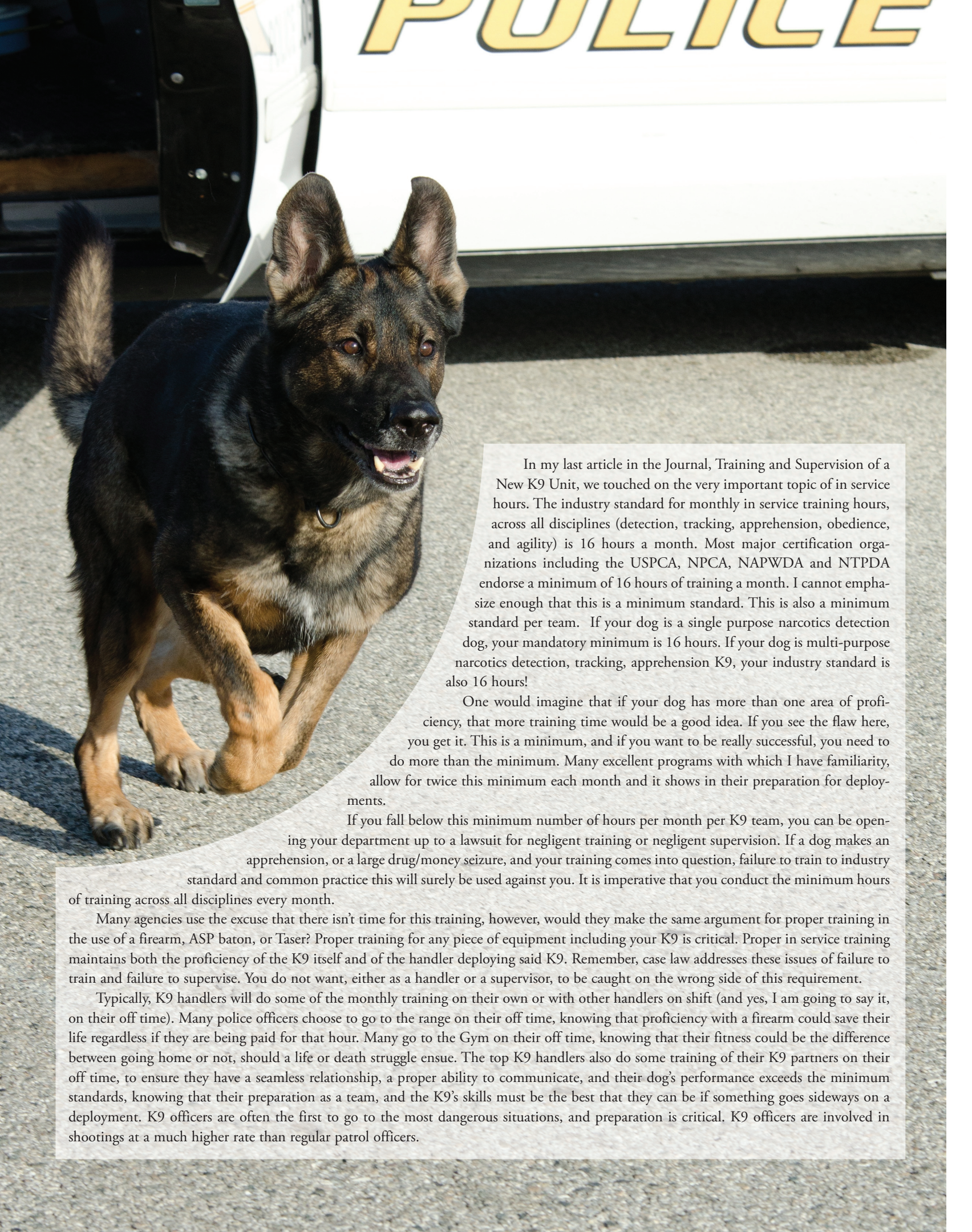


CONDUCTING QUALITY IN-SERVICE K9 TRAINING

By Jerry Bradshaw, Training Director, Tarheel Canine Training, Inc.





In my last article in the Journal, Training and Supervision of a New K9 Unit, we touched on the very important topic of in service hours. The industry standard for monthly in service training hours, across all disciplines (detection, tracking, apprehension, obedience, and agility) is 16 hours a month. Most major certification organizations including the USPCA, NPCA, NAPWDA and NTPDA endorse a minimum of 16 hours of training a month. I cannot emphasize enough that this is a minimum standard. This is also a minimum standard per team. If your dog is a single purpose narcotics detection dog, your mandatory minimum is 16 hours. If your dog is multi-purpose narcotics detection, tracking, apprehension K9, your industry standard is also 16 hours!

One would imagine that if your dog has more than one area of proficiency, that more training time would be a good idea. If you see the flaw here, you get it. This is a minimum, and if you want to be really successful, you need to do more than the minimum. Many excellent programs with which I have familiarity, allow for twice this minimum each month and it shows in their preparation for deployments.

If you fall below this minimum number of hours per month per K9 team, you can be opening your department up to a lawsuit for negligent training or negligent supervision. If a dog makes an apprehension, or a large drug/money seizure, and your training comes into question, failure to train to industry standard and common practice this will surely be used against you. It is imperative that you conduct the minimum hours of training across all disciplines every month.

Many agencies use the excuse that there isn't time for this training, however, would they make the same argument for proper training in the use of a firearm, ASP baton, or Taser? Proper training for any piece of equipment including your K9 is critical. Proper in service training maintains both the proficiency of the K9 itself and of the handler deploying said K9. Remember, case law addresses these issues of failure to train and failure to supervise. You do not want, either as a handler or a supervisor, to be caught on the wrong side of this requirement.

Typically, K9 handlers will do some of the monthly training on their own or with other handlers on shift (and yes, I am going to say it, on their off time). Many police officers choose to go to the range on their off time, knowing that proficiency with a firearm could save their life regardless if they are being paid for that hour. Many go to the Gym on their off time, knowing that their fitness could be the difference between going home or not, should a life or death struggle ensue. The top K9 handlers also do some training of their K9 partners on their off time, to ensure they have a seamless relationship, a proper ability to communicate, and their dog's performance exceeds the minimum standards, knowing that their preparation as a team, and the K9's skills must be the best that they can be if something goes sideways on a deployment. K9 officers are often the first to go to the most dangerous situations, and preparation is critical. K9 officers are involved in shootings at a much higher rate than regular patrol officers.

SELECTING A TRAINING GROUP

In addition to doing some training at home or on shift, most K9 officers will be a part of a larger local or regional training group, or go back to their vendor for a portion of the 16 hour monthly minimum of training hours. Selecting a training group that is going to help you achieve your goals, maintain certification, and focus on honing your skills for daily usage of your K9 is no easy task.

Not all training groups are led by experienced trainers, and unfortunately, too many K9 trainers have a “My Way or the Highway” philosophy and aren’t interested in your input into training, nor taking into consideration how your dog was trained and if the training they suggest will complement or conflict with what your dog knows.

HANDLERS V. TRAINERS

Many groups are handlers that get together to help one another, and there may not be an actual trainer in the group. I think it is critical to make a clear distinction between a handler and a trainer. Just like every cop must master his firearm in order to be able to perform his duty, not every cop is a firearms instructor, able to troubleshoot performance issues in other people. Being a K9 handler no matter for how many years, does not necessarily prepare someone to be a trainer, able to diagnose and solve training problems other K9 teams may be experiencing. An instructor should know, inside and out, learning theory as it applies to K9s, both operant and classical conditioning, understand how to reduce complex trained behaviors to essential components, and be familiar with canine behavior in general. But that’s not all.

A trainer must be able to explain a particular training progression, for instance, how to train a building search from beginning to end, and all the essential variables involved, and how to manipulate them during the progression of training. A trainer must be familiar with pitfalls in any training progression, where problems may be expected to show up, and how to make proper, reasoned, and skillful adjustments based on actual experience. Dog training is both a science and an art. One must know the science behind what is being done, or asked of the dog, and also be familiar with the application of the principles to a living being. All too often, handlers think because they were able to train successfully with their dog, that they are an expert in something other than, just their dog. A trainer has a range of experience, perhaps training multiple dogs from start to finish, and having gone through a respected trainer course, where both the science of training is learned, as well as having the opportunity to practice on real dogs in training.

No matter how much handling experience one may have, being a trainer requires another level of dedication. If you are interested in joining a training group, there should be some objective yardsticks used to measure the skill of the trainer who will now be overseeing your dog’s training. They should be trained as a trainer, and be able to adapt to training progressions you are already working on (training is never finished) and know how what you are doing fits into how he thinks about training. Broad experience and a lack of ego are critical. The most insecure and unskilled trainers are ones who are the most “dominant” and use appeals to their experience and authority to gain compliance from their groups rather than results. If they disagree with you they should be able to explain why they disagree, if

not in the middle of the training, at a minimum after it’s done. They should want you to get on board with their philosophy, and be able to have that philosophy make sense, and be willing to explain it. If the dogs in the training group are poorly trained, unproductive, or the methods and philosophies are very different from how your dog was trained, find another place to train. Do not let mere convenience screw up your dog. Changing training philosophies and methods just to “fit in” is a common occurrence among K9 handlers, and is done at the detriment of your K9’s performance and can result in him becoming confused and as a consequence can create major problems in performance.

SCENARIO TRAINING V. CERTIFICATION TRAINING

As you check out an in service group, also look at some other things to help you make your decision. In service training is unfortunately often designed around running certification exercises over and over again. This is a really big waste of time. Training should be designed to promote goals in training. Your trainer should explain what goals (in the short run and in the long run) you are trying to achieve (better threat identification on passive subjects, better distance control on the out, quicker and more fluid outs, stronger grips, more neutrality to the handler approaching the dog on the bite, better odor recognition, more stamina on long tracks to name a few). These goals should be mostly focused on preparing you and your dog in a scenario based context for deployments you will likely encounter in your work, from detection to tracking to apprehension. You should prepare for a level of proficiency well above certification. Your training should incorporate elements of skills that will be required for certification, so that your certification exercises will be relatively easy compared to the deployment scenarios you are running in in service training.

Further, as each dog/handler team has different experience, different strengths and different weaknesses, training exercises, drills, and scenarios should be designed to be run to make adjustments for individual dogs in the training group. If you see every dog (rookie K9 to 5 years on the road) doing exactly the same training in every phase you are wasting your time with that training group. Trainers make adjustments. They make adjustments for skill level, handler skill, and design scenarios and drills to build on strengths and remediate weaknesses, and teach lessons. If these adjustments aren’t being made, training is poorly designed as “one size fits all.”

In order to maximize productive training time, join a smaller group if you can. This will reduce dead time (an unfortunate by product of our work due to the need for odor-based training to allow for permeation times), and allow for more time to talk through training, individualize training, and to debrief performances to learn how to design the next training exercises to build upon successes, or remediate any deficiencies exposed.

Smaller groups can also allow for varying training environments, meeting up at different places to train (don’t always train in the same building or the same field), or meeting up on the road. Smaller groups can encourage handlers to speak about their experiences, challenges they have encountered in real life deployments. As an example of the flexibility of smaller groups, they can arrange to park away from one another (the great gathering of K9 vehicles in one parking lot is a signal to the dog that training is going to happen – a remarkable fact of classical conditioning) to make training scenarios that much more realistic for the dog.

ALIGN YOUR TRAINING PHILOSOPHIES

When you visit a training group, make sure that the group's general philosophy about training and deploying a police K9 is in line with the philosophy behind your team's training.

Look at things such as reward methodology in detection, whether the group has skilled and trained decoys, whether they insist on proper targeting training (see the link to my training articles at the end of this piece for an explanation of this and other training philosophies). If you and your K9 have been trained in the progressive way of deploying building searches using a long line and employing a systematic clear, down and cover methodology, don't just give it up because nobody else in the group does it!

Some groups believe in allowing a detection dog to do his job with minimal handler influence, and other more old school trainers have the handler constantly presenting every crack and seam in a room. This over-handling in detection can create massive problems in a dog that is used to being independent and having the handler just make sure that a room has been thoroughly sniffed. Does the training you see incorporate tactics? Is equipment orientation something that is being created by poor decoy work or neglect of human orientation drills? Are enough blank areas being used in the detection problems, especially for the explosives dogs, or are all dogs doing the same things every time. Make sure e-collars aren't being wantonly used without proper instruction, and thus creating confusion and conflict behavior in the dog. Can anyone explain the methodology behind the use of the e-collar?

There will always be minor differences in training philosophy, and minor differences can and should be tolerated in any group. Every dog doesn't need to be trained with the same cookie cutter approach. A good training director will be able to help you realize why these differences might exist. All training should be a mixture of component training, full scenarios, drills, and fundamentals. Training should be well thought out, and challenging and inspire you to get better. There should be time spent on each area of training from detection to tracking/trailing to patrol/apprehension based on the mandatory minimums and the needs of each team that day.

PROBLEMS

Imagine you graduate from your basic school, get certified and are on the road. You are going to in-service training and you see a problem start to come up. Let's say the out on command starts to get progressively slower and now your dog is fighting the out. The first thing you must do, despite being in a training group, is seek help from the trainer that knows your dog best. Contact the trainer in the academy that trained you and your dog to be sure it isn't something you are doing now that is encouraging the problem. I cannot tell you how many months can be wasted with in service groups struggling over a problem, that could have been dealt with by the vendor or academy trainer that originally trained the dog. Seek help from vendors before you make things worse. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard the phrase, "Our group's trainer has 30 years' experience and we have tried everything." No, you have tried everything he knows, and it is also possible he has been a mediocre trainer (or just a glorified handler not a trained trainer) for 30 years. Maybe he stopped learning 20 years ago, and hasn't kept up on new developments in the field, or new techniques, or maybe he isn't familiar

with how this particular dog was trained. Remember experience and authority are not arguments for being right. "Appeal to authority" is considered to be a logical fallacy of argumentation, yet it exists in the Police K9 community in a big way.

The only things to consider when dealing with a problem behavior are: what was actually done to remedy the problem and how it was carried out, and what did the result teach us about the problem. Theory can be poorly applied in training – you can have the right idea about what to do but carry out the training poorly. You can also have the wrong idea about the problem, but carry out the plan based on that poor diagnosis perfectly. To be complete you can have a poor plan and also execute the poor plan poorly! In any case you will likely not make headway.

Diagnosing the problem properly is critical. E.g. let's say when the team started with this in service group they started making the dog do all his outs as "out and recall" and providing no rewards for the act of releasing, only punishment when the out is refused, a typical strategy because out and recall is standard in many certifications, and let's be honest it is what all the other handlers are doing! If the dog has a hard temperament, he likely would begin fighting the punishment, because he is used to being rewarded for releasing properly, and that has been changed from his former training protocol. (Imagine if a trainer stopped rewarding dogs for finding drugs or explosives, we would think that is crazy, but handlers and trainers fail to reward outs properly all the time). This change in training results in the conflict over possession of the decoy. Therefore either the out needs to be changed back to an out and guard where the release can be properly rewarded on a variable basis to alleviate the conflict, or the out and recall must be set up to properly to reward the dog for releasing and recalling to the handler by a mixture of warm and cold redirect drills. In my vast experience with such problem cases the "tried everything" doesn't include these things at the heart of the issue. Usually "tried everything" means more punishment for failing to release. That only causes the dog to fight against the training more and more creating a vicious circle.

CREATING YOUR OWN UNIT TRAINING GROUP

Many K9 units are taking the initiative to send a senior handler through an instructor course, so that training can be run within the agency's K9 unit more seamlessly, and the instructor will have the benefit of having learned the theory and how to apply it in training progressions and drills. I think every unit should have a design-





nated trainer who has been through a proper course to assist the unit with monthly in service, problem solving, and to help frame problems to come up with good solutions, or at a minimum feel comfortable reaching out to those who certified him as a trainer to get input on problems.

CONCLUSIONS

Getting home from an academy or a private trainer with your certified K9 is just the beginning of the process of keeping your dog proficient, and advancing him beyond basic competency. I always try to explain to our new K9 teams that graduating basic school is just the beginning, like when you came out of your police academy. There is still much to be learned. Just as your in-service as a police officer, mixed in with your street experience makes you grow year after year as an effective law enforcement officer, we should attach the same expectations to the K9 team. They should grow year after year, in proficiency, experience, and ability. Certifications should get easier year after year, and the team will have trained well above basic competency. Your dog should become more and more efficient in locating contraband, tracking suspects, and making apprehensions, if your in-service training is being done properly and challenging the dog to become better and better.

Jerry Bradshaw is Training Director & President of Tarheel Canine Training, Inc. in Sanford, North Carolina. Jerry has been training dogs for competitive protection sports since 1991, and has competed in National Championship trials in both Schutzhund and PSA, winning the PSA National Championships in 2003 with his dog Ricardo v.d. Natuurzicht PSA 3. Jerry has trained many Belgian Malinois to the highest titles in the sports in which he competed including Arrow of Tigerpaws, SchH 3, BH; Ben von Lowenfels, SchH 2, BH; Rocky de la Maison Des Lions PSA 3; and Ricardo v.d. Natuurzicht PH 1, PSA 3.

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.

Many of the training concepts mentioned in this article are covered in depth in published articles available on the Tarheel Canine website at www.tarheelcanine.com/media-area/training-articles/

Please feel free to make your handlers, trainers, and training groups aware of this resource.