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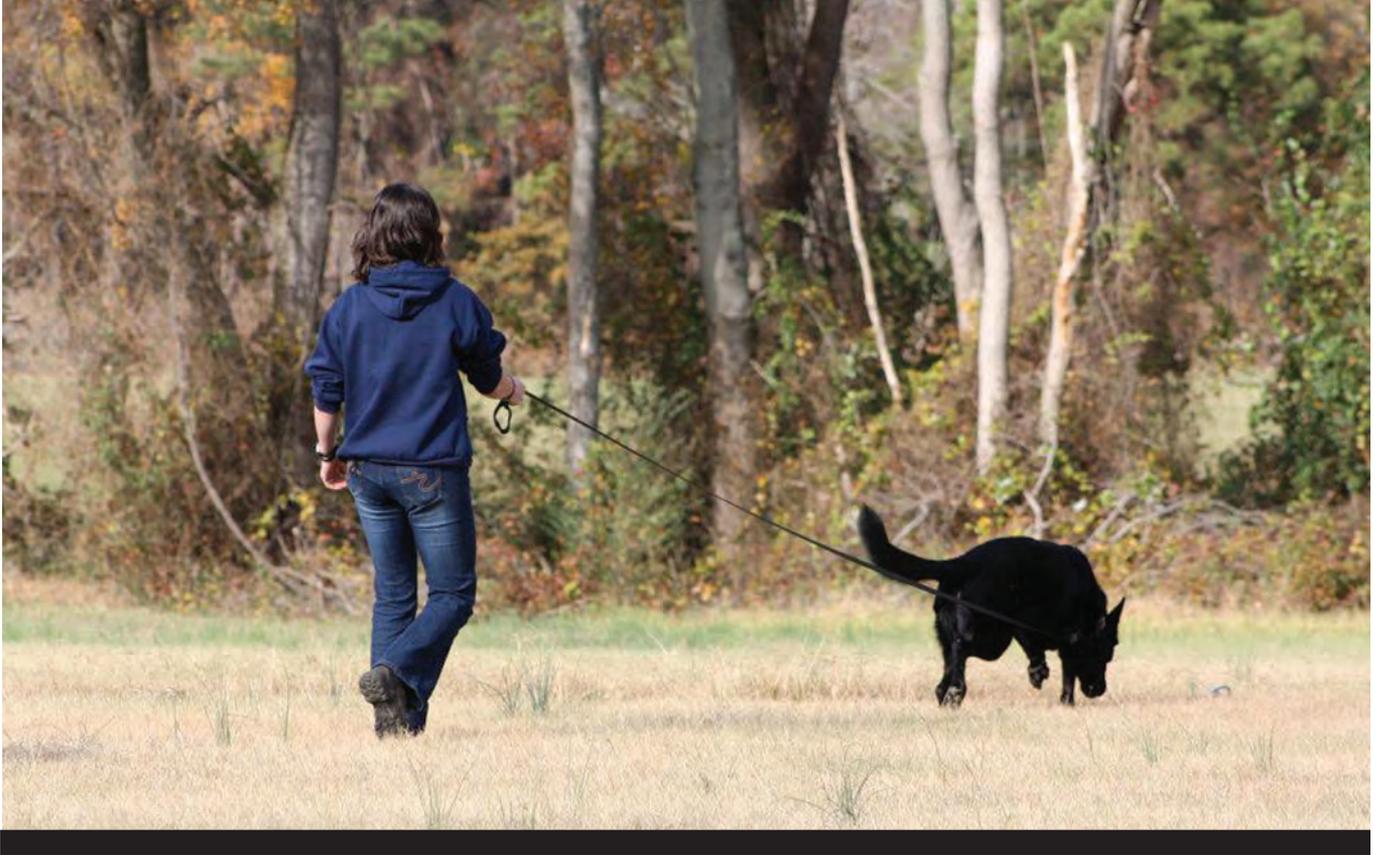
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COMPONENT TRAINING FOR POLICE K-9S

Quick Training Scenarios for Tracking
by Jerry Bradshaw



Training your police canine should be an every day occurrence. Doing something in the context of your shift work is imperative for success. Allotted training days are very important for working on longer problems, or more complex training scenarios, or more repetitions of skills. But there are a number of things you can do on shift to really propel your skills ahead and work your dog in the context in which he will have to deploy, that don't require hours of investment. You can also use this technique on your training days to train components of behaviors in the context of likely scenarios you will face on the road.

Many handlers have had the problem of their dog performing well "in training" but not "on deployments." When you see this disconnect you should immediately look in the mirror and understand you have set up your training to be contextually different than your deployments. It isn't the dog. It is how you have presented the problems to him. Training days normally begin with everyone parking together in a group, dogs barking, standing around outside the vehicles as you decide what to do. Equipment is dragged out in view of the dogs, the same fields and areas are used for tracking, bite suits and sleeves are seen, decoys are dressed sometimes, and then the dogs come out and do some work, nor-

mally not in the context of a scenario. This is a recipe for failure on deployments. The dogs cue in on the set up.

If you are the unit trainer, you should coordinate your group to never park together and never set up training days so the dogs can cue in on the place or context of the training. Try to vary the training venues regularly and also from where the dog is deployed relative to the training area. Training must always look like a deployment or the dog will detect the difference and you may see a variation in performance. In this series of articles, I will present ideas for component training for tracking, obedience, apprehension, and detection. This article will focus on tracking.

As with all complex behaviors, train the components separately and then string them together from end to beginning in the process of back-chaining. It will be assumed that at this stage of the game, the dog is on the street and has had experience with each component to a greater or lesser degree. We still split up the components for our ongoing training. When you feel your components are each well trained, start with your first full scenario track being more complicated at the end, and relatively less so on the track and the start. All tracking dogs should be accustomed to



a security officer walking behind the handler. Don't be afraid to have more than one person behind the tracking dog, as this will eventually become the basis for any tactical tracking you will do where formations of back up on high risk tracks are needed and your dog must be neutral to their presence. As the dog develops and you begin working on tactics, treat this variable like all others we will discuss below. Start simple and add complexity slowly and deliberately.

Quick Scenarios: Starts

In our tracking classes at Tarheel Canine, we remind our handlers that if you cannot locate an unknown track with your dog, it doesn't matter how good he is at tracking when he is on the track, you will be unsuccessful. Any complex behavior, such as a track, can be broken down into component parts. Consider the track to have 3 parts. The start, which is

where the exercise will begin (you may have limited information about where the subject went); the track itself, including legs and turns, backtracks and step-offs; and the end, where the subject is hidden (on the ground, up a tree, in a building, abandoned vehicle) or the track ends where a subject might have been picked up in a car.

As a handler and trainer, you may be accustomed to going to a training day and setting up one long track with a start, a track, and an end. This "one and done" mentality is something we need to change in police K-9 training. Instead, think about training components of these behaviors. Let's say you have a lot of confidence in your dog staying with a track once he is on it but you sometimes have trouble getting him to pick up the start of the track. Then you may want to focus your time on doing repetitions of starts rather than one long track. The scenario could, for example, be set up with another patrol car on a 'scene' and you arrive to do the track.



Deputy Kenny Vincent and K-9 Jazz



The track layer should clearly be instructed where to start and the path he should take for the track. Keeping it simple, you can have the track layer drive his POV to an area, exit from the driver side, go around the front, through the culvert beside the road, and into the woods. Keep the track part of the sequence fairly short and easy. The end of the track should also be uncomplicated (no big arrest situation) because you want the dog to get a fast reward for finding the track after you cast him to it. Bring the dog to the vehicle, cast him to the track, and when he picks it up, you can lightly verbally praise him for it and then after that he gets a fast reward.

Start with handler known problems so the handler can learn to read the dog and you can ensure success. Progress to handler unknown exercises as you see the dog successfully and efficiently identify these cold tracks. However, you must always have a trainer there to guide on these unknowns, as we must make sure not to pull the dog off the track because of the handler's lack of confidence. Someone always knows what is going on who is with the handler.

Put your track layer or the dog's toy downwind so the dog doesn't do an area search since the track is short.

Once completed leave that scene and set up another one with a little more complexity. Maybe this time the track layer exits on the opposite side of the vehicle, same scenario, just a little more complicated. Have the track layer leave the car and run down the culvert for a bit before cutting into the woods. Again, do a fairly short and easy track with an easy ending to keep the focus on the start being successful with a quick reward. Then do another one, say, on a dirt road. Have the track layer exit the vehicle, run down the culvert, then cross back over the road to the other side. Again, you must set up a known track, known turn location, and keep the track part simple but varied with a simple ending. The emphasis is on a successful start. Instead of one track with your dog seeing only one repetition of each component, he sees 3 or 4 starts in a row. This allows some repetition to improve his problem solving skills. The quicker reward builds his drive to solve the problem of the start efficiently.

Also, if you train scent discrimination tracking using scent articles, this is also a rich area of exploration in setting up starts. You can have a scent article from the driver and other track layers who leave the car who are not the target subjects. You can work on making a scent article using distilled water and cotton gauze to swab the driver seat or steering wheel. Start again from known to unknown (with unknowns, a trainer who knows the prob-



lem is always present to guide the team to success). The dog must sort the contamination by different scent. You can also start the track in an area of ambient contamination that is light, working your way to heavier contamination areas.

Quick Scenarios: End of Track

On another training day, you can make an easy start, a short track, and work on different end of track scenarios. In training any dog, we want to only change one variable at a time in order to ensure success. As we build the dog's confidence on end of track scenarios, we keep the other components (start and track) simple and easy to complete so we don't get hung up on an unintended problem.

Think about the variables you can change on these end of track scenarios. Again, work from known scenarios to unknown scenarios. You can address dog training-related variables such as reading your dog as he comes to scent pools of different ages, how he gives you an alert to the subject at the end of the track by using hidden subjects wearing a Ghillie suit for camouflage, or up a tree in cold weather so the scent falls to the dog, or up a tree in warm weather as he gets good at high finds.

You can work on tactical variables as well. Go back and simplify the "dog-related variables" and once the dog gives you an alert, call your dog to cover and verbally

challenge. The subject can either comply or not comply. The handler has to decide how to handle that. Alternatively, you could have the hidden subject attack the dog. This is where the dog must absolutely understand drive channeling (see *Controlled Aggression* by Jerry Bradshaw) or you run the risk of really frightening the dog as tracking takes a lot of concentration and the dog's drives are capped and internalized at this point. Start this scenario with a subject jumping up at a distance and fleeing first and work your way to more defensive scenarios. I have seen trainers ruin dogs by startling them out of their track this way, pushing too fast.

Add in less lethal combinations at the end of the track if the subject is apprehended with a bite and fights the dog. Condition the dog to the use of a Taser with training cartridges, or your back up guy using an ASP. The dog should be first conditioned in his bite work training to back up guys joining the fight using less lethal and the use of return gunfire. These high pressure ends should be practiced but be careful here. If there is too much made of the end of the track, the dog may lose concentration on the track as he anticipates getting to where the "real fun" is. We also like to have tracks end with just an article or a toy at the end (buried rather than visible) or the track layer rewarding the dog with his toy.

Quick Scenarios: The Track

If your dog starts well and is adept at various track end scenarios, you can switch your focus to concentrate on the middle of the exercise: the track itself. Some of the variables here include the weight of the track layer (if your track layers are always 200 lb. plus guys, your dog will be accustomed to an odor threshold that is pretty easy), gender of the track layer, and race of the track layer. These are all variables that present a different scent picture to the dog.

Additionally, this is where you can work on aging of the track, length of the track, turns (from obtuse angles to acute angles), step offs, back-tracks and other key components. Put multiple hotspots on the track, where the track layer stops and creates a scent pool then moves on to simulate a subject going to the ground and then deciding to move on after catching his breath. Each of these variables must be treated with care so you do not change too many things at once. As your dog gets better and better at tracking, his baseline “track” will become generally more complicated. This will allow you the freedom to push his limits in training and challenge him.

The possibilities are endless for what variables you can tinker with to make your dog more adept at his solution to the problems. If you think of training your tracking dog this way, you will give your dog repetition on each component of the complex behavior in order for him to progress his skills in each area. Then, once in a while, set up a long complex tracking scenario. If you train components instead of “one and done” you will see your dog’s skills improve tremendously. Each skill area (each component) will be trained in context and the repetition will condition the dog to become efficient at solving the problems with which you present him.

Blend scenarios with component training from the start. You should see your dog’s accuracy improve and his ability to perform on deployments will show you that you are doing your training properly. Many of these scenarios can be set



“The possibilities are endless for what variables you can tinker with to make your dog more adept at his solution to the problems.”

up quickly and ran quickly on shift. To be at the top of your game as a canine handler, training should be an every day occurrence. The biggest issue with in service training is in knowing what goals to set and what variables to work on. Use this article as a starting guide for scenario based training of tracking. You can add variables to those presented here that come from your own experience, your work areas, and the experience of your unit trainers. At Tarheel Canine we now train all of our tracking dogs on hard surface tracking right from the beginning to give us the most variables and terrain to work with in our tracking scenarios. Whether your dog is trained for urban, suburban, rural tracking or trailing you can use these quick to set up scenarios to improve each component of the exercise and soon your dog will be the reliable tracking dog you must have. ■

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