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Scenario Based Training

SKILL TRANSITIONS IN
DUAL-PURPOSE DOGS

By Jerry Bradshaw

Transitioning among the various skills your dual-purpose K9 possesses is a crucial aspect of in-service training that is often overlooked. As you probably know, too many agencies are still stuck in certification-exercise-based training and need to move toward a more scenario-based approach. I have written before on what goes into creating worthwhile scenarios in training so that dogs with less experience can still be successful, and dogs with more experience can be challenged appropriately. In-service training is still, even when scenario driven, often created within the boundaries of one or another of the dog's skill sets (detection, tracking, patrol, obedience). In this article, we are going to focus on creating scenarios that make the dogs transition among skills, so the dog has to transition from tracking to detection to patrol, or in any number of ways, back and forth from one skill set to another.





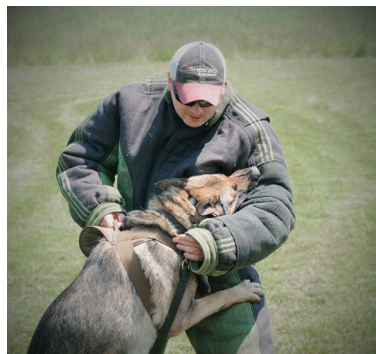
Photos by Kimberly Scott

Kimberly Scott Photography



If the dog has solid fundamental skills, these scenarios will teach him to shift from an extremely expressive drive state (externalized drive) — like making an apprehension — to a less expressive state (internalized drive) like tracking or detection, and perhaps back to a more expressive state with a building search for a man. I often hear that once a dog becomes exposed to agitation or potential agitation, it becomes hard to reign the dog back in with obedience. The dog is in a state handlers commonly refer to as “bite mode.” What this really means is the dog cannot be brought back down without a lot of down time in the car, perhaps away from people whom he may assume are potentially going to stimulate/agitate him. Our goal is to be able to get the dog to switch back and forth seamlessly between these different skills because that is what real-life K9 work is all about. You might go from a building or area search to another call that is a track. Or one call (as we shall set up here in our scenario) could incorporate a

number of skills in less than ideal order. My article on training drive neutrality (*Drive Neutrality for Police Dogs, Working Dog Magazine — March/April 2017*) included some discussion on this topic. This previous article speaks to the important training concepts of drive capping and drive neutrality training. Both are the foundations to being able to make the difficult skill transitions from high drive-state skills, like bite work, to lower drive-state activities, like detection or article search.



Prerequisites

To set up scenarios to work on skill transitions, you must understand the level of control a given handler has over the dog. If you think the dog will have some trouble transitioning skills because once he gets into bite mode it becomes hard to ramp him down, you need to develop some exercises in drive capping and drive neutrality that can assist you in making these transitions. An example is putting the dog on a long sit or down, which is more stable but allows for less deep breathing, after an apprehension. It will get him to calm down and relax before you ask him to

do another activity that might conflict with the externalized drive of biting. For some dogs that are trained in drive neutrality exercises, heeling with toy rewards can be a good intermediate activity to reel the dog back in and calm him down. All this assumes the handler knows how to reward the dog properly, so his focus can return from a high-drive skill to a lower drive skill. Going from an apprehension to an article search for a high-drive dog could be compared to you as an officer having to go from struggling to arrest someone who is fighting you and your backup officers, to walking into a classroom immediately afterward and giving a PowerPoint presentation. Your breathing is heavy, your adrenaline flowing, and your neurological defensive systems are on high alert from the physically expressive activity, and now you are asked to shift to a calm, cerebral activity. Doesn't sound so easy when you think of it that way.

Some of this training starts in selection. You can add into your selection training a simple transition for a green dog. To be fair to the dog, we first test detection (retrieving and hunting tests), and then we test the bite work/nerves of the dog in aggression work. Likely, you would start with some civil agitation, followed by some grips on a sleeve, a courage test, and maybe bites in tight rooms or some such similar test. Once the dog is taken from the area in which he did the aggression work and given a short walk to calm down, go back to throwing the detection item in a close but different area. See if the dog can get his mind back on that object or if he lingers in the expectation of more aggression work. If the dog will refocus on retrieving and hunting a simple problem in a new area after a little time for his biological systems to calm, you have a dog that can likely be taught to transition.



Setting Up Good Transition Scenarios

Now let's assume you have done some drive capping/neutrality work with your dog. He's heeled around decoys or, minimally, done long downs around decoys in training so that the mere sight of a decoy in a suit doesn't make the dog react and go off the rails. Let's create a scenario that will allow the dog to transition.

Base Scenario: You are called as a backup to a jump-and-run from an attempted traffic stop.

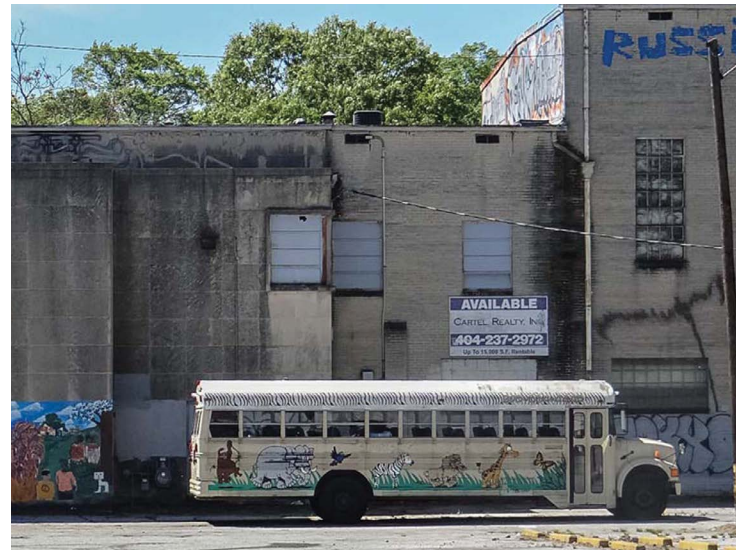
The patrol officer who initiated the stop saw a vehicle matching the description of one that fled a robbery scene that night. The pursuing officer noted items were thrown out of the passenger side of the vehicle about a quarter mile before the car pulled over, and the passenger bailed and fled the scene. While the passenger did run, the driver did not, and cooperated with arresting officers on the scene. She has been taken into custody.

Now your job is to take this call and turn it into a scenario for K9 teams. What follows is one possible K9 scenario of five elements. At the end, we will discuss other scenarios that could be used off this base scenario to challenge the dog further.

K9 Element 1: Tracking the passenger. Taking a scent off the passenger seat, the K9 team tracks the subject through a variable surface track of about a quarter mile to a building (assume it's a fairly large vacant house or barn). You can use any building for the purpose of the scenario. The dog tracks up to the closed door of the structure. During the track, articles — hat, gloves, or tools — can be placed on the track or just off to the side to give the dog rewards that can be marked for track performance.

K9 Element 2: Building search of the structure with no find. The handler commences to perform a building search of the structure. Systematically moving through the building using a long line, the building is cleared with no find, which means the suspect went somewhere. Casting around the exterior of the structure, the dog picks up the track again, with an article placed shortly after cutting into the track to again give the handler the ability to reward the transition from searching the building to tracking again.

Sometimes after the building search, the dog has trouble focusing back to the ground because the blank building search has left him unsatisfied (many dogs will want to go back inside the building). This is where you would place the dog in a long down to allow him a minute or two to regain composure. We asked the dog to externalize his drive for the building search. Now we have to compose him again to get the dog to focus on the ground. Many dogs will have trouble with this initially, so use your tools, down stay, or even some heeling to settle the dog. As you progress with these transitions, you should be able to cut the time on these “drive breaks” and transition more seamlessly.



K9 Element 3: Track to an area where there is an old bus or RV with the suspect hiding underneath.

The goal of this element is to achieve a good proximity alert as the dog comes into the odor source under the RV. The dog is called to heel for a verbal challenge from cover when he identifies the location of the hidden subject. Now we integrate tactics off of the proximity alert. Calling the dog back to heel position is another transition here, where the dog is now in drive, perhaps giving the final response of the proximity alert (barking) or intense air scenting. We ask the dog to perform an obedience command that is critical to the next step of the apprehension.

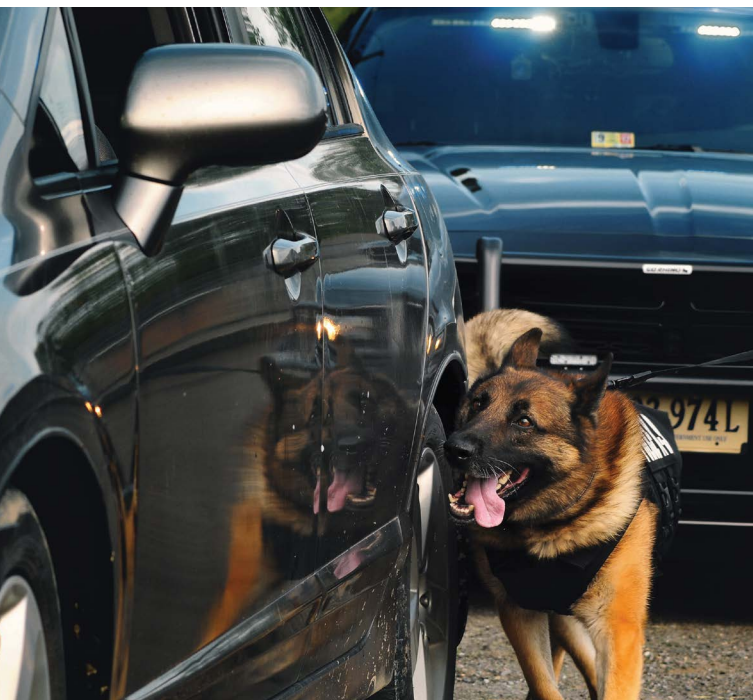
K9 Element 4: The apprehension of the suspect. There are now two ways to go. You can decide to have the decoy cooperate or not cooperate. If we must now fish the dog under the RV to make a bite apprehension, and extract the decoy with the line pulling him out of hiding prior to the arrest, we know the result will be to place the dog way up in drive. We will then need to compose him for the last parts of the scenario.

Know your dogs. For some dogs, not getting a bite might make them extremely frustrated, where a bite might actually allow them to release that frustration, making the next transition actually easier. If you decide to allow the extraction with a bite, do you tactically remove the dog (frustrating) or out the dog and heel away when in custody (cap drive)? While a verbal out would not be the approach we suggest in a real encounter, in this training scenario I might want the effects of the out to cap the drive and settle the dog for the next portion. I may want to use this moment to practice my outs by giving multiple grips and enforcing multiple outs before moving to the next part of the scenario. If I was doing a cooperative suspect, I would now long down my dog as the suspect is led away. Alternatively, if more advanced, we could do a rear transport as the subject is escorted out of the area in custody. This likely will raise the dog's drive in anticipation of a possible bite and make the next transition harder.

K9 Element 5: Article search for the thrown items. Both suspects are in custody. Now the dog is asked to go to the scene of the disposal of the evidence. Dash cam is inspected to narrow down the likely place where we need to search. As a trainer/handler, you could set up an article search close to the area where the suspect is apprehended. In fact, you would probably do that to make sure the area where he was hiding didn't contain any critical evidence, and then go back and do it again at the scene of the evidence disposal. But the dog may not be ready to do an article search in the area where he just made the apprehension, so you have to decide how to handle it.

Perhaps going all the way back to the side of the road is a good starting point. The car ride to the article search will allow the dog to re-compose himself after the apprehension. Or you could set up an article search near the site of the apprehension and place the dog in a down or heel over there to allow the dog to compose. Think of this moment whenever you are doing your apprehension training. Heeling the dog to a problem and away from a problem allows the dog to start naturally shifting gears and allows him to self-compose.

K9 Element 6: Drug search of the suspect vehicle. You have already asked the dog to do a fair bit in this training exercise. However, after the article search, the last element should be doing a search of the suspect vehicle for any contraband. This transition should be fairly easy because we are going from one searching element (articles) to another (contraband). You could do the apprehension element, article search next to the area of apprehension, and then go directly to the drug search. Or you could eliminate the article search altogether and go directly to the drug search last, leaving out element 5 above in favor of a more contextually clear transition (apprehension to vehicle search for contraband). If I was training a younger dog, or one who struggles with transitions, I may start by eliminating the article search in favor of ending with the vehicle sniff for drugs because it is contextually more clear than an open field search for articles (which the dog could see as another apprehension situation). Again, know your dogs!



“There are times to focus on one element in training and times to incorporate multiple elements in transitional training so that your dog can perform at a high level in everything that is asked of him.”

Possible Variations

There are any number of variations of this base scenario, but here are some that come to mind.

- 1. Coordination:** Both suspects run in different directions. Two K9 teams respond and simultaneously track and locate runners with the setup as described before, two different building searches. After the apprehensions, one returns to search for evidence, the other for a contraband sniff on the car.
- 2. More Advanced:** One runs and one stays. The suspect who stays is uncooperative, so you begin with a vehicle extraction and bite. Then you must track the second suspect from the car you just made the extraction from. Have the track to the building result in a find in the building search. Then drive back for the article search and the narcotics sniff of the car.
- 3. More Advanced:** Both stay in the vehicle and are uncooperative. Conduct two extractions. Long down the dog, then article search near the suspect vehicle, followed by a drug sniff of the suspect vehicle.
- 4. Even More Advanced:** Both suspects run. A neighboring agency dog is tracking suspect 2, but they lose the track. Suspect 2 has doubled back to where the evidence was thrown out of the car to attempt to retrieve those items. After the tracks and building search, RV apprehension, and the article search, the K9 team is attacked. This takes the dog from a low drive state after an article search and forces him to react to an urgent and immediate threat without any warm up. Apprehension is performed, and then finish with the narcotics sniff transition.

The variations on this one call are endless. Sit down with your K9 teams and come up with more calls on which to base these transitional elements. There are times to focus on one element in training and times to incorporate multiple elements in transitional training so that your dog can perform at a high level in everything that is asked of him. Be sure to make mental notes of how your dog needs to transition in all your road calls, so you can weave similar things into useful scenarios for your K9.



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