

Introduction To The Agitation Muzzle

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The use of an agitation muzzle is often misunderstood; therefore, it is not always applied properly in training police canines. Because the term “agitation” is attached to the word “muzzle”, we feel the muzzle has only one use.

I see the leather basket muzzle or Ray Allen “Ram” muzzle as the two most common muzzles used by police canines. Both provide the dog a comfortable fit with room to breathe, expel heat, drink water and receive a food reward while wearing them.

The basket weave and ram muzzle has two straps that secure it to the dog’s head. One secures around the back of the dog’s upper neck, just behind the ears. I refer to this strap as the “back strap”. Once the muzzle is fitted properly, this strap is usually not adjusted often. But as the muzzle wears you may need to tighten it up a notch due to leather stretch.

I refer to the second strap as the “front strap”. This strap runs from the area between and in front of the dog’s ears and connects to the “back strap”. When it is secured properly this strap usually is not adjusted often. As the muzzle wears, you can tighten it. With this strap insure that the dog’s nose is not jammed up against the front wall of the muzzle. There should be enough room for the dog to breath, allowing it to expel heat and drink water if the muzzle is submerged.

I occasionally see plastic muzzles; they are hard and very uncomfortable for the police dog to wear. They also have a tendency to cut the dog’s nose when used in agitation exercises and they are not flexible. I personally do not use this type of muzzle for any agitation work. It cannot be secured properly and can easily come off during a ground fight. These muzzles are fine for muzzling an injured dog or for limited control work.

Finding the right size muzzle is relatively easy. They are sold in various sizes by several vendors. They are available for all breeds of working dogs. Speaking with an experienced handler or trainer will take you in the right direction.

Once you have found the muzzle that fits your dog, the problem of introducing the dog to the muzzle starts. There are several ways to do this. I have one method that has not failed me.

I utilize hot dogs or moist dog treats. I start by placing treats in the basket (interior) portion of the muzzle. Letting the dog go in and out eating freely. I sometimes feed a dog out of the muzzle, with small portions of his food several times a day. The important part here is to let the dog go in and out freely. If he pulls his head out, let him, don’t force him in or push the muzzle up against the dog’s face.

As the dog feels more comfortable, it will stay inside the open muzzle for a longer period of time. Usually after several days he will be diving into it because we have made the initial introduction a positive one. The dog simply associates the muzzle with food.

As we progress, I take hot dogs and squash them into the basket portion. This forces the dog to spend more time in the muzzle and they tend to lick the interior for the pieces of squashed hot dog or treat. I hook up the back strap and front strap loosely, so I can put it on and take it off with the least amount of disruption.

By the end of the second week, in most cases, the muzzle will stay on for a couple of minutes without any problem. I then push the pieces of hot dog or treat through the outside of the muzzle, occupying the dog so it doesn't begin to fight the muzzle.

If you notice the dog is not comfortable, just step back and stay with the last step. It is a simple ladder approach, one rung at a time. If you have a problem don't be afraid to step down one to get your footing back. When the dog is wearing the muzzle and accepting the food from the inside and outside of the muzzle it is time for step two.

I place food in the basket portion of the muzzle and place the muzzle on the dog's head. Again the straps are loose but just tight enough to hold the muzzle on the dog's head.

I use a soccer ball and we play soccer between the handler and another helper. The dog chases the ball and I continually kick it to keep it away from the dog. If it is moving, the dog is less apt to be bothered by the muzzle and is more intent on chasing the ball.

The muzzle only stays on for a one-minute session and then we take the muzzle off and put the soccer ball away. We then throw the dog's kong or ball to end this exercise without the muzzle. I usually do sets of three, make the exercises very short and exciting. The dog ends each session with the soccer ball being replaced by his kong, tennis ball or other toy.

We do continue to throw treats inside the muzzle and through the outside of the muzzle. You can progress to short sessions of obedience while you hold the soccer ball like you would hold your toy. Reward the dog with the ball when he is correct, during the obedience drill. Vary your reward system; utilize food as a reward also. Remember to keep your sessions short and exciting. Remember to reward for positive behavior every time!!!!

This type of muzzle application should be continued throughout the dog's career. Keep it fun, exciting and vary the rewards. It is real easy to make the muzzle a piece of equipment associated only with aggression control. However, this is the last thing that you want. A ball or food reward can be just as effective in most cases for many of the control exercises we do, however few people use this method in their training.

When it is time to do tactical obedience, passive gunfire response and full custody drills, we reward the dog with a ball at the end of the drill. Some handlers like to use a small

18” tug and play tug of war with the dog at the end of the exercise. To much bite work will reduce your control, creating a problem for the handler.

Remember to clean your muzzle after every use, wipe away dirt, mud, saliva, or any other particles that have attached to the leather. We use cooking spray once the muzzle is cleaned. We then wipe off the excess cooking spray with paper towel and place a softball or balled up newspaper inside the muzzle to keep its shape. We then hang the muzzle or place in an area where it can dry. The cooking spray will help keep the muzzle soft.

Once the dog is comfortable with the muzzle, your aggression control exercises and tactical applications are much easier to accomplish. Your dog will not be pawing at his muzzle or trying to rip it off. As a result you will spend less time yelling at and correcting your partner and more time effectively training.

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