

# workingdog

Issue 2 | March/April 2017 | \$9.95

## INTEGRATION OF SWAT AND CANINE THE EVOLUTION OF K9

**Blurred Lines**  
Core Competencies  
of an Effective K9 Trainer

**Modern Approach  
to Training**  
Part 1: Obedience

**Handler Fitness**  
5 Foundational Principles  
for Every Exercise Plan



# Drive Neutrality for Police Dogs

KEEP YOUR K9 COMPOSED AND FOCUSED

*Article by Jerry Bradshaw*

**S**uppose you roll up on a scene—perhaps there's been a robbery or a violent domestic—with a fleeing, unsearched felony subject, and as the K9 unit, you are being called in with your dual-purpose dog to perform a track for this felony suspect. As you arrive, people are agitated. Some are yelling either at the police already there or one another. You have to get your dog out of the vehicle to a point last seen, perhaps collect a scent article, and track. Yet as your dog gets out of the car, he sees the agitated people yelling, screaming and gesturing. If at this moment he goes into "bite mode" from the agitation around him, will you be able to keep him controlled and focused? When you get to the area where you need to cast for the track, will he be able to focus on the track rather than the visual stimuli from the crowd he had to move past?

The bad news is, many police dogs are unable to compose themselves around agitation, much less become neutral enough to it to perform obedience and then a track after being agitated. Then the handler's excuses begin about the conditions, about the scene being too contaminated, or he switched into bite mode with all the agitation around him. Many accidental bites have occurred because a police dog walked past civilians who made a sudden move, yelled their displeasure about something, or got too close to a K9 team and did something the dog perceived as agitation, and the dog reacted in accordance with his training.

The good news is, neutrality skills can be trained. Neutrality is a process of teaching the dog to maintain focus and composure around decoys in suits and sleeves and people exhibiting decoy behavior, suited or not, that the dog might perceive as agitation. Your dog can become neutral to agitation to which you don't want him to react. The first problem is, it takes time and dedication. It also requires a change in the typical approach to in-service training in which obedience is done in a sterile environment without decoys, without dead equipment on the ground, and only in a certification exercise mindset rather than a scenario-based mindset.



Imagine you want your dog to do the hypothetical track described before. If you set up a scenario at a building to simulate a robbery of a convenience store, put two or three people in bite suits out front who are loud, distraught, and physically moving around and gesturing, could you take your dog out of the car, heel him past these distractions to the back of the building, and get him onto the track? Would the decoy distractions catch his attention so strongly that you might not be able to move him past them and go do a track with the dog concentrating fully on the tracking? If the answers to these questions are either “no” or “I’m really not sure,” training neutrality to agitation should be an important goal for you.

In my experience, the dogs who can do this easily are in the minority. They do so because the handlers routinely work on neutrality training as part of their obedience work. I have written articles and given presentations about scenario-based training, component training, and making your in-service look more like the work you do rather than certifications. This certification mindset is one that the handlers and trainers need to abandon. They need to focus more on training components of skills that are geared toward the actual deployment skills needed to function in the real world.







## Teaching a Dog to Maintain Composure

There is a big difference to many dogs between performing an obedience command it knows in a low-stimulation context and performing that same command in a high-stimulation context. Heeling around a sterile soccer field is a lot different from heeling around a crime scene with people screaming, moving, and gesturing. Further, we must realize that visual stimuli aren't the only things that cue the dog to become agitated. Certain kinds of vocalizations (on the part of the subject and the handler) can also create a state of agitation. There are two concepts related to self-composure we need to introduce to every police dog: drive capping and drive neutrality. Teaching the dog to keep his composure and restrain his drive for the short term is called drive capping. The long-term process of teaching the dog not to self-load in the presence of stimuli or contexts that otherwise would result in the dog expressing his drive is called drive neutrality.

## Drive Capping

Uncapped drive is a dog expressing his prey drive or defensive drive unabated, without restraint. The prey-driven green dog, when he sees a sleeve or ball, pulls at the end of the leash and “swims” with all his might against the leash to get to the object. For some police dogs, just seeing a decoy or a sleeve or suit on the ground can initiate this drive response. Additionally, in a dog with a well-developed defense drive, arousal of that drive can come with the mere proximity of a stranger out of place, hiding, in the dark, or peeking around a corner. This is expressing drive as well. We as handlers and trainers want to exert control over the expression of these drives. This is the essence of drive capping.

Many of us use drive capping without even knowing it. If you have a detection ritual in which you show your dog a toy, make him jump at it and miss it a few times, then sit him, make him wait a few seconds, and then give his command for finding contraband, you are drive capping. Chasing the toy gets him stimulated in prey drive. The obedience command temporarily caps the drive, and the dog internalizes the expression of his prey drive, like a pot of boiling water on which you put a lid. When you give the command for him to start hunting, he takes that capped drive and expresses it in his hunting, for which he will eventually receive a reward. You take the lid off the boiling pot, and the steam rushes out. The hunting is faster and more purposeful as the excitement that we capped is allowed to be expressed through hunting. Getting an opportunity to hunt for his target odors, in a dog with a strong hunting drive, in and of itself is rewarding. The hunt and subsequently getting his toy are the rewards for the dog composing himself with the obedience command.



---

---

***“In every case where handlers say that the dog won’t take a toy around decoys, I have seen it’s a matter of the handler giving in to the dog too quickly or expecting too much too fast.*”**

---

---

Teaching the dog to toggle between outward expression of drive and composure is something that comes in handy in controlled aggression training. Releasing the bite and guarding the subject calmly without getting dirty is a drive-capping process. By rewarding the dog on a variable interval of wait times, we can teach the dog to cap for longer periods—stay composed and clean in the guard—expecting eventually to be rewarded for holding his composure with another bite. If you never reward your dog for his outs with re-bites, your dog’s drive capping will never be completed properly, and the dog will be slow to out and dirty in the guard because he never gets rewarded for composing himself. In fact, if you remove the reward by calling him away or heeling him away every time, the dog will become more unstable as you approach him in the guard. This removal of the reward and not allowing him to be satisfied causes him to get dirty in guard or be slow to return out of frustration. The drive is never capped but spills out as he takes shots at his own rewards when he can. So you can either train it properly and get good, clean responses or have the dog always looking for a way to get satisfied at the expense of proper behavior.

Drive capping is something we do for relatively short-term control of the dog’s intensity. As we work the dog in his trained behaviors around stimuli that trigger his drives, the dog will move between capped states and expressive states. When working the dog around decoys for example, we will cap his drive by making him sit or down in their presence, and then reward the obedience with a tug or ball. The purpose of the toy reward is to satisfy the dog’s drive by rewarding the behavior in which the dog is capped.

Many handlers say that their dog just won’t take a lower value reward (toys) around decoys. This is often observed in training, and the handler gives in to the dog’s preference, saying, “He won’t do it.” It is important to teach drive capping at low intensity first. That means teach the dog to cap himself away from decoys and start rewarding him with his toy. Then work up to higher intensities: capping around

sleeves on the ground, then suits on the ground. This is the process of successive approximation. Start at low intensity first. Make the dog compose himself around food, then go to a toy, then go to a tug or bite wedge, before attempting to do it around decoys. Fact: There is some distance away from a decoy where your dog will take a tug. If at first that’s all the way across a parking lot or field, if that’s where you need to start, so be it. Don’t push it too fast. If the dog refuses to take the toy, move farther away. Let the frustration channel into what you will allow him to have. In every case where handlers say that the dog won’t take a toy around decoys, I have seen it’s a matter of the handler giving in to the dog too quickly or expecting too much too fast.

Another reason you don’t want to start capping with a dog that is too intense in his prey drive is because then you will have to use too much force to gain the obedience compliance if the dog is disobedient. This will cause conflict. Conflict is a state between the prey attraction of the toy or decoy and the obedience you are trying to achieve. To avoid the dog being conflicted between obeying us and getting his drive satisfied, we begin at lower levels of prey stimulation and work up slowly. Teasing the dog with his tug or ball, then getting obedience, and quickly marking and rewarding it by allowing the dog to have the toy is the start of capping. We then work our way up to working around sleeves on the ground, a sleeve on a decoy sitting in a chair, a decoy in a suit in a chair, all the way up to decoys moving and yelling as we heel around and give obedience commands. As the dog keeps composure at distances away from these distractions, we move closer and closer to them. Getting the dog to keep composed is stressful to the dog. Dogs are opportunistic. They take what they want when they can take it. In drive capping, we are expecting them to restrain their natural expression of their drives to do something we want them to do instead, such as hold a sit or down. It’s important not to move too fast with intensity, to keep a manageable distance from the stimuli when we go up in hierarchy to objects that are more and more attractive to the dog.



## Drive Neutrality

There are times in training when we need to not just cap drive temporarily, but reduce the dog's arousal in prey to a lower level. As in the example of the track at the crime scene from the beginning of this article, the capped state must be trained to last for longer and longer periods, until the dog develops a state of neutrality to the distractions that becomes the default. To succeed in this kind of training, the dog cannot merely be capped temporarily, as the incitement of the drives can be steady and unrelenting for minutes at a time. The dog must consider the decoys (or anyone agitating) largely irrelevant unless commanded otherwise. The handler's job in neutrality training is to gauge the level of stimulation correctly and reward the dog for being neutral as the time variable (time in heeling) and intensity variables (proximity of the decoys or other stimulation) are varied. We reward instead with toys throughout the routines, bleeding off drive, and the dog must become satisfied with these rewards. We are basically deconditioning the dog to the intense immediate arousal a decoy would under normal conditions bring about. This is why starting with capping and toy rewards around decoys is crucial.

The behavioral concept at work here is known as systematic desensitization. The dog's drive is allowed to be satisfied only when properly engaged with the handler and doing obedience under systematically presented stimulation from the decoys. This process of creating drive neutrality through systematic desensitization takes time. As trainers, we must vary the intensity of the decoy behavior starting with calm decoy behavior at first and carefully managing the proximity of the decoys. Always err on the side of making it too easy rather than pushing the intensity too high or the duration of that intensity level too long. The handler then must pick the timing of rewards and reward neutral behavior often and systematically.

Remember the two key variables: stimulus and threshold. As a handler, you have to know those stimuli that trigger the dog's prey behavior into a high state of arousal. Also, you must, as the handler, be able to read the dog's thresholds for these triggers. A dog actively engaged with the handler in heeling—because of the movement during heeling and close proximity of the handler—allows some natural drive expression and may allow for the decoys to be closer, all else equal. A sit stay is a less stable behavior in general and has less natural influence because the handler is away from the dog. We might expect the dog not to be able to endure the same amount of intensity and duration of decoy stimulation and remain stable. Therefore, the handler may need to have a larger buffer between the dog and decoys, as well as consider where she places herself.

We use restriction of options by having the dog back-tied during stays or on place boards as we move away from the dog and allow the distraction of the decoys to get closer to the dog. Double handling (requiring social dogs who can be handled by a third party) is another way to restrict the dog on the field and not allow bad choices to be satisfied. Systematically, we desensitize the dog to all those prey triggers from the decoys, including voice and movement, posture, position and proximity, that cause the dog to arouse in prey to a high state of intensity.

Systematic desensitization is time intensive. The trainer must reward good behavior and maintain a tight standard of performance, correcting departures from good behavior. Getting a baseline of good obedience behaviors, and the dog knowing he is rewarded for these individual behaviors are critical before asking the dog to become neutral to decoys.





## Compartmentalizing Training

Once your dog is relatively neutral to decoys to where you can heel around them comfortably, the dog is not breaking or lunging at them, and they are moving and somewhat vocal, you can set up short scenarios like the one at the beginning of this article. Have a couple decoys and a couple other handlers gather at a place where you will lay a short, fairly easy track. Get your dog out of the car and heel past the decoy distractions, rewarding your dog for obedience and ignoring the distractions. Maybe down him near the moving and talking decoys and have a conversation with another officer, and then go back into a heel toward your point last seen. Conduct a relatively easy track using your normal tracking protocol. The track should be short, easy to follow, and rewarded with something of high value. Set up two or three of these scenarios in a row, so the dog sees that obedience under distraction is rewarded, as well as he is expected to go from seeing decoys to a track—or an article search—without fixating on those decoys. Repetition is key. Doing this training once a month is not enough. This must be a weekly ritual.



Remember to reward the lower value activity (track or article search) with a favorite toy and a lot of play. In this way, we put his skills into compartments. Tolerate the distractions, get a reward, then take a solid start on a track and get a reward. Over time, make the track more complex, or make the intensity of the decoys he has to heel past higher. Always when you ask more of the dog in one area, make the other variables easier. When you want him to follow a more complex track, or more aged track, dial back the intensity of the decoy distractions. Teach your dog that no matter what he does, being neutral to decoys is part of his job. Heel past decoys to get into a detection search. Always put decoys on the field in obedience. Start with low intensity of attraction and work up to more intense attraction. Teach these individual skills and manage the variables of these skills well, and you will be surprised at what your dog can do. When you get real advanced, do some bite work, heel away, and go do a detection problem or an article search immediately. Don't make excuses for your dog, no matter how high drive he is, that he's "too strong" to be neutral. There are many dogs out there, doing both police patrol work and advanced sport work ([www.psak9.org](http://www.psak9.org)), that can demonstrate real power in their work, but also master an incredible amount of neutrality. On the flip side of the coin, if you get to a scene and you don't want him neutral, get him out, hook him up, give his alert command, and you are unleashing all his power. This training doesn't weaken the dog or make him tentative; it just reduces his impulsivity. But in dogs that are used to being capped, the alert command turns on the monster!

---

**Jerry Bradshaw** is the Canine Training Director of Tarheel Canine Training, Inc. in Sanford, NC. Tarheel Canine's School for Dog Trainers holds police K-9 instructor courses for police K-9 trainers as well as civilians. Tarheel Canine trains dogs for police departments worldwide.

Email: [jbradshaw@tarheelcanine.com](mailto:jbradshaw@tarheelcanine.com)