

Balancing Independence with Handler Focus in Sport and Police Dogs

by Jerry Bradshaw

Brain chemistry and biology have taught us that learning a new task creates neural pathways. The more deep practice those tasks receive, the stronger those neural links become, and thus the habits become stronger and less likely to be extinguished. Both the biology of learning and the theory of learning seem to agree on these principles. Conditioning takes place on a cellular level as neural pathways are linked and insulated with myelin, and as a result the cues that initiate these pathways to fire become faster and faster. Both humans and dogs can then access habitual responses to certain cues quickly and efficiently.

In my early days of IPO sport training in the 1980s, it was often agreed upon that one must wait until the dog is biting strongly and confidently before doing any obedience training, normally after the dog was at least around 10-12 months old. The idea behind this was generally accepted to be because, at that time, obedience training in general relied on more compulsive methodologies than it does now, and so pressure at a young age would shut down the dog and make him more worried about, and dependent on, the handler. This makes a lot of sense if your training invokes a lot of pressure. You want to allow more maturity and experience to evolve in the dog in order for him to handle pressure. For example, bite work, when done in a balanced manner including elements of prey and defense and drive channeling, is a great way for a dog to learn how to handle pressure successfully.

At present, available techniques for shaping behaviors, skills, and focus are much more motivational in nature. As these techniques for motivational obedience have evolved, most trainers will immediately embark on training obedience with puppies to shape many nascent forms of adult behaviors when the pups are at the peak of being able to absorb information and learn. This also makes a lot of sense, as new methods bring with

them more opportunities for learning at younger ages. The dogs are given very positive classical associations with learning itself, and the components of complex behaviors can be formed and shaped and thus key habits are created early to employ later as behaviors become more complex.

The purpose of this article is to reveal a potential problem even with motivational obedience work in young dogs, and provide some cautionary recommendations on how to avoid the problems. Compulsive techniques used early and often on young dogs certainly can bring about detrimental results on motivation, learning and create handler dependency as a habit. Bear in mind this article is about sport competition dogs where the quality of trained obedience behaviors are highly valued including fluidity, speed, and confidence in performing them, and police dogs where independence is highly valued in tracking, detection and searching functions. Through observation of young dogs (puppies to 12 months), I have seen even motivational obedience training, without direct pressure, have adverse effects on other areas of training where handler interaction and dependence is less highly valued, such as bite work, detection and even tracking.

Our working dogs, whether sport protection dogs or police dogs, at their optimum operate both independently and dependently with regard to the handler. When tracking, we want the dog to internalize his drive, and focus its hunting and prey drive to concentrate and follow the scent trail without becoming distracted by the handler or the environment. The same goes for a dog doing a building search for a suspected criminal, as we don't want the dog to be looking back for the handler saying, if you will, "are you coming mom/dad?" When the dog is operating and focused outside of the handler-dog dynamic, we call that, for simplicity, "outward focus," as opposed to a dog doing obedience where the focus relies heavily on

the tasks being performed at the direction of the handler, which we call “inward focus.” There are times the dog must toggle between the two, such as when the handler controls the police dog’s expression of aggression with “out” commands, recalls, or multiple subject redirects. There the dog must also balance his focus outwardly on the decoys and the biting behavior but inwardly as well, and be attentive to the handler’s commands. Dogs that come to detection training after having a lot of obedience can have a difficult time hunting fluidly without handler direction if they experience too much inward focus through obedience before starting independence work like hunting freely.

Perhaps the handler chooses to do Nosework™ for example, after having done many months of obedience, and sees the dog struggle with being independent of the handler or staying focused on the detection problem when the handler is close. This is often resolved by having the handler manipulate the dog’s focus through presentation, rather than teach the dog to be independent and hunt on its own, without reliance on the handler. Over time, if the dog has enough natural independence the dog may overcome the early obedience and be more independent in the presence of the handler.

Puppy Training

Too much obedience, even that which is completely motivational, can create inadvertent drive neutrality and a dog that is too inwardly focused. The puppy learns that the way to rewards is through internalizing drive with focus on the handler as the neural pathways are created in the puppy. These become strong defaults. So for instance, the handler without access to a protection club or decoys, or who waits a long time before introducing hunting exercises in detection, spends much of his time doing obedience training, and the learning creates strong inward focus (focus on the handler and rewards emanating from the handler), so the dog sees the environment as less engaging and the relationship with the handler as that which provides all his rewards.

For pet training, this default to the handler is a good thing, as the dog engages with the handler and becomes neutral to distractions. But in the multi-purpose performance dog, the dog becomes conditioned to engage the handler over all else. When that puppy is asked to do independent tasks such as hunt or chase the flirt pole and now play with the protection decoy, the dog prefers to engage the handler as that is the habit that his conditioning has created. The dog appears to not have much drive to hunt or do protection work. Although the handler may have an easier time engaging the dog in play, the dog eschews interaction with the stranger. In cases like this often the handler must start the process of getting the dog to engage in the hunting or take the bite materials and pass them along to the helper or decoy.

This looks from the outside, just like a young dog made too “polite” by compulsive obedience, where the dog is, for lack of a better term, “afraid” to not pay attention to the handler and fully engage in the interaction with the decoy, as play with the decoy becomes an obedience distraction in the dog’s perception. In these cases we normally tell the handler lay off obedience for a while and allow the “dog to be a dog” and become more outwardly focused. We tell these handlers to stop being so over-bearing, commanding, and be less of a focus for the dog. When I see new handlers of either young sport or police dogs I have to call attention to them being “helicopter moms,” and give their dogs some space to work independently, and



not try to control everything, even if with spatial influence. Doing obedience work also conditions the handler to be involved with everything the dog does, and so handlers tend to hover, talk too much, and the cycle of dependence continues.

Notice how these two situations look similar from a 3rd party observer's standpoint. The lack of independence is the prominent symptom, but the causes are completely divergent. Bear in mind that there is also a "nature" component at work here as well. In my experience, puppies as well as older dogs will have a measure of genetic independence or dependence in terms of their social drive that is innately present. So if you start with a puppy that is genetically independent, doing motivational training as much as you like with that puppy may have little to no outward manifestation even in the absence of doing activities to encourage independence. The converse would also be true: a dog starting with a large genetic predisposition to dependency if trained with a relatively small dose of motivational engagement training could become adversely affected and more dependent as a result of the training.

If the compulsion or motivational training in obedience is the main focus of the training up to the beginning of adolescence, it will be a hard road back to independence for some dogs. Let's look at the dog who is raised in the opposite manner (and there are a lot of them)--dogs who are encouraged to be outwardly focused from puppy hood. This is the old program of "let the dog be wild until he is 12 months old."

Adolescent Dogs

In cases of young adult dogs that are encouraged to be extremely independent and outwardly focused from the time they are pups, we can deduce the opposite issue. Examples of these dogs are green police dog prospects raised primarily for being sold to police dog vendors in Europe, or pups that are allowed to be wild and not asked to do much besides bite work and perhaps tracking, both of which are activities that encourage independence from the handler. These green police prospects are motivationally trained to be independent from the start. Very little obedience, compulsive or even

motivational, is introduced so as to not squash the drive, or direct the dog away from an outward focus. Bite work foundation is laid, and from that the dog becomes focused outwardly on the decoy. The dog is shown hunting drills and allowed and encouraged without help to search out the toy. Independence is encouraged as the people buying want to see dogs that work without handler direction and influence.

Tall grass hunting, hunting in rooms, basic building searches for humans, perhaps some tracking to find a toy or articles which produce a reward are often used. These dogs become very independent and outwardly focused and often trainers have trouble when it is time to bring in obedience training (even motivational) because they are conditioned to want high value rewards (decoys and toys) relative to food, perhaps. Layer onto this a little defense work, and you have a dog whose outward focus makes flashy attentive obedience a bit of a struggle. All his concern and rewards

The advertisement features a dark background with the Dogtra logo at the top. Below it, the word 'COMBO' is written in large, bold, white letters, followed by 'COMBINATION BOOST CONTROL' in smaller white text. A yellow circular badge on the right side of the image contains the text 'COMBINATION BOOST BUTTON' and three small icons. The central focus is the Dogtra COMBO remote training device, which is a grey handheld unit with a black antenna and several buttons. Next to it is a black collar with a grey receiver. At the bottom of the advertisement, the text 'LEAD THE TRAINING WITH INSTANT STIMULATION LEVEL CONTROL' is written in white. Below this, the website 'www.dogtra.com' and the phone number '1.888.811.9111' are displayed.

come from outside the handler/dog relationship. Furthermore, these dogs are passed from owner to sub-dealer, to larger dog dealer, to vendor, and their life consists of more hunting and biting with a parade of new people holding the leash who have very little relevance to the dog. You receive your green dog and in fact, you are just your dog's "ride" to the fun.

Achieving Balance

To balance these effects we need to simultaneously create pathways to reward by expressing drive and rewarding independence and outward focus as well as inward focus and rewarding the dog or puppy for being handler focused. This means if you start training your competition puppy, and he is genetically pre-disposed to being dependent, be careful how much you condition the dog doing motivational obedience without balancing that with activities that are outwardly focused such as bite work, searching or tracking. Further, if you get a relatively outwardly focused puppy, don't let him only engage in activities that reward only outward focus as you may lose key opportunities to work on engagement with the handler and you will likely create a dog that is too outwardly focused.

This begs the question, "How do I know if my puppy is relatively outwardly or inwardly focused when I select him?" Good puppy testing protocols can reveal this, and there are as many different ways to test a working prospect puppy as there are trainers. The purpose of this article is not to go into detail on this particular subject, but suffice it to say, when testing puppies, be sure to test your puppy away from its pack. Many people looking at pups will do rag work and interact with their pups all together in the litter, in familiar settings, and the ones that draw confidence and boldness from their litter mates in the group setting, or from familiar surroundings, will be hard to separate from more independent puppies. Look at pups individually and see how they interact with you vs. their environment in a novel setting. We are looking at where the puppy focuses. Does he want to only explore his new environment? Does he check in with you or the breeder with whom he is familiar in between exploring, or does he stay glued to

people in a new environment? These are some of the things, as well as the breeder's (assuming they are honest and perceptive about their litter) assessment that you should take into account. You want to strike a relative balance between independence and dependence.

The conclusion here is that every puppy and young dog is different. Many novices start with puppies and as such the burden of knowledge needed to avoid critical mistakes is large. Many people think starting with a puppy is easier than a young adult, but with puppies there is much room to make errors from which recovery is difficult at best. You have to do your homework, and know what your puppy is, how best to train it, and that requires the guidance of experienced trainers in most cases. The expert eye will see problems on the horizon where the new working dog handler will be seeing their dog doing such cool perch work for rear-end awareness they will lose the forest for the trees. If something as simple and seemingly harmless as motivational training can create problems for you in your training, it becomes crucial to understand these temperament traits of focus and independence as you embark on your journey with your dog.

Jerry Bradshaw is the Owner of Tarheel Canine Training in Sanford, NC. His experience and progressive training methods have made Tarheel Canine an industry leader in training and service. Jerry is co-founder of the civilian protection sport PSA (www.psak9.org) and the Police K9 Certification organization known as the National Tactical Police Dog Association NTPDA (www.tacticalcanine.com). Jerry is the author of "Controlled Aggression," and the forthcoming book, "Commonsense Pet Training." Jerry and his trainers have appeared on CNN, Good Morning America, and in many regional and National print publications.

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Every Dog is a Living Breathing Project

by Jeff Leavitt, CDT

When we train dogs, we typically do not think of the activity in terms of being a “project.” The term almost has a sterile feel to it, as if we were simply putting an addition onto our home. But we, as professional dog trainers, know that every dog is different, a living creature, and the approach we take can vary based on a number of factors. When we sign the contract to perform training (I will include behavior modification as part of “training”) for a client (aka owner), I suggest that the work we perform is project work, there is a process that guides us, and we may improve what we do by implementing even a few of the concepts I will describe. Let’s break it down a little more.

What is a project? According to the Project Management Institute’s (PMI) Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), a project is: “a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result.” There are three key components to the definition. First, a project is a “temporary endeavor.” The work we perform in training a dog can be relatively short, as in a few basic obedience commands with several private lessons. The work can also stretch over many months, such as in training a service dog. However, there is a starting point and an end point to the training we do, so it is a “temporary endeavor.” Second, we “create” something “unique.” The act of sitting for one dog is no different than the act of sitting for another dog, but each dog we train has its own personality, quirks, and environment in which it lives. One dog may perform a sit in the presence of deer without any difficulties, while another cannot keep his rear on the ground because he’s ready for the chase. The way we develop the training plan, or “project plan,” will be different for different dogs. Similarly and third, we most often produce a “result.” The IACP has adopted standards for training, which we could use to gauge our results in training dogs. For instance, the basic sit command for dogs

older than 16 weeks requires (1) that the dog will sit from a stand or down, using a single command or signal, and (2) the dog is successful on 4 out of 5 attempts. This would be a measurable “result,” which is part of the definition of a project. This type of standard can in part, be used to determine the success of our “project.”

Every dog is a living, breathing project, but it does not end there. A project has a life cycle, and this life cycle goes through phases. The basic phases of a project are (1) Concept, (2) Planning, (3) Execution, and (4) Close-Out. Without exception, I find myself working through each of these phases for the dogs I train. When I am hired, the project will go through all four phases. If I am not hired, I will have gone through concept and planning, or just concept. The phases of our projects could include these characteristics:

Concept: Marketing/Advertising, Prospect Contact, Evaluation/Discussion of Training Options

Planning: Training Selection, Training Plan Development, Contract, Payment to Start Work (partial or full)

Execution: Work Performance, Monitoring Progress, Modifications to the Training Plan, Modifications to the Training Methodology, Owner/ Stakeholder Feedback

Close-Out: Knowledge Transfer to Owner, Final Payment (if partial payment was made to start work), Client Feedback

Along with the life cycle phases of a project, there is also a process for getting the project from start to finish. The following is an eight-step project management process that was codified by Philip C. Nunn, my co-author of a 1994 book¹ that dealt with the synergies of quality and project management. Each step may not have the same duration (some may be very short or overlap) or

depth as another, but skipping any could slow or bring the project to a screeching halt. The steps of the process are described below.

Step 1 – Project Definition: *This step tells us what the project is about and provides the foundation for making it a success. It will include a project description, the current situation, the future state, the strategy, objectives, and assumptions.*

Step 2 – Appoint the Planning Team: *We want input from people who will be involved in the project. Typically it is simply the trainer and the owner. However, there may be others needed to make the project successful. For instance, a client dog was highly excitable/unruly at the groomer and would bark the entire time there (45 minutes or more). Improving this behavior was one of the objectives, and the groomer had to be involved in planning the “how” and “when” at their location.*

Step 3 – The Work Breakdown Structure: *Also known as the “WBS,” it is basically a task list of everything that needs to be done to complete the*

project. In some cases it is fairly straightforward, but sometimes it includes tasks that are outside of the regular dog training tasks. For instance, I would need to include a task to write a protocol for handling an aggressive dog if I did not have one already, and part of the project definition included behavior modification for an aggressive dog.

Step 4 – Estimate Task Durations, Resources, and Costs: *For each task identified in the WBS there will be an associated duration, resource, and cost. As an example, a new client dog will be learning the place command, which is a common task in many a dog training WBS. I already have a couple of elevated dog beds, but there is a problem. The new dog is too large for the beds that I have, so I have to purchase another bed. The task duration may be impacted (time to locate a supplier and place order, availability of the bed, time to deliver), I have to include another resource (the supplier of the bed), and this is an additional cost for the project.*

Any trainer, from basic obedience to hunting and agility, will tell you that consistency is the key to a well-trained dog. Training your dog does not stop when the dog is “finished” with professional training. Consistency is essential for a dog to retain the commands he has learned. Platform dog training helps keep that consistency in training. The KLIMB™ is the first professionally-made dog training platform available for professional dog handlers and everyday dog owners, making it far easier to continue training and keep the dog's focus.
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Step 5 – Calculate the Schedule: *We sequence all of the tasks necessary to complete the project. Some tasks must be completed before others. Some tasks can be performed at the same time as others. This is not so much of a problem with our type of projects, but watch for resource conflicts. One resource cannot be in two places at the same time.*

Step 6 – Start the Project: *This is the green light to proceed. Contract (including the training plan/project definition)... check. Vet records... check. Payment... check. The first task in the schedule can now start.*

Step 7 – Track Progress and Identify Problems: *This is where the training plan is executed. There are a certain number of tasks that need to be completed within specified time frame. Are you on schedule? Is there something that is impeding the progress of the project? If so, how will it be resolved? Is the rate of learning for the dog, or inversely, the effectiveness of the trainer in teaching the dog, taking longer than expected?*

What do we need to change? In some cases, communicating delays or problems to the owner is critical.

Step 8 – Transition to Use: *We hand-off the newly trained dog to the owner, and provide training to the owner on how to maintain what the dog has learned. We demonstrate, observe, critique, provide written instructions, and possibly homework. Was the owner satisfied? Dissatisfied? Thrilled? If full payment has not been previously made, the balance is paid in Step 8.*

So, why is all of this important to how we approach our living, breathing projects? Simply put, the better organized we are as professional dog trainers, the better we are able to improve the lives of our clients and their dogs.

1 Jeffrey S. Leavitt, Philip C. Nunn, 1994, Total Quality Through Project Management, McGraw-Hill

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