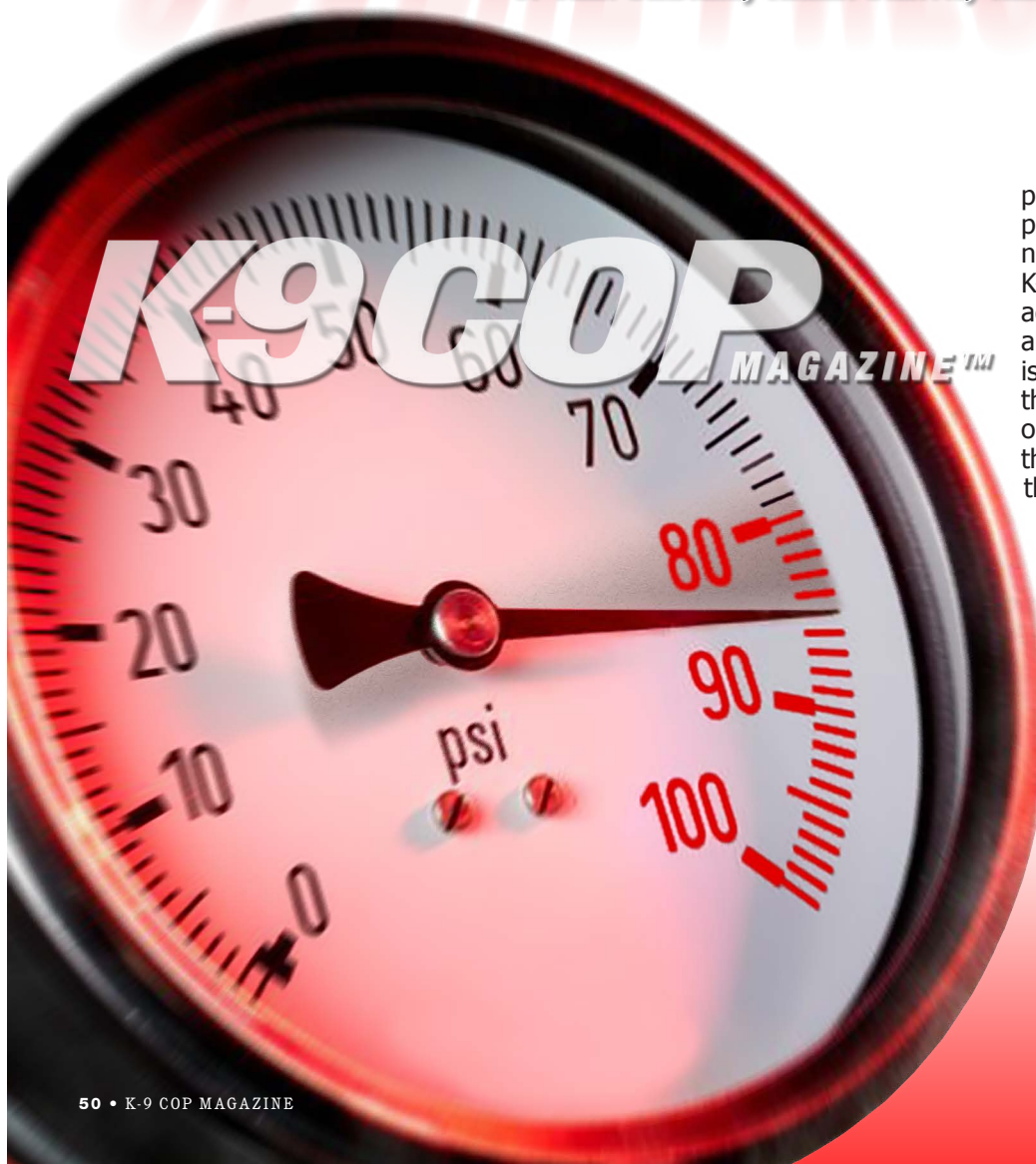


TEACHING PATROL DOGS TO HANDLE SEVERE PRESSURE

BY JERRY BRADSHAW, TRAINING DIRECTOR, TARHEEL CANINE TRAINING, INC.



It goes without saying that a police dog must be able to take pressure. Pressure comes from a number of sources for a working K-9, such as its environment, its adversary (decoy or suspect) and also from the handler. Pressure is equivalent to stress and what this means is that we must train our dogs to handle stress so well that no combination of pressure the dog will experience during a deployment will deter him from his job.

I have argued before that one of the biggest mistakes many K-9 handlers and trainers make is failing to prepare their dogs for the multitude of stressors they will encounter on the street. This failure to prepare is a failure to recognize how to apply stress, how to relieve it in a productive way and therefore how to decondition the dog to generalized stress without breaking the dog.

STRESS FROM THE HANDLER

Often handlers and trainers do not give this source of stress enough attention. Handler stress on a young dog can come from handler pressure in obedience and controlled aggression work, usually in the form of corrections and body language influenced from the handler. In order for corrections to not have a long term detrimental effect on a dog, the stress of corrections must be relieved by an equal amount of reward for correct performance. Reward in obedience is something that is often generally lacking in day to day training. Corrections for non-compliance occur much more often. These constant corrections and reprimands can build a general level of stress in the dog that doesn't need to be there. It creates an undertone of doubt and concern in the dog that other stressors will build upon. If we eliminate this handler conflict with the dog with a more systematic obedience system, where the dog is experiencing more rewards and fewer corrections, the general level of stress will go down. Rewarding individual behaviors often and in a variable reward system, not just at the end of a routine full of corrections, will increase the dog's confidence and get better performance and result in lower stress. For more reading on this subject see my article "Component Training for Police K9s: Obedience," printed in the May/June 2013 issue of K-9 Cop Magazine.

The upshot here is you need to evaluate your relationship with your dog, and ask yourself if you are stressing your dog out unnecessarily, causing him to be in conflict with you and take steps to remove that conflict so that you can eliminate yourself as a source of stress for your dog. He will have enough to contend with on the street in a deployment without worrying about you and being in a state of conflict.



PHOTO CREDIT: All Creatures Photography by Tim Wandling

STRESS FROM THE ENVIRONMENT

In young dogs that are just starting out on their journey to become police dogs, we have to recognize that they have not been alive long enough to have experienced every situation and environmental obstacle to be completely fluid in every environment. In police work, we contend with slippery floors (and there are many degrees of slippery floors), tight spaces, dark rooms, open stairs and the many combinations of all these environmental factors can contribute to a dog experiencing stress when operating. It is critical to recognize where your dog needs proper exposure that results in confidence building. Simply exposing a dog to an environmental stressor without a plan for deconditioning the dog to that stressor is simply bad training. You have to have a plan to systematically desensitize the dog to things that are likely to cause your dog to experience environmental stress.



PHOTO CREDIT: Katelyn Mendigorin

In 2013 I wrote an article that discusses how to systematically approach, prevent and treat environmental stress issues in police dogs titled "Environmental Challenges: Basic Systematic Desensitization for Police Dogs." You can find this article in the November/December 2013 issue of K-9 Cop Magazine. This is another area you must address in your training when looking to create a K-9 that will fluidly and flawlessly take pressure in deployments.

STRESS FROM SUSPECT ENCOUNTERS

In the remainder of this article, we will assume you have done your homework and removed the stress of handler conflict with your dog as well as have done a good job of training proper environmental soundness. The next area we want to address is how to properly train your dog to handle stress from encounters with suspects and that starts and ends with your training decoys. I cannot stress enough how important decoy training is for those who will be working your patrol dogs. Many times as an instructor teaching decoy training workshops worldwide, I have seen only prey biting, where the decoys literally do not know what to do once the dog is on the grip. Once the dog is on the grip, there is a little rocking back and forth,

swinging the dog around, but nothing productive. Fleeing subjects kick the dog into a prey mood and therefore, a naturally lower stress fighting encounter. This just isn't enough.

Decoys in our workshops are introduced to the ideas of prey drive development, defense drive development and drive channeling, which is teaching the dog to move fluidly from one drive to another based on the feedback the dog receives from the decoy he is fighting with. This experience of moving in and out of drives and winning confrontations as a result makes the dog enjoy fighting (what some people call fight drive). Enjoying fighting means the dog knows how to fight in the technical sense (pushing into grips and resolving stress by bringing the fight to the decoy) and has experienced enough victories over his adversaries that he starts to hunger for the confrontation because he is confident in his ability to vanquish any opponent. Only a solid training decoy can produce this in the police dog.

Decoys must be trained how to work the dogs to this end. They must know how to develop prey drive with proper frustration to make for hard initial strikes, forward motion in the biting behavior with countering to full grips and pushing behavior to resolve stress and in addition, how to generate full, firm and hard biting. But working a dog in prey isn't enough. Move-

ment and eventually passivity will trigger the dog in prey if done correctly. We must prepare the dog for when the prey turns into a predator, willing to fight back and cause harm to the dog.

Therefore, decoys must also be schooled in how to work a dog in defense. This is the weak spot in most decoys' game. They are not taught how to read the body language of a dog in defense, how to spot pre-avoidance behaviors as the dog approaches the avoidance threshold. They often do not know how to manipulate this drive and use the fear associated with it to build confidence and not reduce confidence. In my essential book, *Controlled Aggression* (www.lulu.com), I spend chapters explaining defense work in detail; how to manipulate it with civil aggression and how to channel it with prey work to build a civilly aggressive, confident dog that wants to fight a man. This is a training progression that must be mastered.

Drives like prey drive and defense drive have triggers. Motion is the typical unconditioned trigger for prey drive and threat is the typical trigger for defense drive. If we threaten the dog, the dog will react to that threat with aggression and we call this tipping point the dog's defense threshold. The stress of the threat tips the dog into a state of active aggression. This aggression is meant to communicate the animal's seriousness of purpose to whomever is threatening and initially is a tactic used to avoid a real fight. The threat retreats from the aggression and the dog wins.



PHOTOS BY: All Creatures Photography by Tim Wandling



In training police dogs, we must go beyond this to where the dog is willing and able not just to threaten back aggressively but to engage the threat with its weapon system (mouth and teeth) to harm its opponent if pushed. Decoys must manipulate the defense drive of the dog to reach this point where the dog will engage the threat and bite with purpose and ferocity. All our prey drive development comes into play here because in prey work, we teach the mechanics of striking, biting and winning these encounters so that when the dog bites in defense we don't get the typical untrained defensive bites of shallow, frontal, chewy and non-confident grips. The system of biting we have taught can be transferred over to starting the dog in defense and channeling the biting into prey, building the dog that fights with violent intent.

PRESSURE WHILE BITING

When the dog can bite confidently in prey and defense, go to the next step of teaching him to handle stress while biting. This is where decoy work becomes a mix of both art and science. The dog must be taught to handle environmental stress from the decoy driving the dog (pushing him around) with increased decoy pressure from stick hits (padded and bamboo clatter), noise distractions like can curtains and jugs of rocks, firearms (though not too much of



turning his hips into the dog, the elbow pointing in the same direction as the hips, and running with the effect that the dog is pushed with the stick pressure over his head and shoulders. In effect, the dog is being moved by the power of the decoy instead of the dog moving the decoy. Many people doubt how this one change in the decoy's behavior can fundamentally change how the dog feels about the encounter, but I can say with authority and experience that dogs that are only used to prey biting can be unnerved simply by this one maneuver by a decoy.

The decoy goes from allowing the dog to push him around (dog biting and driving into the grip moving the decoy in the direction the dog pushes) to turning into the dog and driving the dog and pushing the dog. These fights ebb and flow; meaning that during a suspect encounter, the dog may gain a position of advantage (pushing the decoy in prey), then his adversary fights back harder (decoy drives the dog) and he must counter that aggression with his own, staying in the fight and gripping harder. The decoy relents to the dog and goes back into prey. This can go back and forth for a number of cycles. The decoy starts out with low intensity and low duration of the pressure and chooses to manipulate one variable at a time, either the intensity or the duration. As the dog learns to handle low intensity and longer and longer duration in the drive, we can increase intensity and

an association here because we don't want the dog to lose his ability to stay composed and neutral under gunfire both friendly and hostile), water distractions, placing the dog in tight corners and squeezing him against walls, blocking distractions where the dog is fended off from biting and mechanical distractions such as leaf blowers, chain saws (without the chains), smoke, flash bangs and anything strange you can think of that might throw the dog off his game. There are two keys to systematically desensitizing the dog to anything and everything he might encounter on the street: intensity and duration.

With each distraction, or pressure/stressor, the dog must learn to become neutral. Pressure can be manipulated by the decoy in either intensity or duration or both. Some distractions have a relatively high natural threshold of intensity (an idling chain saw makes a certain amount of noise), and so these items are best left for later to desensitize the dog as he becomes more generalized to other pressure distractions. The overriding training principle is when you apply pressure you must allow relief from that pressure and with that relief, the dog wins the fight or segment of the fight. In Controlled Aggression, I write about drive channeling and how to teach the dog through this process to endure stress and win starting with the simplest of tools. The simplest stressor is the decoy driving the dog with stick pressure. The drive is an essential maneuver by the decoy



PHOTOS BY: All Creatures Photography by Tim Wandling

reduce the duration at that level of intensity. Then the decoy will slowly increase the duration of the higher intensity work until we have achieved the dog's neutrality to a high intensity of stick pressure in the drive for a long duration and once the pressure ends, the dog can channel back into prey once again. When the dog channels back into prey and is clear enough to process commands like "out" or "recall," or to tolerate a handcuffing procedure, we can feel confident that he can handle this level of stress. Now we can start cycling through the same process with other stressors.

The decoy should go back to managing each of the two key variables, by lowering intensity and slowly increasing duration then vice versa until we have successfully introduced another stressor and the dog can take the pressure fluidly. We continue to cycle through these distractions and pressure/stressors until the dog achieves a generalized neutrality to pressure from the decoy. Be careful not to assume too much generalization. A dog can make a single event learning experience from one bad experience and learn to avoid that one thing at all costs (maybe getting water sprayed on him or having a mechanical device in his vicinity). Always start with low intensity and short duration. Build duration in the low intensity. With water distractions, I'll have my decoy use a mist from a garden sprayer and work on duration in the drive first then make the stream more intense for shorter duration before moving to dumping gallon jugs of water on him in the drive or a spray with a garden hose on entry.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

When the dog has generalized successful reactions to many stressors, you can then start blending decoy pressure with environmental pressures. Spraying a dog in the face with a hose upon entry in a grass field is different than doing the same in a tight dark space or on a set of open stairs. Always go back to your foundation concepts. Before you blend any environmental stress with decoy initiated stress, the dog must be fluid with both separately then you can manage intensity and duration once again with the blended pressure.

Your mindset should always be that the dog could potentially have a problem, so your decoy must be able to read the dog under stress. The grip is always the first barometer of how the dog feels about pressure. If you feel any changes in the grip, even slight



PHOTO CREDIT: Katelyn Mendigorin

changes, know you may have gone too far and back off one of the variables (intensity or duration) or even go back and work separately on the two stressors you are trying to blend. If you have properly taught your dog to fight forward into pressure and now he's backing away, you may be going too far.

Assumptions in this work can lead to disaster. Never assume your dog is "good" with anything unless you have trained it specifically and generalized his responses to the specific pressures or blend of pressures. Be careful not to push to failure. Fixing a single event learning experience of fear of something like water distractions or mechanical distractions can take months. Also, never forget as the handler you can be a source of confidence or stress depending on how you behave. So, if you are doing something difficult with your dog, don't put more pressure on him as a handler by screaming commands at him but rather get in the fight with him, support him, build his confidence going into battle with you not for you. Then as his confidence becomes stronger you can start giving him more independence in the fights. This training should be done thoughtfully, carefully and with a solid plan taking into account all of the dog's prior strengths and weaknesses. 🐾

Tarheel Canine Training, Inc. and Training Director Jerry Bradshaw are available for advanced decoy seminars which feature this kind of training and the proper methods for decoys to apply it and achieve success. Tarheel Canine's tag line is #wemakemonsters and we can make monsters for your agency. Jerry is often a featured speaker at national K-9 conferences and travels extensively giving seminars to police departments, the US Military and sport trainers worldwide. Jerry's book, *Controlled Aggression* which is rapidly becoming the standard text for understanding the fundamentals of canine aggression for police service, personal protection and sport training, is available from Lulu Press at www.lulu.com. Website: www.tarheelcanine.com