



THE TALENTED K9 TRAINER:

BECOMING AN EXPERT HANDLER OR TRAINER

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In 2010 in a blog for the Harvard Business Review, work performance guru Tony Schwartz wrote that a minimum of 10,000 hours of deliberate concentrated practice is necessary to become an “expert” in any complex task.

Let’s assume that dog training and handling is one of those complex tasks. If we were to do 40 hours of deliberate practice a week (impossible) it would take 250 weeks to become an expert. There are 52 weeks in one year, so that comes to about 4.8 years of deliberate practice (at an impossible rate of 40 hours of practice a week). Let’s say, we do something more reasonable, but equally unlikely, such as 20 hours a week, then that means we are looking

at 9.6 years to become an expert in any complex field such as dog training or handling.

For police dog handlers, we require as an industry standard, 4 hours per week of in service training, for a rate of 16 hours a month. How off the mark are you at being an expert dog handler if you do just the minimum? The answer is, a lot off the mark according to Schwartz. It is well known that the best handlers put in a lot more than the minimum. The best handlers work hard at the practice of their craft every day, and as such are probably doing well over the 20 hours a week that will get them on their way to being the best they can be in their field. The same holds

for trainers, but in my opinion, even more so. Every opportunity to observe training, think about it, and to get your hands on dogs, brings you closer to maximizing your potential. However, it's not just how much we practice to become experts, but in fact the way in which we practice may have even more of an impact on how we become skilled and talented. This is good news for those of us for whom time is a very real constraint.

Daniel Coyle writes in *The Talent Code* (Bantam Books, May 2009) a book that explains how talent grows in the brain and how you can nurture excellence in any complex craft, that the key to growing talent is what he calls "deep practice." Deep practice is the essential component of growing the neural network and the resulting myelin insulation of those neurons, which solidifies a skill or task in the brain that is observable as talent. Thus growing talent happens as part of a biological process. He explains that deep practice, when you are in the "zone" that allows these neural pathways in the brain to grow and become permanent, you are doing a few important things (below) that are essential to deep practice. Coyle visited talent "hotbeds"



across the globe that are producing the best tennis players, golfers, classical musicians, among others, and found these places where talent was grown in abundance had some things in common about how the students learned and practiced skills:

1. **"Chunking"** is the breaking down into smaller compartmentalized tasks the essential tasks of the skills you are growing, such as handling a detection dog on a traffic stop on the side of the road or deploying a patrol dog in a building search, where you have to manage a line and a flashlight for example, both complex tasks. When practicing you break the skills down (both for you and the dog) into manageable mini-skills you can practice. Only after mastering these "chunks" do you put the whole task into a complete unified routine. I wrote a series of articles for *K9 Cop Magazine* on compartmentalizing training (chunking skills if you prefer) in obedience, tracking, patrol and detection which are available on the media area of my website (www.tarheelcanine.com).
2. **"Absorb the whole"** is spending time watching (and listening to) the task you are trying to master in its coherent whole. So often at in service training, handlers lose focus and stop watching other handlers work their dogs, and get into unrelated side conversations. Developing a habit of deep practice requires this visualization, especially when talented, fluid handlers, decoys and trainers are at work, flowing effortlessly through routines or solving common problems. In other words, if you want to be a great tennis player you must watch great tennis players play tennis. So from now on, after working your dog, watch others work theirs, and work on absorbing the whole, remembering this is an essential part of your development.
3. **"Slow it down"** means sometimes walking through a skill without your dog, so you can capture the movements you must make in training or deploying without the added distraction of a high drive dog in your hands. When we get excited working our dogs, we tend to get adrenalized and move too fast, this causes us to not pay enough attention to errors we are making, or even sometimes notice them at all. Part of the skill of deep practice is making errors and correcting them over and over again, until they are eliminated from the flow of your practice. A quote from quarterback coach Tom Martinez in *The Talent Code* drives home this point, "It's not how fast you can do it. It's how slow you can do it correctly. (p.85)" Speed will come with the fluidity of the task, as it becomes habitual. Coyle also notes that going slowly also has the additional benefit of gaining a complete perception of the "shape" and "rhythm" of the skills components.
4. **"Repeat it"** means that to build a skill one needs attentive repetition, meaning that these skills whether the chunks or the flowing strings of these chunked skills, must be repeated over and over, attending to errors, correcting those errors, and beginning again. Too often in dog training, we do "one and done" practice. Instead we



must practice chunks or flowing skills again and again, giving us the opportunity to perceive errors, correct those errors, and continue to master the skill. Coyle notes that deep practice is more than being repetitive, it is pushing yourself to the edge of your abilities during practice, while fully mentally engaged, and allowing errors to happen, be perceived, corrected, and the skill attempted again. Being mentally engaged at the edge of your capabilities, takes a lot of concentration, meaning that one can only properly practice deeply for a few hours a day. This is good news for those of us who have limited time, and it means how we spend that time, training and practicing efficiently is of most importance.

This kind of practice or training is explained by Coyle as follows: “1. Pick a target. 2. Reach for it. 3. Evaluate the gap between the target and the reach. 4. Return to step 1. (P. 92).” In order to get better at something, Coyle says, you must be willing and even enthusiastic about being bad, as you hone your skills, by making errors, correcting those errors, and reaching for new targets. Staying in a comfortable place, as many K9 handlers tend to do, working on things that they and their dogs are good at already, and avoiding problem areas, doesn’t lead to improving skill much less mastering it. Moving out of your comfort zone, reaching for new skills, and following the guidelines of this deep practice will.

Dogs, as humans, make errors in their practice. This process of building talent and skill is a biological process, and as such should and does apply to learning in animals as well as people. Thus another lesson of *The Talent Code* is that in teaching things to your dog, breaking up the tasks into component parts, slowing the learning process down for the dog, allowing him to make errors and giving him the opportunity to try again to correct the errors (even if there are strings of mistakes) is what leads to learning the

skills. Many handlers are quick to intervene and correct physically before a dog really understands a task, and this can interrupt real learning. Making errors and learning how to correct them, is a huge part of learning a new skill for both humans and dogs. Training must involve sufficient opportunity for repetition as well because only through repetition can errors be identified and corrected and fluidity of proper responses nurtured and sped up. Thus doing something only once is about as useful as doing it not at all. Your dog needs the opportunity for deep practice as well.

So, don’t think of how many months or years you have been a dog trainer or handler as reason enough to prove what you know. What really matters is how often every week you get your hands (or mind) engaged in the deliberate practice you need to develop your skills to the “expert” level. Hands on, reaching beyond your grasp out of what is comfortable and easy, correcting those errors, and beginning again, makes all the difference. There is another lesson, pick as mentors those trainers who are still training actively, still developing their own talent, by training their own dogs. Train hard by practicing deeply!

Reference

Coyle, Daniel. *The Talent Code*. Bantam Books, 2009.

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.
