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Scenario Based Training

ROLE-PLAYING AGGRESSIVE & PASSIVE SUBJECT ENGAGEMENT ISSUES

By Jerry Bradshaw

Patrol dogs encounter suspects of all kinds. They can be passive, aggressive, standing, seated, or prone on the back or belly, or partially obscured by brush, blankets, sheets, and may attempt to fend off police dogs with any type of object. We will look at two simple scenarios that could present challenges to a K9 team, whether experienced or not. Following from my last article in this series of scenario-based training, where I discussed skill transitions, these scenarios could be built into a larger scenario or used as stand-alone training.

When doing scenario training, it is critical for the K9 team and the backup, as well as the decoy suspects, to role-play effectively. This cannot be overstated, for the dog to be trained and exposed properly, as well for the concomitant safety of the handlers and backups as a result of that proper training and exposure. The scenarios presented here will highlight this importance because the very behavior of the decoy/suspect and backup will determine the success or failure of the K9 team in the real-life version of such an encounter.

Scenario 1: Hyper-Aggressive Subject

K9 is called as a backup to a domestic call, where the homeowner is intoxicated in the back yard of the home. The homeowner is by a pile of wood with an axe in his hand, with the axe head on the ground. He is hyper-aggressive, yelling loudly, and at times incoherent. The subject is a large male. K9 arrives on the scene and takes a position among the other officers. Backup have weapons out on the suspect. The six backup officers are ordering the man to drop the axe and to calm down. There is a lot of yelling from both the K9 team and the suspect. K9 moves to a position advantageous to making an apprehension as the scenario unfolds. The man drops the axe and starts to run, and though partially surrounded, the K9 is in a good position to intercept the fleeing subject.

Coordination and Communication: Role Playing

In such a scenario, there must be solid communication between the K9 team and the on-scene officers. The K9 team must be clear to send the dog without pursuing officers getting in the way. Don't underestimate the confusion that can be created by having a number of officers and the suspect yelling simultaneously. The vocalizations will naturally draw the dog's attention, and if the dog is approaching the situation from the rear, it may not be able to quickly and clearly identify who the bad and good guys are. Just because the dog will do it when the training decoy is in a bite suit isn't good enough. This must be a hidden-sleeve or hidden-suit exercise, or possibly a muzzle exercise. I suggest a progression of practice starting with a decoy in a suit, then hidden suit, then hidden sleeve, then muzzle. The hyper-aggressive nature of this scenario could put a young dog in conflict if it isn't exposed to lots of sound neutralization in general.

It is critical to train K9s with backup officers in proper positions, in a scenario-based context. The scenario requires the backup to behave in character, using the same voice and volume as in a real situation. Often in training, I see the role-playing not being taken seriously enough. The dog and handler must get used to moving around in such a scenario and being able to properly target the K9 on the threat. The handler must carefully guide the dog into position without getting anyone bit and controlling the dog's attention, or at minimum the dog's head, effectively. The fact that the subject is out in the open here along with six others yelling makes the threat identification difficult. Also, once the suspect breaks and runs, if other backups in the field of vision of the dog run and are closer to the dog, the dog may lock in on the backup. This kind of coordination must be practiced; otherwise, the dog may lose the threat in the sea of choices or, worse, bite a backup officer.

Engagement

Everything from K9 apprehension work up to the dog's first actual apprehension is a process of successive approximation. The dog must have the genetics and proper training to want to engage a human. Training must create the habit of engagement, using a variety of methods of awakening confident civil aggression; heightened prey aggression; a variety of equipment, including hidden equipment, sleeves, and suits; and good, solid targeting. Dogs that are not taught a limited number of effective targets (both upper and lower body) can suffer from choice paralysis when faced with a real encounter. We must make powerful engagement at the first opportunity our most critical goal. If targeting properly is taught and becomes muscle memory, the likelihood of failed encounters will go down.
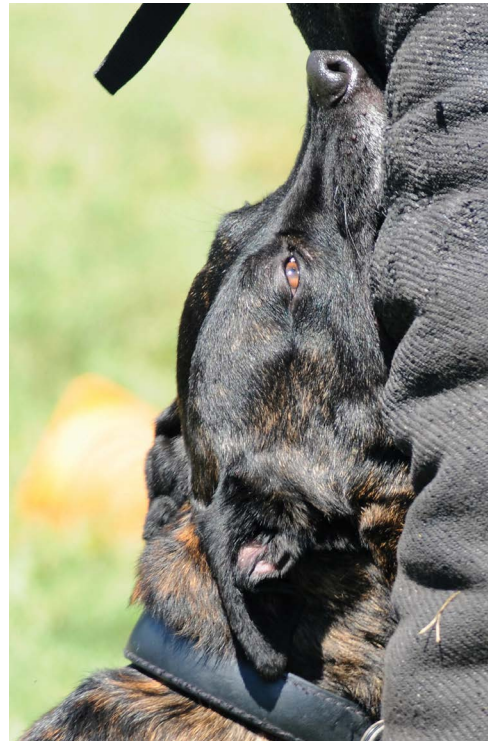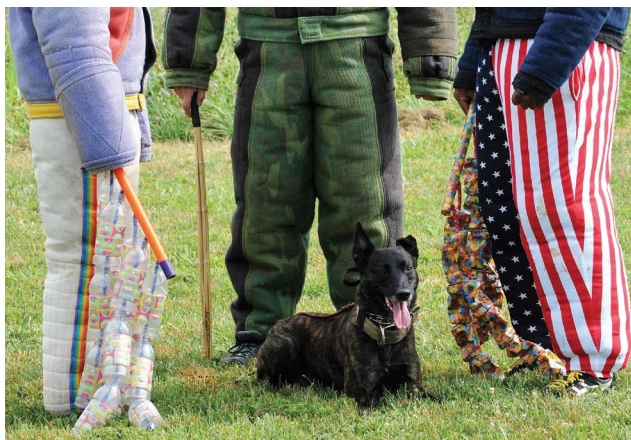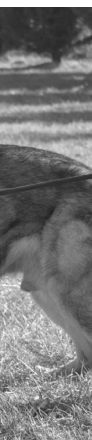
Prolonged Encounters

The extremely aggressive subject when apprehended may continue to fight against gaining custody. Assuming the dog engages the subject and takes him to the ground, the handler must immediately physically control the dog, and the backup attend to the subject. In training, leave the dog on the bite to practice a long fight to control the subject. Biting and pushing deeper into the grip to gain pain compliance is important. Grip development, grip strength, and stamina on the grip is critical in a prolonged encounter, as is pushing rather than pulling on the bite. The dog must stay put in his target area while backup is all over the suspect. Continue to yell and continue fighting the subject. Count the minutes (yes, minutes) of your dog's biting, and progressively work to increase the grip stamina in all your scenarios (your dog must be a well-conditioned athlete to endure a long fight). Your decoy must know how to continue to mark and reward the forward aggression. Pushing into the grip is less tiring for both the dog and the decoy in training. Pushing will sustain a proper grip over a long fight much more than pulling and promote a deeper and thus more painful grip.

Working your dog to have the proper grip strength and stamina is critical. Using resistance such as line manipulation (tight line followed by loose line and countering as an isometric exercise for the jaws) and bungee work can increase grip stamina and jaw muscle power immensely. Here is where training certification style, with quick outs after grips, will possibly get the handler or backup hurt in a real encounter. Dogs can anticipate releases because they are on the bite for too long — in other words their training bites normally last only less than 10 to 20 seconds (count it when you train next), which means that after that duration the dog could start to anticipate the out and just release on his own. Duration must be taught, not assumed.

Integrating Scenarios

Once the simple scenario is practiced, you can integrate this at the end of building searches, area searches, and occasional tracks, where the dog may already be physically tired from searching. The key to good scenario training is component training *(see the media area of **tarheelcanine.com** for articles on component training).*

Scenario 2: Hyper-Passive Subject

You arrive on scene to a man on a park bench wrapped in a black bed sheet, hands and legs obscured. You have been informed that the subject communicated serious threats of rape and kidnapping to two women passing by in the park, was reported by them, and matches the description of a rape suspect. Officers on scene are attempting to get the subject to show his hands before approaching from cover. You arrive nearby with your patrol vehicle, get out and have your K9 at the engine block of your patrol vehicle with a long line attached for a possible extraction.

Backup Neutrality and Role Playing

I have done similar, simple scenarios with patrol dogs where I have put a prone passive decoy in a hidden sleeve in an open field and had a patrol vehicle drive up close enough to deploy the dog, with only myself and one other officer as the backup, and because the dogs have had little or no experience with prone passive decoys, the dogs look around for someone more like their training decoys, standing up and talking, or at me. A team that relies on prey alone will fight the dog's urge to seek out the easier prey (in this case, the backup).

The key to this scenario is to have the dog understand that passive, prone people are important to it. In fact, it can aggress against such a subject and make him come alive (in training), where to focus on that job and not the backup is going to get the dog what it wants (the bite). This again is operant training. Practicing this scenario requires a decoy in hidden equipment who understands how to train this behavior. The decoy must mark the aggression with slight but discrete movements (the dog thinks its aggression wakes up the decoy and makes him rise up and either run or charge at the team). It requires the backup to slowly integrate into the scene so the dog can be taught to properly target the subject. (The conscientious handler can teach hand signals to his K9 and also integrate a laser-targeting system to focus the dog on the appropriate target).

Let's assume you give your warnings to the catatonic subject in the scenario who refuses to speak or show his hands. You decide to deploy your dog on a 30-foot line to extract the suspect off of the bench and take him to the ground with the dog exposing whether he is carrying weapons or not and take him into custody.

Engagement Issues

Passive engagement requires training your basic bite work so the dog understands it brings the prey alive or the threat is neutralized by its actions. Starting your training sessions with agitation rather than passive decoys in all possible positions will ensure your dog looks more at your backup, who may be loud and moving around, than at the actual threat. Passivity is a threat in police work. Sitting, standing, or lying on a bench, on the ground, or in beds in building searches are all good ways to practice passive engagement.

The decoy being wrapped in a sheet is an additional issue. The dog must understand it can go through certain impediments (*e.g., sheets, tarps and blankets*) or under or around other impediments (*e.g., baby pools and couch cushions*) if necessary. This must be taught to your dogs through scenario training. Don't expect dogs just to know they can bite through the sheet. The sheet covering also turns the human form into a big blob and will sometimes expose the need for equipment orientation when the equipment is covered. Equipment orientation drills should be a staple of your maintenance training.

A muzzle can be used here as well to teach the dog to pound through these soft impediments to make contact with the subject. I always use long lines, and here is where targeting training is so important. When the head alone is clearly exposed, we do not want the dog going to the head, so slowly feeding the dog into the target areas is preferred (shoulders, arms, and legs can be approximated by the dog if the targeting is good) and approaching from the sides or back for safety.

> *"Too much muzzle work is smoke and mirrors, and more of an artifact of the decoy's rolling around in prey than the dog's punching in and bringing aggression to the decoy."*

Non-Reactive Subject

The final engagement issue you can train for is the non-reactive passive subject. This can be explored using first a bite suit or hidden sleeve. The dog is sent to bite a passive seated subject and the decoy does not react on the initial grip. The decoy gives no reaction at all except what the dog transfers energy to the decoy by pushing in and thrashing. The dog pushes and punishes for a few seconds and then the decoy comes alive. This time delay is increased by a few seconds at a time until the dog will enter the grip and stay in the grip for 10 to 15 seconds without any reaction from the decoy. Increase the delay variably over time for maximum engagement. The dog makes his own fight and must not be conflicted with its out training. This exercise can be confusing to a young dog, so do not assume this will be easy. Always deploy with a long line first, when the dog makes the grip, place some pressure on the line by making it tight. Roll the pressure as the dog pulses into the grip, then over the course of a few sessions, slowly reduce the help from the back line.

Finally, if you think your muzzle work is strong, send your dog in muzzle on a non-reactive decoy (use a long line here as well so the dog doesn't migrate to the head). See how long the dog will stay engaged without reaction from the decoy. Too much muzzle work is smoke and mirrors, and more of an artifact of the decoy's rolling around in prey than the dog's punching in and bringing aggression to the decoy. Most dogs will stop if there is no reaction after a couple of seconds. This is where teaching muzzle work properly becomes very important. If you see your dog gives up after only a couple of seconds with no reaction, stop doing it and seek professional guidance on proper muzzle and muzzle decoy work.

Integrating Scenarios

Many times, people think scenario training means coming up with a complicated storyline of what a dog needs to do. In my experience, all police dog training consists of components of behaviors and simple routines, which turn into subroutines, that when strung together become a complex scenario. Always blend in realistic role-playing from your backup. Your dog will be successful if you break these complex scenarios down into components you can practice over and over, changing variables in each component until you feel certain your dog will complete the components under a wide variety of conditions.

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