

The Muzzle for Police Dog Training

It was almost ten years ago that, while attending a course at the police dog school in Stukenbrock, Germany (West Germany then), I first became acquainted with the formal use of the agitation muzzle. Prior to that time -- like most police K9 people (even today) - - I knew a little about it, had used it, and had even encountered police dogs that had run along beside a real bad guy looking for the training sleeve. But I was far from recognizing its tremendous value. Since then, I've used it extensively. And each time out, whether conducting a training class or training a dog on my own, I seem to realize another new benefit. I find that "muzzle-training" a police dog, routinely and consistently, is far superior to the traditional (non-muzzle) process -- especially in the area of the criminal apprehension exercises.

Although for police dogs in North America the use of the muzzle has grown over the past ten years, I still meet a great many handlers who either are not familiar with the basic concepts or are misinformed. When they look for material to assist them on the matter, very little is available and many are understandably reluctant to use the "trial and error" method. For this reason, I have put forth this article summarizing some of my observations and experiences with the muzzle, in the hope that it will assist those who are interested.

We all know that there is no "one way" to train a dog in a particular area. The ideas that follow in this article are a basis of what works for me and are intended to provide a guideline. If you have any input, I would appreciate hearing from you. If there are any questions, I would be happy to reply with "my two cent's worth." You can contact me at: 8004-4A Street, NE, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2K 5W8; e-mail address ammb@cadvision.com.

Types of Muzzles

There are basically two types of muzzles used on dogs: the safety muzzle and the much sturdier agitation muzzle.

The safety muzzle is generally used to restrict the dog's biting ability when such behavior is undesired and cannot be controlled (e.g., at the vet's). Some keep the dog's mouth closed, while others allow limited lower jaw movement. They are usually worn for short periods of time.

The agitation muzzle, on the other hand, is used during times when aggression is being encouraged -- as in the training of a police service dog. These muzzles are built stronger and can be worn for extended periods of time. They are designed to allow the dog free movement of his mouth; to allow barking and the bite reflex. They even allow the dog to drink or to eat little "treats."

Plastic agitation muzzles are not a good idea for extensive muzzle training. They have sharp edges that can injure the agitator and it is possible for them to break. A good

quality leather muzzle is best. In this article, we will discuss the basics of the agitation muzzle.

History of Muzzle Training

It appears that muzzle training was first used at a German police dog training school around 1956-58. The trainers were trying to solve the problem of police dogs that had an "arm fixation" or "sleeve happiness." (Remember the dog running beside the real bad guy looking for the training sleeve?) The muzzle was subsequently found to be a very effective aid in solving these problems. Many other side benefits were also discovered, some of which will be discussed later.

At the State Police School for Dog Handlers (Landespolizeischule für Diensthundführer NW) at Schloss Holte-Stukenbrock, Germany, the muzzle was incorporated into the international patrol dog qualification test (DPO) and then called the Polizeischutzhundprüfung (PSP). There are several exercises that make up the PSP criminal apprehension test, but only one is off-muzzle, a courage test that also tests the overall biting ability of the dog. The PSP, which also includes standard tracking, evidence search, and obedience, is a highly regarded police dog test.

Uses of the Agitation Muzzle

1. Training - The police service dog can be taught to search, find, and detain a "suspect" who is not wearing any protective equipment. The dog learns to relate to the "suspect" -- not to the equipment used for training (e.g., bite sleeve).
2. Safety - The "training-suspect" (or agitator) will more readily perform as requested if he does not have to worry about receiving an accidental bite, or a cheap bite from a dog lacking control. A handler, starting a new dog prone to dominance behavior, can properly control that dog during the bonding process until the correct pack order is established.
3. Socialization - Since the danger of injury during a possible dog fight is minimized, the dog can become involved in group activities with other dogs. Some dogs will overcome minor phobias, such as swimming or slippery floors, if they can run in a pack with other dogs. Running many dogs together like this not only gives you more insight into the character of your dog, but also provides an excellent opportunity to study canine interaction (i.e., the signs and signals of social dominance, submission and play). Interestingly, it has been my experience that the dogs that demonstrate dominance behavior in the pack environment may not be the strongest (of the group) in man work.
4. Experimentation - Once the risk of injury from a dog bite has been eliminated, a whole new range of ideas can be tried, e.g., applications using more than one dog, or working with a tactical (SWAT) team.
5. Evaluation of Potential Service Dogs - Putting a muzzle on a potential service dog, then testing his reactions, will provide additional information about the dog to the evaluator. If the dog performs strongly under these conditions, it gives a

- truer picture of the dog's character. This is one possible way of determining whether a dog has a natural confidence or has developed confidence through training under known conditions.
6. Restraint - If the muzzle socialization process (described below) has been properly observed, the agitation muzzle can also be used as a safety muzzle during times of injury to the dog or routine vet visits. The muzzle should not key the dog to be aggressive.

Training Exercises Enhanced by the Use of the Muzzle

1. Off-leash group (pack) activities/socialization
2. Long-down exercises with a distraction
3. Area/building searches for "suspects"
4. Aggression exercises - enhancing drives, building confidence, control work
5. Gunfire sensitivity
6. Tactical (SWAT) applications
7. Re-enactments of actual K9 cases

Other Ideas

1. Public relations demos - games using the dogs (in Germany they have police dog soccer teams)
2. Group transport of K9 teams in close quarters

Care of the Leather Muzzle

Use a good quality leather cleaner and preservative -- about once a week if used often -- to maximize the life of the muzzle. Stuff the inside with paper or a ball when not in use, to hold the shape. This will make it easier to slide it onto the dog and will also be more comfortable for him.

Putting the Muzzle on the Dog

Leather muzzles are generally sized by a number located on the muzzle itself. Size 9 is the average size for a German Shepherd Dog, while sizes 7 and 8 cover most Malinois and size 10 may be required for the Rottweiler. Plastic muzzles can have a different numerical sequence.

A properly fitting muzzle should have the front end approximately 1/2 inch from the end of the dog's nose. The strap that runs up between the dog's ears is used to adjust this clearance.

The neck strap should be tight enough to prevent the muzzle from coming off, but there should be room for at least two fingers to fit snugly between the strap and the dog's neck.

For ease in putting the muzzle on, hook the buckle in the last hole of the neck strap first. Hold the dog's jowl in one hand (to keep his head steady) and slide the muzzle on with the other. Place two fingers under the neck strap buckle using the first hand; then cinch up the neck strap with the other until snug and secure. Pull the fingers out from under the neck strap; then tug up and forward on the top strap (the one that runs between the dog's ears). The muzzle should remain secure. Check the dog for any discomfort.

Another tip is to mark the correct hole on the neck strap, with a pen, for future reference. Be aware, however, that the strap will stretch somewhat with use.

Socialization to the Muzzle

How will the dog accept the agitation muzzle? This varies with each dog: some pay little attention to it right from the beginning, while others are visibly bothered by it initially. It is my observation that as a group, younger dogs (under two years or so) adapt the quickest. Some older, experienced dogs take a little longer.

The best time to initially muzzle the dog is during a period when there are interesting distractions present, since these tend to take the focus away from the muzzle. The most effective exercise that I have found in this regard is to take the muzzled dog for a walk with other dogs. In this exercise, play and socializing are allowed, but dog fighting is not. Running off-leash with a bicycle is another good exercise, as most dogs enjoy the run (especially if they have been kenneled for a while). Less dynamic experiences can also be introduced, such as grooming and going for a casual walk only with the handler.

For the dog that persists in fighting the muzzle, try and keep the situation positive by introducing fun distractions or, failing that, ignore the behavior. (This situation is very similar to the puppy that is experiencing the leash for the first time and doesn't want to follow along.) Be sure the muzzle is properly secured, because if it comes off, the dog has just learned that persistence is all that is required for its removal. Chastising the dog only adds to any anxiety it may have and makes for a negative situation.

If properly done, the dog will learn that the muzzle (like the leash) means good things and will eagerly allow you to put it on. Associating the muzzle only with aggression training is considered a fault. We do not want the dog looking for a fight the minute we put the muzzle on. The other applications should be prominent for proper socialization.

Philosophy

You have your dog wearing the agitation muzzle; he's been properly socialized; and you are ready to do combat training. Will the dog still be motivated to engage/apprehend a person if the ability to bite is not there? To fully answer this question, we would have to write a treatise on animal aggression and motivation, discussing why dogs bite, what causes them to stop, and what are they trying to accomplish. For this article, it is sufficient to reiterate that for the dog, the act of biting is a means to an end -- not an end

in itself (or, in animal behavior lingo, it is an instrumental act). The bite is a "tool" used to satisfy needs, e.g., acquire food, drive off intruders, resolve conflicts. If the same goals can be accomplished without the bite, the dog will be just as satisfied. The key then is to show the dog that this can be done, not only while wearing the muzzle, but by using it.

During criminal apprehension training, we teach the dog to take control of the situation and to dominate. Whether this is accomplished with or without the muzzle is irrelevant to the dog. In fact, the bite should not be considered a reward for the dog because if that were true, the "out" would be like taking his food away.

So, let's continue with what we are trying to convey to this dog wearing the muzzle. The preliminary exercises start with the cautious approach of the agitator. The dog learns to ward off the intruder with aggressive posturing and barking (showing that he does not need the bite to win). As the dog becomes stronger, the intruder moves into contact range. The dog uses the muzzle to tag the intruder during the aggressive response. The intruder is knocked **away** head-over-heels and the dog realizes that this is an effective way of demonstrating superiority which, in turn, builds up his confidence. With a higher level of confidence, the dog will respond more strongly to the same threat again. The dog learns not to be intimidated by the much larger human and that the whole human is the primary objective -- not training equipment, clothing, or arms alone. Instead of a hindrance, the muzzle becomes a means to an end and is backed up by every ounce of the dog behind it.

In the previous paragraph, you will notice the word "away" is in bold letters. This is to emphasize that the dog considers himself a winner when his foe leaves the battleground first. This appears to be the case in the wild and is an important point to remember when training your dog (and your agitator) in combat. The person the dog has defeated (apprehended) should always try to leave the area by going away from the dog (like in real life when other officers take the suspect from the K9 team). During basic combat training sequences, the agitator should at some point give ground to the dog to give him the feeling of domination. If this does not happen, the dog will either keep trying to dominate without satisfaction or will become frustrated and confused, and may appear to lose interest.

In police work, dogs are used to defeat (apprehend) culprits of crime. To do this, the dog must have the self-confidence and skills to accomplish the task. How do we know if the dog will have the confidence to control the problem when presented with a real-life apprehension situation? By utilizing the muzzle in training, we should be able to gain most of this information as the dog realistically demonstrates the mind-set required.

Muzzle Training: The Agitator

There are some tactics the agitators should follow when engaging a muzzled dog:

The "act" -- the "performance" -- is very important. Pretend that someone has just peeled all your skin off and the muzzle is made of salt. Learn the signals of submission and make the dog feel like a winner when the time comes. Perform the role realistically.

The hands should not be used on the muzzle during combat. This frustrates the dog and may teach him to target the hands when the muzzle is off and the arm is presented. Also, fingers may get caught in the muzzle in an area susceptible to the dog's snapping jaws (dogs *do* maintain the biting reflex while wearing the muzzle).

Generally, keep the hands and arms close to the body so that the whole body becomes the target rather than just a limb. Be careful not to hit the dog in the eye with an elbow.

The hands may be used by the agitator to slap his/her chest in order to encourage the dog to hit high on the center of the agitator's body. The hands should not be viewed as the target, but rather as a means to get the dog to refocus as it makes the decision to strike.

When encouraging the dog to target the upper body, sometimes it is helpful for the agitator to get on his knees to work the dog. Placing the dog at a higher level than the agitator can work too.

Care should be taken to absorb as much of the muzzle hit as possible in order to minimize any possibility of discomfort to the dog. This can be done by falling away on impact, by deflecting the hit, or angling the body so that the dog slides up (instead of jamming his neck).

Protect your face, groin and kidneys. The impact of the muzzle can hurt (although less so than having those areas gripped by a vise of teeth).

Muzzle Training: Building the Dog

Some dogs are slow to respond with the muzzle on. Usually this indicates lack of sureness or a low confidence level within the dog. The agitator is tasked with "drawing the dog out" to the point where the muzzle makes contact with the agitator, no matter how lightly. The agitator then has to react, with both his voice and his body, in an exaggerated fashion, pretending he has "a very tender body," then falling away "in excruciating pain." The dog will be impressed with himself, gain a little confidence (with praise from the handler... don't forget), and will probably try a little harder next time.

Other dogs demonstrating a higher level of confidence may have little problem with the basic program. However, these dogs should continue to run through the same exercises and progressions to ensure that they are clear on the concepts and that there are no hidden surprises (from the dog) later on.

A suggested progression for the dog-building program is to start by working the dog on a short (6-foot) line, progress to a long line (10 meters or so), then to short pursuits while dragging the short line, followed by long pursuits while dragging the short line. There is no control work done during the initial, on-line building exercises, so be sure that the dog is not subjected to an active choke collar. When the dog is working strongly, on-line control work can be started. Off-line training works better after control is established.

To start, the handler has the dog on a 6-foot line and the dog is being worked by the agitator. The handler, acting like a post (not moving from his position), offers encouragement if the dog shows any sign of uncertainty. Training continues at this stage until the dog is striking the agitator firmly with the muzzle and is demonstrating a high level of confidence. This stage can last anywhere from one day to weeks, depending on the character of the dog and the skill of the agitator. Each encounter with the agitator involves about three challenges (by the agitator) at short range, to get a reaction from the dog. Then the agitator quickly backs down. This may or may not involve the dog striking the agitator. When the agitator finally leaves to end the sequence, signaling that the dog has won, the handler **moves up to the line to the dog** and gives praise. The dog should still be focused on the retreating agitator when the praise comes from the handler now at his side. It is *not* a good idea for the handler to pull the dog back for praise, as the dog will then learn to turn his back on the "suspect". Realistically, praise at this point signifies the threat is over.

It is preferable that the dog learn to hit high on the agitator's body (back *and* front) as this demonstrates that the dog is not intimidated by the body mass of his foe. It is also safer for the dog to neutralize a suspect via the upper body, since this area poses the most threat. The suspect is vulnerable to being knocked off balance, thereby adding to the distraction.

It is also recommended at this stage that the agitator begin to convey to the dog that barking can cause action. If the dog is showing confidence but is not barking, the agitator should suddenly stop and glare directly at the dog, but immediately continue moving when the dog barks. The dog learns that he can spur the agitator into action by barking. This is helpful later on when the dog finds a neutral or hidden suspect.

Next, put the dog on a longer (30-foot) line. The agitator will continue as before, except now the dog will have more range of movement. With the handler anchored again, the dog is started at the 6-foot distance and gradually allowed to work at distances further and further from the handler. The distances at which the dog is worked is dependent on the performance of the dog. We are looking for the dog eventually to work independently and with confidence (strong and high muzzle hits) at the end of the line. Some dogs do this the very first time.

We are continuing to get the dog to "bark for action": each muzzle contact results from the dog barking.

Again, the end of the exercise comes with the agitator being driven off by the dog and the dog watching him go. While the dog is still watching, the handler **moves up the line to the dog** and gives praise. The retreating agitator keeps the dog's attention to allow the handler to move up the line.

The dog is now ready for short pursuits. The handler attaches the 6-foot line to the dog's collar and hangs on. The agitator incites the dog to peak intensity and, on a bark, turns to flee. The dog is released and drags the line in pursuit of the agitator. The handler

(immediately) chases behind with the priority of regaining the line as quickly as possible. The dog strikes the agitator "knocking him to the ground." When the dog is on top of the agitator (who is still flailing about), the handler immediately grabs the line and **does not pull the dog back** but holds steady. The agitator rolls **away** from the dog, gets up, and runs away from the victorious team. The handler allows the dog a few feet to pursue the escapee and to keep the dog focused for any possible threat, then **moves up the line to the dog** to give praise. The winner holds his ground and the loser has gone!

Normally, the dog would return to a social state and allow the challenger his freedom once he has dominated and the challenger has recognized his higher rank. But we can't allow the police dog this luxury since the suspect may challenge again at any time. Combat with the agitator in a submissive position on the ground should be very short since the dog has as much control in the situation as he can get and the willingness to continue may naturally wane. That is why it is important for the handler to regain control of the leash as soon as possible, thereby allowing the agitator to leave. The agitator can submit and remain stationary later, when the dog knows the "out", etc.

Initially, the dog is striking the fleeing agitator from behind; but when the dog seems comfortable with this, frontal hits (where the agitator turns to face the dog) can be introduced. The finish is the same. Remember to absorb the impact as much as possible.

Progress the dog to a continuous set of three pursuits with knockdowns employing rear and frontal hits, i.e., the handler regains control of the leash after the first two pursuits and re-sends the dog on the escaping agitator. Again, finish up with the agitator leaving and the handler holding the dog in place.

The agitator can gradually increase his resistance by taking more hits each time before submitting to the knockdown. The knockdown blow should be high and hard to convey to the dog that this is what it takes. Usually, pushing the dog away forcefully, as he makes contact, causes the dog to re-hit with more power.

The distance of the pursuits can also be increased. The dog can be deployed in different training areas with the agitator running at various angles in relation to the dog. Constantly varying the conditions, a little each time, keeps the dog from being "routine trained" and he learns to adapt to change.

Muzzle Training: Building Control

Let's compare training a dog in aggression-control exercises, while employing the muzzle, to obedience training. In obedience, the dog is usually taught the range of exercises while on-leash. It is very difficult for most of us (in the time allowed) to adequately train a rambunctious young dog from scratch without the use of a leash. The leash gives the handler a physical control that prevents the investigation of distractions and helps keep the dog focused on what is expected. Through repetition, the dog learns what is correct -- and also what is unacceptable.

When it is felt the dog is ready, the attempt is made to get the dog to perform the same exercises while off-leash. By now the dog has learned to respond to other stimuli, such as verbal commands and hand signals. As the leash is used less and less, the dog is "tuned" to perform at the same level as on-leash. As stated, the leash has (among other things) been used to maintain control while the dog learns what is expected from the exercise.

Now, let's apply the same principle to aggression-control training. The dog, while wearing the muzzle, has learned how to control a person. Everything is going well except that we haven't yet incorporated the required verbal control into the dog's repertoire. The muzzle now becomes the aid that allows the dog to learn what is required. The unwanted bite or refusal to release are the "distractions" neutralized by the muzzle.

You can now utilize and enforce your obedience commands to gain the desired responses from the dog. Incorporate the additional "out", "watch," etc. and carry through with the search of the suspect routine. You won't have to pry your dog off the "suspect;" the "suspect" is steady; and focus on the task at hand is maintained. (Because the "suspect" has previously run away when the handler got physical control of the dog, and the dog was sometimes re-sent, the dog should now remain focused on the "suspect" anticipating a possible re-engagement. The dog has learned that the exercise is not over until the "bad guy" leaves and the handler indicates that all is well). Through repetition of the whole scenario, the dog learns what is expected of him (and what is not) and becomes dependable in aggression and control. The dog is then tuned to perform the same exercises without the muzzle.

Off-muzzle aggression training is begun with the dog knowing the rules from the start --- same as our usual off-leash obedience training. Some compulsion may still be required in the beginning; but if the dog is solid in his on-muzzle control work, this should be minimal.

Let's just run through a sample progression of how control training might go:

1. The dog is wearing a muzzle and is attached to the handler by a leash from his (the dog's) collar.
2. An agitator approaches threateningly. The handler gives the dog the command to engage in combat. When the dog is intense, and after a bark, the agitator engages the dog in combat, but remains in the upright position.
3. The handler shouts for the agitator to stop fighting the dog and the agitator complies -- ceasing movement and remaining passive.
4. The handler commands the dog to "out" and places the dog in the desired position for the "search of the suspect". The dog is to remain steady but watchful.
5. The handler does a search of the agitator while enforcing the dog's required positioning.
6. Handler returns to the dog.
7. Other "officers" lead the "suspect" away (loser leaves).
8. Handler praises dog.

One option (of many): #5, Handler commands the dog to re-engage (instead of doing the search). At the same time as the command, the agitator attacks. Repeat #3 and #4.

Searching: On Muzzle

Once the dog is established and working well in the muzzle, "*suspect*" searches can be introduced. The scenting ability of the dog does not seem to be hindered by the muzzle in any way. Carry on with training as you normally would without the muzzle, except that now the situation can be set up more realistically.

Conclusion

Let me comment on muzzle training in relation to *bite work* training. I believe that the best advantage comes from training the dog completely in aggression and control on the muzzle first--then introducing the bite work training later. Bite work training is so much easier if the dog is already solid in his control work. The dog can still be tested for his bite separate from the muzzle process, but extensive bite training is complicated by the absence of the proper release ("out") component.

Dogs already trained to bite securely don't need more if they are performing adequately. It is my experience that *muzzle* training a dog naturally improves the dog's performance in off-muzzle work.

I hope this information is of assistance to you. Good luck and good training.

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