

Effective Muzzle Fighting

By

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A real street bite is the one thing that as police dog trainers, we cannot actually set up and practice as it would happen on the street. Because of this, we have numerous techniques that we use to simulate a real street bite. One of those techniques is the muzzle attack.

There are numerous brands and types of protection muzzles. Be sure you have an actual agitation muzzle and not just an everyday wear muzzle. Most agitation muzzles have a reinforced steel bar framing the leading edge of the muzzle to keep the leather from collapsing on the dog's mouth when he makes contact. The typical agitation muzzle you see is a "Dondi" style three strap muzzle, which buckles behind the ears (this is the part that secures the muzzle) and one strap that goes over the head, between the ears, and secures to the head strap. There are also "Belgian Ring" style muzzles of similar design but these often come with bite-bars covered with leather and affixed to the inside of the muzzle for the dog to grip during a muzzle fight. Some muzzles only have the two straps that fasten behind the head, and not the over head strap. These muzzles are safe to use if properly secured. The over head strap is not the key part of the safe operation of the muzzle. Make sure you choose a muzzle that fits comfortably. The dog should be able to breathe and pant normally, and even bark and clack his jaws inside the muzzle. Manufacturers make many sizes. You should try a few different ones and settle on one that secures nicely and is comfortable for the dog. An experienced trainer can help you select the right size.

Once the muzzle is secure, a safety check must be performed. The handler should grab the muzzle underneath and gently but firmly lift the dog straight up by the muzzle. The muzzle should stay securely fastened. Next, grasp the muzzle top and bottom in both hands and try to "roll" the muzzle down off the dog's snout to mimic the pawing action the dog can make to insure that the muzzle cannot be taken off by a determined dog. Do this gently but firmly, and don't wrench the dog's neck. Some people allow the decoy doing the actual muzzle attack (since it is his ass on the line with no equipment on) to make a secondary safety check. I don't like doing this because it ruins the realism of the encounter to some degree. I do like having a second person (most preferably the training instructor presiding) do a safety check. I also encourage some back-up by having a decoy with a sleeve hidden in close proximity just in case the muzzle comes off.

It goes without saying that before doing any muzzle fighting the dog should be conditioned to be calm and accepting of the muzzle. This part of the training should not be rushed, but unfortunately, it usually is. Put food in the bottom of the muzzle, a number of times a day, and allow the dog to dip his nose down into the muzzle and pull out food. As he gets accepting of the confinement, strap him up for a few seconds letting him eat the food like he has on a feedbag, and then reward him when you take it off. Strap him in the muzzle and do short, quick, obedience, ending with rewards. If the dog tries to get the muzzle off by pawing at it, try to redirect his behavior into some heeling or a recall, something active, rather than correcting him for pawing the muzzle. Punishment will only serve to create a negative association with the muzzle. You can also muzzle him and let him watch some decoy work on another dog, and when he is

barking in the muzzle, pull it off for a bite or two. Take your time with this part, and make it a positive experience. If you watch a Belgian Ring dog do muzzle work, you will see the dogs generally enjoy the muzzle, and willingly stick their heads into it for you to strap them up, because they are taught to expect some fun when the muzzle comes out. Take your time so you will not have a career of fighting your dog over the muzzle. Further if the dog never learns to accept the muzzle, he will never put his all into the muzzle work, but rather be preoccupied with always trying to get the encumbrance off.

Many times I have witnessed muzzle training where the dogs are sent off leash, and the dog and decoy roll around on the ground. I do not allow any dogs to be sent completely off leash for muzzle work or hidden sleeve work, simply because it is too dangerous to not have a way to positively control the dog. I will send the dog dragging a long line so the handler can pick up and work the line. If there is no line, and if the dog breaks off the attack because he is unsatisfied or he is pawing at the muzzle, there is no way for the handler to control the session. The handler may end up chasing his dog as it moves away from him upon approach. Intensity can go from 60 to zero quickly. In such a case, if the dog leaves the engagement, there is nothing to do but have the decoy attempt to attract the dog back into the fight. Wrong, wrong, and more wrong! The problem with this is that we want the dog to bring the energy to the fight, not vice versa, and in fact, as with all our work, we want the dog to bring enough energy to the fight that we can do a passive muzzle attack and expect the dog to remain engaged until the handler removes the dog. Too many decoys even in non-muzzle work start the session with agitation to attract the dog, rather than making the dog alert and load first to make the decoy move, or load enough to send the dog on a passive bite. If your dog needs agitation to start his bite session, you need to retrain that before doing any muzzle work. Muzzle work is proofing work for civil aggression and passive biting. For these reasons we must use skilled decoys and keep the dog on line during this training, and work with dogs that have had proper foundation in their aggression training.

One of the big problems with muzzle fighting is that it requires excellent decoy work to make it worthwhile to the dog. In most instances when I watch muzzle work, the dog will engage briefly, is usually unsatisfied with simply punching the decoy (the dog knows he is restricted by the muzzle because normally he would bite), and break off the attack to return to the handler or try to paw the muzzle off. This is especially true if the decoy is unskilled in doing a muzzle attack. The worst thing a decoy can do, given that the dog is restricted by the muzzle, is to not react to the dog's aggression. The decoy must act realistically and submit to the dog's aggression. But most decoys are at a loss as to exactly what to do during the engagement.

One thing which I teach at my decoy seminars is to have the decoy use the dog's natural **opposition reflex** to keep the dog engaged. Often during a muzzle fight, the decoy gets hit on initial contact, and falls to the ground, and then the dog will come in on him again on the ground. When the dog comes in to tag the decoy, the decoy must both give ground when punched with the muzzle, but also the decoy should *push the dog away*, and then let the dog come in with another punch. The "fight" then involves a flow of energy from the dog onto the decoy, and then back at the dog in a pushing motion, where the decoy opposes the dog to make the dog drive in, and then the decoy pushes the dog away in a constant, flowing, but not sharp motion. This act of pushing the dog results in keeping constant tension in the forward press of the dog, and it acts like a tight back line in bite work training and causes the dog to want to continue forward in the fight. This is the nature of opposition reflex. Pushing the dog away makes him want to come forward. All the while the decoy is moving in response to the dog's attack, staying vocal, and keeping tension on the dog's chest and lower neck (the area that is to be pushed). The decoy can

also manipulate (pinch) the dog's skin as he pushes against the dog to create some discomfort to peak the dog's aggression. These engagements should take place for a matter of 10 to at most 15 seconds at a time, and then the handler should pull the dog back by the line and collar when the dog is aggressively pressing forward. The handler keeps a loose line during the fight, and only snatches the dog out when he is most aggressive. This should be done on a variable (length of encounter) basis to increase the dog's focus.

A good decoy can use this technique to keep the dog engaged. The handler can snatch the dog out of the fight when he is at his peak of aggression in order to further frustrate the dog, and then let the decoy escape for a short distance. The handler will then have the dog chase the decoy for a short stretch (holding him back a little to make the dog dig hard against the back pressure) and release into another attack. The whole thing should be very fast and intense sequences of ground fighting and then frustration which can then be lengthened into longer, more intense sessions of engagement. Using this technique will help you develop a more focused and intense muzzle attack. Important note: The handler should keep the dog from floating to the face of the decoy during each encounter (which seems to result often as the dogs get highly frustrated, and since the decoy is on the ground) by handling the line properly. This is one more reason why good solid targeting work needs to be taught on the suit and hidden sleeve. Don't allow your dog to learn something you don't want him to learn.

At the very end of the muzzle session, the decoy should escape as the dog is being held back. Too many times I see muzzle sessions end when the dog gets frustrated and aggression is low. Our goal is to keep the aggression short and intense. Once the dog is pulled from the encounter by the line, the decoy can escape behind a door, where a sleeve is waiting, or a hidden sleeve can be slipped on, and the dog then is taken out of the muzzle quickly and sent to bite around the corner of the door, where the sleeve or hidden sleeve can be used. Sometimes just let the dog lose the prey - he doesn't need the bite every time. Mixing this technique with pure civil aggression sessions with no equipment and passive bites on hidden equipment (hidden sleeves, hidden suits) which then result in very satisfying fights, will go a long way to getting your dog street ready.

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