



# SIX KEYS TO K9 NARCOTIC DETECTION SUCCESS

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Having just returned from teaching an advanced narcotics detection seminar I thought I would share some observations that could help make any narcotics unit more successful. Once your team is trained and certified, in-service training needs to be focused on maintaining baseline skills, as well as challenging the dogs in training to make them better at their jobs, and more efficient problem solvers.

You must move beyond the static work of certification exercises, and into the realm of scenario training your narcotics dogs. Challenge your dogs as well as your handlers.

Finding the source of target narcotics odor is a skill that dogs will become more and more efficient at if their training is built to work on fundamental parts of the detection skill set, and as well, challenges the limits of their abilities.



## *Scenario Based Training isn't just for Apprehension Work.*

One of the complaints I get often from handlers is that the dogs behave differently in training than they do in deployments. Mostly that performance goes down during deployments from what the baseline is in training. This is often the result of training that doesn't mimic deployments, and this is where well-conceived scenario training comes into play. Chasing a car from a buy house where they throw contraband out the window makes for a great scenario where you can set out both a vehicle sniff and a side of the road area search. Vehicle stop with a driver on an outstanding warrant who jumps and runs and then gives up after thinking better of running from you makes for a nice scenario where your dog gets ramped up anticipating an apprehension after a fast chase, and then top it off with the subject in handcuffs causing a disruption verbally as your dog is working on sniffing the car. Test whether your dual purpose dog can work drugs with someone yelling (agitating) in the background. Suppose you just made an apprehension on a track with no bite, but the dog alerted on the suspect, and became a little frustrated, and then are called immediately to a sniff. You can make that a training scenario to see how your dog does making a transition from one task to another.

Because we never reward the dog on the street when we get a K9 alert (change in breathing, change in body posture, followed by a final response of a sit or scratch), we must have the dog on a variable reward system in detection as in all other areas of K9 work. In scenario training you can mimic the process, or initial sniff, and alert, then praise the dog off and place him back in the car, the PC now allows you to locate the contraband. Then bring the dog out to run a second time with reward for correct alert. This change on the street to a variable system, if not followed in training, can also explain why a dog may perform better in training than in deployments. Remember when a defense attorney asks you if you don't trust your dog because you didn't reward him on the initial alert, your answer should be that your dog is on a variable reward system and often is not given his toy but rather just praise on an alert. Doing this in training is imperative to having strong training records that bear this out. Set up your scenarios so you can work dogs of all skill levels, and make adjustments for dogs still in training as well as challenge dogs that are experienced.

## *Have a Strategy to the Sniff*

Many handlers in training just go get their dogs and bring them up to the problem and don't think about their strategy before putting the dog in their hands. Whether you are doing a traffic stop, search of a house/building, or an open area it is critical to first look at the problem and think about how you want to attack it before just jumping in with your dog. It is important to remember that there are no hard and fast rules about going "clockwise only" or "making a single pass only." These are constructs a trainer may have told you because it is what they know, but you should rather strategize about the process first and see what the situation calls for. If you have a simple traffic stop with a single car, one pass around that car will take no more than 30 seconds. There is no reason to limit the dog to one pass only. You can first loosely scan around the vehicle, then detail one way and turn around and detail on the way back. Changing direction increases the likelihood you will enter any scent cone from downwind, increasing the likelihood the dog will source. If these additional passes triple your time on the car you are





only at a minute and thirty seconds! Now if you are a bomb dog handler working a gate on a choke point entry to a busy campus, once around every car is all you can afford without over searching your dog.

Before you get your dog, look at the problem. If it is a warrant service and the house and grounds named in the warrant are secure, walk around and come up with a plan on how you want to attack it. You may want to clear the exterior and the vehicles first before going into the home. If there is a dog in a kennel on property, animal control may need to come get the dog secure, as that is potentially a place where large amounts of contraband could be hidden. Another reason to be able to work your dog so he ignores not only human odor but dog odor. But come up with a plan that will get you the amount of coverage your need, most efficiently and safely.

On the warrant example, plan how do you want to work the home: free search can maximize the dog's efficiency. However you may decide to closely scan or detail on a six foot leash because of some hazards in the home you notice on your safety check. The shorter leash allows full positive control of the dog for safety reasons.

## *Perform your Pre-Detection Rituals Faithfully*

Pre-detection rituals are very important. Often I see handlers just get their dog out of the car and walk them up to the search area and barely even speak the dog's search command, instead expecting him to just know what to do. If your dog is multi-purpose and you bring him into an open field, he needs to know by context if he is doing an open area search for contraband, getting ready to cast for a track, or is doing an area search for a man. The ritual will help him keep on task. In our pre-detection rituals for narcotics dogs, we first take the dog out to empty, then take the dog within about 10-12 feet of the vehicle we wish to sniff, and then pull out his reward and activate the dog. This involves teasing the dog quickly, making him miss the toy, and then in a fluid motion hiding the toy and making the dog sit. This sit before being allowed to proceed forward serves both to cap the dog's drive (increasing his intensity as he waits like a teapot boiling on the inside) before we release him into the intensity of the hunt, and to control the dog's position so we can present the first place we want him to search without him blowing by. Even if we are doing a scan, we want the dog to know what it is we are sniffing.

The ritual can be repeated with or without the teasing of the dog. Here is a situation that points to the importance of the ritual: One of the dogs at the recent seminar was a strong dual purpose dog with a number of street apprehensions. We set up a traffic stop scenario where the officer pulled the car over, lights and siren. After securing the driver (who was on an outstanding warrant in the scenario) the dog was brought out. There were a number of back-up officers around and one civilian standing a little ways away very still leaning on the fence. The dog, upon exiting the vehicle became very interested in this person, looking at him real hard. As the handler approached the car to do the sniff, the dog

still was focused on the suspected "bad guy." This bad guy was just a distraction for the scenario. The handler was able to pull out his toy, make a few misses, give the dog a sit command, and it refocused the dog on task. Had he just gave the search command without the ritual the dog most likely would have not paid full attention to his sniff and potentially might have missed something because his mind was not fully focused on the task at hand.

If your dog is getting tired, the appearance of the ball, and the teasing can often get the dog back focused and up in drive by seeing the cue which starts the ritual. This is another situation where having the ritual can really help keep the dog on task and giving maximum effort to the sniff.

## *Be Systematic*

Often as I watch handlers work, whether in a building, open area or on multiple vehicles, I see a lack of systematic attack. Pre-planning a strategy will help tremendously in being efficient in your search. But planning and execution are two different things. Once you have a plan you have to follow through with that plan. But as you do your sniff your dog may want to pull you in another direction, and if you leave your plan, you must be able to go back after the dog satisfies his curiosity or finds another hide out of the sequence you were expecting. Being systematic in training will condition you to be systematic in your deployments. In training your training coordinator should keep an eye on whether your sniff pattern and plan of attack is being carried out properly, or whether you are bouncing around form one part of the room to the next, or one area to the next, and potentially missing things.

When giving presentations and detailing a room, or cars, make sure your presentations are to productive areas like seams, and vents, or anywhere odor might escape from a hiding place. Also make sure you vary the height and depth of your presentations. Many handlers on presentations just present belt level, and don't move high, to low and high again. You don't have to be married to the infamous "inverted V" process but you should be aware to move the dog high-low and deep between furniture, under tables, or up on counters to catch high cabinets, making varied and rich presentations to productive areas.

Let's say you are doing a house, and your strategy, because of the amount of area to be covered, is to do a scan in one direction in the room, and a detail back in the opposite direction. This means you must pay attention to what your dog sniffs on the scan, and more importantly, what he passes up, so on the detail back you can make sure to get the dog's nose on those items or areas to make the most complete sniff possible.

In large areas, a spotter can be a great help. Have a back-up officer come with you as you work your dog (both in training and on deployments) so they can also keep track of any potential uncovered areas. If your dog jumps a couple rooms to follow odor, you want to make sure you complete the sniff of those areas missed. In buildings or homes some rooms and areas may look alike and you can forget where you have already been. If you re-do areas already scanned and detailed you run the risk of tiring your dog unnecessarily or over-searching and causing frustration in your dog.

## *Incorporate Known Hides, Blanks and Distractors in your Training*

In your training you can do hides that are known to the handler if you do them in such a way as to not influence the dog in the location of the hide. Running a dog on a 15 foot lead and scanning, or ideally free-searching, allows you to observe your dog work in odor so you can master reading changes in the dog. Similarly when you wish to work on having the dog ignore masking odors, or proofing odors like plastic baggies, canvas narc bags, rubber gloves, human and dog odor and dog saliva, you need to know where these odors are in training to make sure you do not allow your dog to final respond on any of these familiar odors.

If you work a trafficking area, many traffickers will use similar techniques to try and fool the dogs by packaging, and using masking odors. If you successfully locate contraband in these masking odors enough your dog may be conditioned to associate these masking odors with the target odors he was trained to locate. Therefore you must teach the dog that those odors are always incidental and not targets. By placing these odors and other proofing odors out in the known blank areas you can see when your dog shows interest in them, and interrupt him from responding on them, by giving a light punishment marker like “Anh-Anh” and presenting another productive area. It is alright for him to investigate these familiar odors (we don’t want avoidance to them) but we also do not under any circumstances want the dog to mistake them for his target odors. By running known blank areas can you keep the dog from accidentally responding on these odors. Train unknown blank areas with distractors as well, but only run single blind, because you must have a trainer there to tell you when your dog needs to be interrupted since you as the handler will not know if the dog is on target odor or a familiar non-target odor.

## *Understand when to Free, Search, Scan or Detail.*

Good handlers know when to make adjustments. If you come out to a problem with only a six-foot leash, and you realize the better choice is a 15 foot leash, you should make it a habit to carry both to your deployment so you can have the option to switch. You may do one part of a problem on leash. Imagine you see your dog is working such a large scent cone that it is better (in a secured area) to just let him off leash so he can more efficiently explore the area without imposing the restriction of your leash. In such a case you should stop, clip him off and let him continue unimpeded.

When I watch experienced handlers operate, one of the first things I notice is that if they see one strategy not working, the go to another, better strategy. Working any K9 problem is a fluid exercise. Adapting to the situation, problem layout (working a dog in a wrecker yard might call for a 15 foot leash in theory but you might decide that there are too many dangerous obstacles so that you have to work him on a six), how the dog is responding to the odor (a large field of odor requires the dog to move bigger distances to work the scent cone) all determine how you will adjust in the moment.

When we have a lot of area to cover, free searching and scanning are preferred for the sake of efficiency. On the side of the road, doing vehicle stops, 15 footers get caught on tires, and free searching is not an option for safety’s sake so detailing and being on a 6 foot leash is preferred. If we have a small area to cover we can be more detailed without worrying about the dog’s stamina being taxed too far.

If you employ these key strategies in your training you will see improved responses, better odor discrimination and efficiency of searching. You should also see much improved performance in real life deployments.



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Tarheel Canine Training Inc. is a nationally renowned training facility for police service dogs, and has placed trained police dogs at federal, state and local law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally since 1993. Jerry is often a featured speaker at national police K9 conferences, and travels extensively giving seminars to police departments, the US Military, and sport trainers across the United States. Jerry has written a book, *Controlled Aggression*, which is rapidly becoming the standard text for understanding the fundamentals of canine aggression training for police service, personal protection, and competitive dog sports. Jerry also maintains a free blog at [www.tarheelcanine.com](http://www.tarheelcanine.com).

Many of the training concepts mentioned in this article are covered in depth in published articles available on the Tarheel Canine website at [www.tarheelcanine.com/media-area/training-articles/](http://www.tarheelcanine.com/media-area/training-articles/)

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