatten back, does the dog quit and look around as if looking for an escape? Does he back up or stay hard into the collar, his entire body coming forward? Look for how he deals with the agitator's aggression.

A dog in a defensive mood can do three things: He can fight, flee, or displace (show an unrelated behavior such as sniffing the ground or jumping on the handler). Most dogs will show a mixture of behaviors, as the pressure builds. What we are looking for is a dog that meets threat with threat, and comes forward into the collar with confidence.

The decoy when close enough to step into the circle described by the back tie can swing the hidden sleeve in as if for a bite and see if the dog will clack his jaws at the arm. You want him to turn that frustration and defensive energy into the desire to bite. Aggression must be met with more aggression, for this dog to be capable to fight in a street situation. We don't

want the dog to think about a way out of the confrontation. If the dog is older you can deliver the hidden sleeve and see how he deals with the fight after the confrontation. (If the dog is a young green dog, do not expect him to bite the hidden sleeve, instead look for him to clack his jaws at your arm as you pass it by his face). Look for weakness in the grip, and other signs that show he is not fully committed. After a short fight, weaken your fighting, and look for his confidence to rise as he neutralizes the threat. If the dog shows good defensive aggression, confidence and a willingness to want to bite you as you invade his space, you have a good candidate to go on to the rest of the test.

PREY EVALUATION

Go to a visible sleeve, or bite suit depending on the dog's level of development. Use a lot of movement and then deliver the grip. Now you are evaluating his biting behavior in the prey mood. Evaluate the quality of the grip. Look for any residual stress that remains from the earlier defensive encounter. The dog can become "stuck in defense," and therefore unwilling to chase you around. This is undesirable.

The ideal response is a change in attitude from a defensive posture, to a more relaxed prey posture. The classical prey postures include the dog pulling forward into the line, front feet off the ground. The dog's ears will be forward, and if he barks, the dog will do so with a big wide open mouth. The pitch of the bark may be a little higher than when he is in a defensive mood. He may still carry a bit of the seriousness from the initial defensive confrontation, and that is fine, as long as you are getting the response you desire. We seek a dog that wants to follow your movement, and lunge to catch the sleeve.

We want a nice full grip back to the molars. The dog should want to possess the sleeve with a full mouth. You can intentionally deliver a half grip to the dog, and see if he will counter when you offer him the opportunity. We want to be sure he is confident to press forward into the grip when the opportunity presents itself. Test him with the stick over his head, petting him with it, and give a few hits to the line on the back tie, finishing with a light hit on the side while on the grip. Look for any changes in the grip with the added pressure, or any discomfort in biting with the stick over his head.

We want to see the dog target the sleeve well, coming in the middle and not to the hands or elbow. Low to the hand can signal a lack of commitment to the grip, by coming to an area on the sleeve that is farthest away from the body of the helper. Make sure he will engage the suit. If he has never been on the suit, start by offering him a prey bite on the forearm.

If the dog has experience on the suit, offer him a bite in front, in the bicep area. This target area can cause a nervous reaction, with the grip becoming unstable and the dog getting noisy, growling or whining with anxiety. You can also use a sleeve for this if the dog is young. Belgian made sleeves can be turned around so that the triceps protection is in front of the biceps and you can offer a grip and work the dog in the front. If the grip stays strong and committed, the dog is a good prospect. Look to see how his grip changes, if at all, when biting in the front. The bite suit itself adds a lot of defensive stress to a prey encounter by virtue of the fact that the dog must come into the decoy's body much more than an outside forearm bite on a sleeve. This will tell you a lot about the dog's stability in general, and if he will look later to avoid more stressful encounters. Remember



that we are not asking to see perfect targeting in the front inside shoulder, just a willingness to take the grip there, and be in the grip confidently.

COURAGE TEST

Next we perform a test of "courage." You can go back to sleeve bites here for younger green dogs, and if the dog is older and more experienced, take him on the bite suit. This would be the outside of the forearm or if the dog is very experienced on the suit, in the bicep of the bite suit.

Good courage test distractions are: a clatter stick or a plastic jug with rocks in it. These are all good choices due to their unfamiliarity. You can do this courage test in a building on slick floors or outside. The dog can be held on leash, and the decoy comes and threatens the dog at a distance of about 10 to 20 yards, walking at him briskly, the dog is then sent at the attacking decoy, and the strike and grip are evaluated. The dog should willingly and powerfully intercept the attack. The decoy should drive the dog once on the grip, using the distractions to threaten the dog. Try to do this test on slick surfaces, preferably in a large building. The echoes in a large building can be disorienting. Test him also in a tight space or a dark room if you can. Test the dog going up open stairs to a bite. The ideal candidate willingly and happily bites under the environmental pressure. Test the dog to his limits of his age and training, without throwing the dog into any kind of avoidance. Also, make sure you test the dog for gunfire sureness and behavior around crowds. The dog's reaction to gunfire should be neutral, rather than aggressive. We don't want the dog aggressing to gunfire of back up officers, so neutral reactions are preferred. A slightly aggressive reaction is acceptable, as it can be desensitized. Any gun shyness should disqualify the dog.

Once all these phases of the test are complete, you can make

your determination as to whether the dog is suitable for your training program. In every dog there will be strengths and weaknesses. What you want to determine is that the weaknesses are minor and the strengths abundant.

I want to make a note here on equipment orientation in green dogs. In order to teach biting behavior, we use equipment. We have no choice. As a result, equipment orientation usually follows in high prey dogs that are green and coming directly over from Europe. This is not a deficiency, but rather a by-product of the training progression in confident, high prey dogs. In my book *Controlled Aggression* I discuss how to eliminate this by-product before going on to teach the police dog his necessary skills. My advice is this: don't pass on an otherwise good dog because he is equipment oriented.

CONCLUSIONS

You will now have to make some conclusions. The ultimate goals of the patrol test are to see the presence of as well as the intensity of the dog's drives. You want both prey and defense present and highly intense. Moderate intensity or low intensity in one or both drives is not acceptable. Further you want to see the dog channel from defense testing into prey drive (important for outs and stress inoculation in training). You will get an appreciation of how the dog deals with environmental stress and pressure from the decoy (courage test).

You should now balance the detection test against the patrol test, and the needs of your agency. If detection and tracking is going to be the bread and butter of your K9 program, and all the dogs did well on the patrol portion, pick the dog that has the best detection test. Otherwise, if you and the trainer feel all of the dogs performed well, pick the dog with the personality you like best. He will be your partner for a long time. If one of the dogs isn't strong on the patrol test eliminate him from consideration, and pick from the others. This is where if you have chosen a vendor wisely they can help you make the best selection, as they know the dogs better than you. If you don't trust them to help your selection, you shouldn't be buying the dog from that vendor. Treat them as a partner not an adversary.

In columns to follow we will talk about training courses, handler courses, and what you should expect in your trained canine when your handler arrives for the handler course and beyond.

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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.*

