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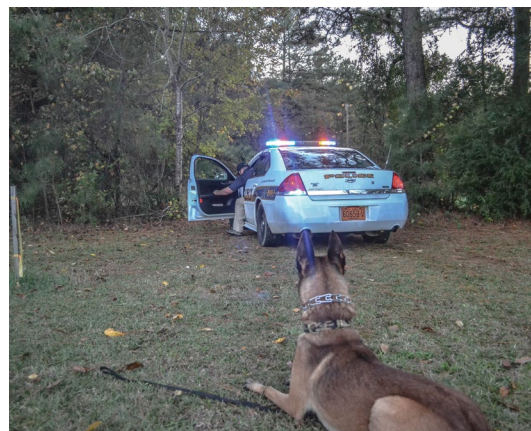


Introducing Between the Legs Contact Heeling

Article by Jerry Bradshaw & Sean Siggins • Photos by Stefanie Suddeth

In our last installment, we discussed teaching the focused heel position and why that can provide some important tactical advantages by owning the dog's eyes when you don't want him to be distracted by his immediate environment. In this installment, we are going to discuss how to teach the police K-9 how to heel in between the legs for a tactical contact heel. This style of tactical heeling allows for you to "feel" the dog in heel position as you approach tactically sensitive situations. Approaching a building search or area search deployment position or calling your dog up to your engine block for deployment on a felony vehicle stop are some examples of its utility. The dog maintains position in between your legs as you move, turn, halt, or kneel as situations may dictate. It allows for tactile communication rather than verbal communication. You can move, turn left, right and about, halt, and kneel with the dog downing automatically, and resume movement with or without verbal commands. The lack of verbal commands and visual focus needed on your dog as you move is what gives this position its tactical value; you feel where your dog is rather than need to visually confirm his position as you move together.

As with teaching any skill, we use the methodology of the lure-reward system. We use something of value to lure the dog into position at first. As he becomes more and more proficient, we move from luring to rewarding the dog assuming the position, and then the reward moves from a 1:1 fixed ratio to a variable reward schedule. We recommend some kind of marker to signal to the dog he has done the correct thing - either a clicker or a verbal marker which has already been "charged" or classically conditioned so the dog understands the marker. Food works very well for this skill, which has a number of separate components. Although once on reward or variable reward, a toy can be substituted for the food.



Component 1:

Assume the Position

Place the dog in a down and step across the front of the dog with your feet at a little more than shoulder length apart, take a piece of food and drop the palm of your hand into the space between your legs and give the command you choose (“center” or “middle” or whatever you like as a command that sounds very different from your heel command). We will use “middle.” Lure the dog through your legs and up so that his shoulders make contact with your thighs as he comes through. Mark and reward the position. Repeat this simple move about 80-100 times over the course of a few days to get the dog coming up reliably. You may find that as you step over him he automatically comes to the position on his own, and this anticipation reflects his learning. If you don’t want this, practice stepping over and reinforce the down, and then step back out and randomize the times you call him up into middle.

Next, start luring the dog around your legs as you change his position relative to where you want him to go. If you start him at six o’clock behind you and lure him straight up, now start varying the dog to seven o’clock then to eight o’clock, and then do the mirror image from five o’clock, four o’clock, and three o’clock. Vary him being in a down first then a sit. Keep going, but now that you changed the game, don’t stop luring too quickly, your hand target will bring him around your legs and each new position must have a sufficient number of repetitions before moving to reward without luring with your hand position. Understand that in reality you only really need him to come into position from directly behind. It’s handy to have the ability to call him into middle from any spot around you but not necessary.

Once the dog will come around behind you into middle from any position around you, if you want to get even more fancy, lure him from his normal heel position around to the left and up in between your legs, so that eventually you can call him to middle from heel (then lure him from middle on command back to heel position). Your K-9 friends will think you are some kind of wizard as you move the dog from one basic position to middle and back on command.

Component 2:

Pivoting (Rear End Awareness)

With the dog in the middle position, put food on his nose in your fist and pivot to the left, and as he moves with you, mark and reward. Do the opposite direction. If it’s difficult for him, don’t move too many degrees around the circle you pivot. Reward often as you lure him in each direction. Put food in both hands as you do this and alternate the hand from which you feed him. Remember that this component also follows the scheme of lure - reward - variable reward. Your hands start at his nose luring him around as you direct his pivot with your legs as a rider would do for a horse. These pivots will eventually turn into turns. As he becomes better at this

skill, move your hands off to the sides and fade out the lure, remembering to mark and reward the pivots. Vary the number of degrees you pivot each time - sometimes 45 degrees, sometimes 90 degrees (left and right turns), 180 degrees (an about turn), in both directions, and sometimes go further to 270 degrees and full 360 degrees. Finally, put the component on variable reward, asking for sequences of pivots before rewarding. This will also enhance the dog’s rear end awareness in general and have positive spillover effects on your normal heeling behavior.

Component 3:

Moving Forward

With food in both hands and in your fists on his nose, give the “middle” command move forward a step or two, mark and reward. Walking over top of him may at first be a little strange for the dog so make it comfortable, keeping your legs a little wide at first. After having done the pivoting, he should be extremely used to being in place between your legs and moving around. Your hand position as you lure will move from his nose to your belt buckle area then up your stomach and chest with your hands together, into forming a “low-ready” two hand position. This will get him used to seeing your hands as if on a weapon as you move. Again, as you bring up the lure to off his nose, you are moving to reward phase. Mark good behavior and reward often and start building the number of steps you can take forward. Remember to mark the proper responses before rewarding and then move the dog to a variable reward system. Once on variable reward, start bringing weapons into the mix so he sees your hands on the weapon (both handgun and long gun). Remember to mark and reward often as you add these distractions. As the dog feels comfortable moving, now start combining components 2 and 3 - moving and turning, variably rewarding both forward movement and turns.

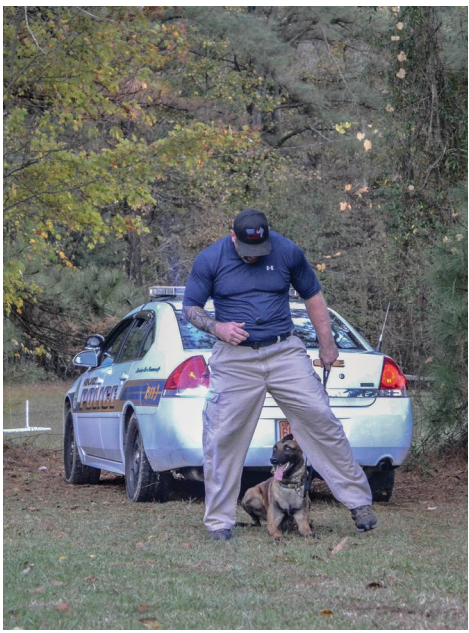
As he becomes more and more fluid in the middle position, vary your pace - fast, slow, normal and reward him for his pace changes in this middle position just as we discussed in the attention heeling article.

Component 4:

Halts and Downs

With the dog moving freely between your legs, as you come to a stop, lure the dog into a sit (and tell him to sit). Mark and reward. If he already sits automatically when you heel and halt, this will probably come without actually training it. Once you show him the game is the same as heeling on your side to stop and sit, it will be an easy transition to doing the same between your legs.

The more useful position for halts is to stop, take one knee, and have your dog down underneath you. This is easily done with the food lure. As you halt and go down, lure him into the down with the food on his nose, mark and reward. Again, lure - reward - variable reward this component skill and in no time the dog will be going down as he feels your legs pressure down on him.



Component 5:

Stay and Calling Up from Behind

Your dog already knows a down and stay command before you begin this training for tactical heeling. Now you can practice going down to a knee and giving a stay command (verbal or hand signal or both) to the dog, and moving ahead without him, then returning to the dog, and continuing to heel. This is important so the dog doesn't anticipate coming to you as you leave him. If your dog is confused, have another person on a long line double handle and give a little pop backwards on the long line to enforce the stay as you leave and return to the position, and get him moving again. Once the dog is solid on the stay as you move up, and return to him, you can add in some recalls up to you. Do not crouch completely. In fact, start calling him up to a standing legs spread position so your hand can drop down between your legs and be a target for him to come to. There will be food in your hand to lure him to the hand target, and as he comes nicely up from behind, mark and reward him. Remember, component 1 taught him to come to this position from the down from behind, so this should be an easy extension of something he is already familiar with (an example of back chaining, with the last behavior in a sequence being the first one taught). As he gets better coming up to you from behind, start kneeling (continue to give the hand target, and soon he will come up and crawl under you into position).



As the dog gets better and better, start thinking of applications of this skill: door pop (out and find between my legs at the engine block – we recommend door pop on the driver side), using this position as a shooting position

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Now your dog knows how to assume the position of “middle” pivot and turn, move forward, make right turns, left turns, about turns, and make changes of pace. Your dog is used to you doing all of this with a weapon in hand, long gun and handgun. Now you are ready to vary the environment, and add in distractions.

Component 6:

Generalize the Behavior

Every behavior must go through the stages of acquisition, fluency and generalization. Most of this training will be easily accomplished with positive reinforcement. And because the dog is flowing with you in a tactile position, there shouldn't be much correction needed. However, as you go into the reward phase, just be aware if the dog wants to leave position, forge, or otherwise not flow with you, you can have a training collar on him with a short line to administer corrections if needed. But of utmost importance is the generalization phase of this training. Vary the context - outside, inside, buildings, light and dark rooms, using flashlights, tight spaces, along fence lines with barking dogs in the fence as you move, anything you can think of.

so the dog is out of the way of the hot barrel when making transitions from long gun to handgun, and shooting and moving are some examples. Remember, if you shoot over your dog to protect his hearing (Mutt Muffs® are a great choice for K-9 hearing protection). Being between your legs will become a very comfortable position for your dog. The fact that you are touching him will make him feel calmer and reassured. Always practice your basics of coming into the position from points around you (component 1) and remember to reward the dog more frequently as you generalize the behavior under distraction of moving and heeling and turning.

This position is not something we recommend for every tactical situation; however, as with the attention heel we discussed in the last issue, it gives you, the K-9 officer, options if you put in the time to train it. It will take you very little time to get this behavior in place in a quite usable form with just a few weeks of consistent application of these principles and proper rewarding. ■

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