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# **Tactical Obedience**

## **Attention Heeling**





In our *K-9 Cop Magazine February/March 2015* article, we introduced a number of concepts pertaining to tactical obedience including attention heeling and tactical heeling that we suggested can be important tools for the K-9 handler to have at his disposal for deployments. In many situations when utilizing attention heeling (where the dog looks at the handler without breaking eye contact during heeling) it is not the fact that the dog is looking at the handler as much as the fact that when this is occurring, the dog is not looking at distractions. Owning the dog's eyes means controlling what the dog does and does not see.

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*Photos by Laura Molzon*



I break my heeling training into two parts: the attention phase and the drive phase. In the attention phase, we teach the dog what attention is, and then we teach him that this attention is mandatory. In the attention phase, either food or a toy is used as a lure to teach the dog to be attentive. I much prefer the food be used to teach the attention, other trainers start with a toy. When we are finished with this phase, neither the food nor our toy will be required as “attractions” to the dog for his attention, meaning that they are not necessary for the dog to be attentive. We need not rely on the dog believing the ball is in our coat or seeing the tug under our arm in order for him to be attentive, because we teach him that attention is mandatory. Attention is rewarded and inattention is corrected.

In the drive phase, once we have taught attention and then established the mandatory nature of attention, we increase the power of our reward, moving from food to a tug or ball as a reward. The reason we use a tug is that it complements our protection phase for one (we can encourage countering and pushing into the grip) but it also keeps the focus on the handler. The reward is not thrown away from the handler, like with a ball, and the dog is taught to focus and drive into the handler for his reward. It allows us to reward and keep the continuity of the exercise. We can also build frustration by making the dog miss the bite on the reward ultimately giving it when the dog is most highly driven and attentive. Once given, the reward and the dog stay in the vicinity of the handler.

## The Attention Phase

Food training gets a bad rap sometimes, mostly because people who give it a bad rap don't know how to do it properly. If food is used as bait (or lure), i.e. it is always visible in hand or in a pouch, the dog comes to associate the presence of the food with his work, and in the absence of the food, it may show less drive and enthusiasm. This is simple conditioning. Food must be switched from a lure to a reward system as quickly as learning permits. On reward, we teach the dog he must perform the exercise first and trust us that he will be rewarded, regardless of whether he perceives an imminent piece of food. Further, rewards must be moved to a variable schedule as soon as learning permits. Give your dog a verbal marker or use a clicker if you prefer to mark the proper behavior before dropping the food. A verbal "yes" or "good" prior to dropping the food will establish the marker. The marker is not a release. I also have a release command of "ok" to give the dog when he is allowed to break position. We will assume from here on out that when I say reward the dog or make a food drop, it will be preceded by a verbal marker. The verbal marker can be given to tell the dog he is correct, but the association to the food does not have to be a 1:1 ratio. The verbal marker will have more power if it is variably associated with a food drop.

In the beginning, I like to teach the dog to catch the food from my mouth. This is not necessary, but makes the dog focus up to your face and not look at your hands all the time. Ultimately, our goal is to have the dog looking up at us. For this reason, we use chicken hot dogs so that the food is at least somewhat palatable. You can use cheese or other rewards that are human grade, but over 20 years, I have found hot dogs to be cheap, easy to use and most dogs will readily eat them. Cut the hot dogs into half nickel size pieces. Catching is facilitated if you toss it up in the air in front of him first a few times to teach him to time his eye-mouth coordination. Then put him in the front position and drop pieces to him, right over his mouth. Do not let him go to the ground ever, not even once to get a dropped piece. Keep your leash short and make him try harder to time the catch, not take the easy way out.



I will assume he can catch food dropped from your mouth to his as we proceed from this point. This takes time to master, but keep at it. Here are our goals for this phase of the heeling training.

### ***Goal #1: Attention while standing still. "Watch" means "Look up at me."***

If your dog cannot pay attention to you while standing perfectly still, he will not be able to do it when you are moving in a consistent way. Now, when I say attention, I mean looking up at you until you release him. Attention has a beginning and an end: command/release. I teach my dog an attention command, like "watch" or "look" separate from "heel" at this point. I want a command that means look at me, separate from the heel command. This is because I want to be able to ask my dog to look at my face without him being in heel position to do it. I will later chain the "heel - watch me" commands together so that "heel" will mean he must be watching my face, but this will come later.



We begin with the dog in heel position. Always start in perfect heel position, make the dog know from the beginning that we want it all a certain way. Have the dog straight in heel position. Command “watch” and take a piece of food from your mouth with your hand and take it down to his nose, let him nibble on it, and then draw it back on a line from his nose to your mouth. Then repeat again - back to his nose very slowly as he watches the food, let him nibble on the piece, and then draw it up to your mouth again. If at any time he loses focus, wave the food under his nose and draw his attention back to your face. As soon as he re-focuses on your face, take the food on a line from your face to his nose and let him nibble it and release him with an “ok” or “free” release command. This is done in a non-distracting teaching environment so you set the dog up for success right from the start. If he tries to jump at the food, use the sit command to keep him in place or use your leash to keep him in the sit at your side. He should know what sit means before you attempt to heel with him.

After a few sessions, try dropping the food reward from your mouth to him. Since you already taught him to catch in front of you, this transition should be easy. Get away from using your hand to bait him as quickly as possible. This is the transition to reward from baiting I discussed earlier. Vary the frequency of the rewards. In other words, don't time the drops every 10 seconds and vary it to keep the dog's interest high. Make multiple drops in a row sometimes. **Critical** - If at any time he loses eye lock with your face, draw his attention back to your lips by making some lip smacking noises or using your hand to pull out a piece and wave it in front of his nose and back to your face. Avoid using your hand if you can to keep the focus off your hands. As soon as he looks back to your face, drop the reward to him and release him. Move him out of heel position as you praise him. There are no corrections given yet unless he jumps at your face. When in this low distraction environment, he keeps focus on you consistently and you only have to reorient his attention infrequently, you are ready to move on to the next step.



**Goal #2: Attention while standing still.**  
**“Watch” means “You must look at me.”**

You will need a pinch collar (preferred) and a short obedience leash. Place the pinch high on his neck and position the leash running from his neck when he is in proper heel position, so that the leash looks as if it is running up the outside seam of your pants, into your left hand, which will give the attention correction. I mean, almost no slack at all, so the correction will be almost instant. The correction will be given for looking away from your face once the watch command is given. The jerk should be made up toward your face, along the seam of your pants, not backwards. Watch your body position, keep correct posture, face your body forward and give the dog the picture of your body you want him to come to know.



When you make corrections, timing is critical. Pay close attention and read the dog. I want to make this correction as the dog is in the process of looking away, not after he has already turned his head away. This means watching his eyes for them to cut away from yours. Intervention as the dog is just beginning to look off will teach him quicker, before he gets focused on the distraction, while he still remembers what he was doing. The most effective corrections come at the instant the dog chooses to behave improperly. (Another example: correct your dog's stay as he is in the process of getting up, not after he has moved.) Pay attention, very close attention.

As soon as you bring the dog into heel position, you should be ready (food in the mouth already) and immediately give the watch command. Reward him as usual, with variable reward food drops, but if he looks away now, we will correct him with a sharp leash pop up toward your face. As soon as he responds to the correction by looking back to your face, drop a piece of food and release him, praising big. You may have to finesse the first few corrections, to get the dog to understand the meaning of the correction. He already has experience with being redirected from inattention back to your face, now the correction will serve to motivate him to keep from looking away. When he is comfortable with this sequence: inattention – correction – refocus – reward and release, then start demanding he continue watching without a release after he is corrected for inattention. Now you can begin to demand longer and longer periods of attention. Remember your routine of heeling is long, he must be able to focus for at least that kind of duration. Build slowly, always varying the lengths of attention - some long, some short, so you don't bore him or you.

Now you can start adding more distractions, new places, etc. slowly to generalize this attention behavior. Remember, use minimum force to motivate the dog to respond, but be ready to increase the level of the correction when distractions come into play. When the dog learns to look back at you after a correction, and when you see him working to avoid a correction when distractions are available, you are ready to move to the next step.

Up to this point, we have done nothing spectacular but teach the dog a command and teach him how we enforce his compliance with that command. Teaching phase, correction phase, proofing phase. This should be very standard stuff. In the teaching phase, no corrections were given, just help. In the correction phase, we teach the dog that compliance is mandatory. In the proofing phase, we teach that compliance occurs in all contexts. This is where the dog learns to generalize the behavior. Don't forget that this part is critical. Many handlers mistakenly think the dog knows a behavior before it is generalized.

Another tip that will come into play is to do all your initial stationary attention work along a long straight wall or fence. When you start moving with the dog in the next goal, the dog will be between the fence and your body giving him no option but to be in correct position by your side as you start moving.



**“In the teaching phase, no corrections were given, just help. In the correction phase, we teach the dog that compliance is mandatory. In the proofing phase, we teach that compliance occurs in all contexts.”**

***Goal #3: Attention while moving.  
“Heel” means “Watch me while we walk.”***

The dog is in heel position looking up attentively now and you are ready to start moving. Remember now, this is a brand new context for the dog. We must go back to helping him. The correction we have taught him is for looking away only; however, it has been in the context of standing still. When we start moving, the dog may or may not want to look where he is going. We don't want him to drop his head when we start.

***a. Begin in slow motion, except for the first step***

With the dog beginning in proper heel position, take food from your mouth with your hand, but keep it near your mouth. Talk to him. Verbally pump him up, bend your knees a little, as if you are going to spring forward. Lower the food to his mouth, let him nibble on it, and while he is nibbling, command “heel - watch me” (this begins the process of chaining the watch me command with the heel command) and over-exaggerate the motion of stepping off with your left foot. As you do, simultaneously draw the food up and forward from his mouth then back to your lips as you heel just fast enough to keep him going forward and focused on the food. You can remind him to “watch” to keep him from looking off. Go only a few steps, then release and reward him. Try not to correct him if he looks away the first few sessions. Try to refocus him by lowering the food to his mouth and then drawing it back up. This is a new context, so try to help him before administering corrections. Now, the first couple of times will be a cluster of bad timing and mistakes. Don't worry, just start over. When he seems to get the idea and draws

his attention to your face following the food and keeps focused on your face as you step off, then you can reincorporate the correction for watch me. You will also want to stop using your hand holding the food to draw him forward.

***b. Step off with him looking at your face, no hands***

Start in heel position, show him some food between your lips, and drop it to him for a few catches in heel position. Then show him another piece, and repeat the step-off, over-exaggerating again, giving him “heel - watch me” as the command. If he comes with you properly, looking at your face, staying in position, reward him with a drop. You are going in slow motion here, so he should be able to catch it. If not, you can halt first, giving the sit command and dropping, then releasing. If at any time he looks away, use the correction we have taught him - correct the attention, then immediately reward and release. Then move to the following sequence: correction – refocus – continue heeling with some verbal praise acknowledging his proper response.

***c. Generalize***

Now your dog is heeling attentively! But only for a few steps. Your job now is to slowly increase the number of steps, until you can heel 20 – 30 paces straight without him looking away. Then do this under more distraction, just 20-30 paces at a time, no turns yet. As you work with him, don't forget to praise warmly when he is heeling correctly with attention, looking at you. Talk to him, use your voice to reinforce him, not just the food.







### ***Goal #5: Teaching changes of pace.***

Changes of pace are pretty straight forward at this point. Heeling attentively at a normal pace, the dog is commanded to heel and in a 3 step transition, the handler goes to slow. The slow is easier to reward with a food drop than the fast, so I teach that first. Make the transition to the slow and immediately reward the dog if he is in proper position and attentively looking at you. Vary the placement of the food drop in the slow pace, sometimes early in the transition to slow, sometimes deep into the transition 8 or 9 paces in and sometimes in the middle, 5 or so steps in. Then reverse the transition, making a 3 step transition after the heel command back to a normal pace. Making the same kind of food drop variance. Lastly, teach the fast transition. From a normal pace, give the heel command and make a 3 step transition to fast. Since it is harder to make a food drop, make a real quick halt by saying "sit" as you come to a halt and reward the dog in the halt. Vary the halt and reward from early to middle to late in the transition and then vary back to normal. In a few sessions, the dog will start to get it. If the dog has trouble with the food reward, you can also postpone this training until we get to the drive phase. In the drive phase, we will use a tug, making rewarding the dog a lot easier in motion.

### ***Goal #4: Teaching the turns.***

The next piece of attention heeling is to teach the dog turns. Once the dog is attentively heeling and understands not to look away, you can easily incorporate the turns. As I am heeling forward, food in my mouth, and I decide to make a right turn, I simply pull a piece of food from my mouth take it down to his nose and lure him around the turn feeding him from my hand as the turn is executed. My hand retracts up toward my mouth and I halt, dropping food to him. Remember to keep your footwork the same each time you turn so your upper body turns the same, which is what he is reading to know you are changing directions. After luring, we go to reward. The habit is starting to form of the dog following your turn motion and we reward with food drop from the mouth after a successful turn at a halt. When the dog is making the turn properly on reward, we move to a variable reward schedule for the right turn as well. The about turn is just a 180 degree right turn, where a standard right turn is a 90 degree turn. They are taught exactly the same. I even do a 270 degree turn in training to keep the dog nice and tight going around to the right.

The left turn is started with luring the dog with your food in the left hand. It comes from the mouth as he is attentively heeling, to his nose and he is lured through the change of direction, feeding him from your hand the first few times as he lures through. Then the hand draws up to the mouth after luring the turn and he is rewarded at the halt after a left. The process continues through reward and variable reward.



## Attention Heeling: Drive Phase

In the drive phase, we move away from the food to a tug toy. Since we have already created the habit of attention while moving and attention through turns and change of pace, the drive phase gives us the opportunity to replace the food reward system with a toy system. The tug is placed in the small of the back to be pulled out and delivered to the dog after the verbal marker when rewarding specific mini-skills in the heeling. We reward attention behavior, attentiveness around distractions, proper turns, and proper changes of pace. The tug is produced on a variable reward schedule, just like we did with the food. The tug should be a higher motivator for the dog, so he should work more diligently to get it and it is also a stronger draw for around distractions.

For example, the dog is heeling attentively, and about 10 steps into the heeling, you verbally mark and produce the tug and present to the dog. He bites it, and you play, having him push into it, counter full on it, and then out him, and variable reward the release (this will help you keep your release in protection clean). When you wish to continue heeling, you can tease him by making him miss the tug a couple times and then command him to heel with attention and place the tug in your belt in the small of your back. You are waiting for the next criteria to be achieved to reward him again. Maybe after a couple of nice right turns where he stays tight into your turn, you mark and reward, play, out and resume heeling. The tug makes the heeling flow nicely, punctuated with play that is meaningful. If your dog is going flat, increase the frequency of the rewards. As you get closer to your certification trial, space the rewards out more. Until he is only rewarded coming onto the field and going off. Then as you return to training, you will increase the frequency of the variable rewards to build up the drive and intensity for the obedience. Turns are rewarded with the marker and tug. Changes of pace, attention around decoys and other distractions are brought in as the dog becomes more fluid in the heeling.

Teaching neutrality to gunfire can happen during the heeling as well, with the dog mandatorily engaged, the gun sounds can be used as markers to reward the dog's attention, keeping him from becoming focused on the source of the gunfire and rather attentive to you. (See the article *Environmental Challenges: Basic Systematic Desensitization for Police Dogs*, *K-9 Cop Magazine*, November/December 2013 for more complete treatment of neutrality to gunfire.)



## Conclusion

As with everything in dog training, there are multiple ways to teach the dog the same behaviors. In the next installment, we will discuss attention heeling by training with a different kind of lure - a toy lure - specifically with a magnet ball. Lure-reward-variable reward concepts will still be exactly the same. Verbal markers will be used. The magnet ball will be used to teach the dog position, attention and a "muscle memory" for that position and attention. In the 3rd installment, we will discuss the tactical heeling concept of the dog working between the legs of the handler. All of these tools are meaningful when applied in the right circumstances. Attention heeling can allow you to move from one position through distractions of citizens yelling and creating disturbances. Attention heeling can also allow you to keep your dog calm and be able to deploy him for a track without becoming agitated by these distractions and interrupting his ability to concentrate on a track, for example. Each tool takes time to develop, but what you have in the end are more options for successful deployments. ■