

Drive Channeling in the Working Dog

Part 1: Introduction & The Prey Dominant Dog

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Introduction

Conflict is what dog trainers refer to as the confusion and resulting inappropriate behavior manifested by a dog during protection training that is unable to change drives seamlessly during the dynamics of a confrontation with a decoy. A typical example can come from schutzhund or KNPV. In each sport, there is a searching exercise which ends in a hold and bark on the decoy. The example of conflict comes when a dog takes dirty bites during a hold and bark exercise, where the search, a prey exercise, ends in hold and bark, a defensive confrontation. The inability to switch from prey drive to defense drive easily can be one cause of the conflict and resulting inappropriate biting behavior. In addition, variables such as the newness of the training area, darkness inside a building or room (in the case of Police K-9 doing a find and bark), distance from the handler, etc. can serve to raise the stress of the confrontation. The dog is unable to handle these stressors. The dog is supposed to hold and bark, but instead he is in conflict, at times barking properly and keeping in check, at times taking dirty bites.

We often see the same thing on outs or re-attack exercises. Either the dog does not out as the helper goes from fighting the dog to a passive "out" position, or the dog takes dirty bites anticipating the defensive exercise about to occur. The dog is stuck in defense, stuck in the mode of fighting, and will not release on command, often despite being corrected. Many handlers I have seen simply correct the dog more and harder, which by bringing more pain and stress, reinforces the defensive mood, and actually causes the dog to fight harder and hold on tighter, creating a vicious circle of outing problems.

The ability to avoid this drive conflict is based on teaching the dog to switch drives clearly and comfortably as the changing dynamics of the fight with the helper dictate. The process of changing drives is called channeling. In this article, I will refer to the drives of defense and prey, the building block drives of protection. Defense drive here is used in a broad context to include: defense of social position (dominance aggression), self-defense, defense of prey (object or resource guarding), pack related defense, and other classical defensive behaviors. Channeling between defense and prey, multiple times, is what we require for a stable and confident dog that can be taught the proper intensity and control. By its very nature, channeling requires we do defense training, and thus we have to worry about the possibility of pushing the dog into avoidance.

Defense training, even assuming that we are training a dog with good nerves, induces stress. Each dog has a stress threshold at which it will "turn on" in defense (defense threshold), and a stress threshold at which he will abandon fighting as a strategy (avoidance threshold). The stress levels between these thresholds are the area in which we can work the drive without causing avoidance, and build confidence. It is important to remember that stress is a cumulative factor. If sufficient stress accumulates over time, the dog may abandon fighting as a strategy and decide to avoid the confrontation. This is undesirable for a police service or working protection dog for obvious reasons. It is also important to remember that these thresholds are dynamic in relation to the dog's environmental context. In a familiar and safe environment, the dog may show a higher threshold for defense. In an unfamiliar or challenging environment, dark room with slick floors for

example, the dog may show a lower threshold for defense, all else equal. This context variable applies to the avoidance threshold as well. This means that in a challenging environment the avoidance threshold may be lower as well, leaving less working room in the dog's defensive mood. Trainers must take heed not to push the dog into avoidance. Sharp dogs being trained in this kind of environment may have very little working room in that mood.

In two previous articles, I discuss the appropriateness of beginning with either defense training or prey training based on the dog's temperament. I conclude that after an initial evaluation, the dog should be worked first in his strongest drive. That could be what he stimulates most easily into, or what he has available at the time training begins. Thus the initial test of suitability will designate the dog as either "Prey Dominant" or "Defense Dominant". This is not an all or nothing designation, mind you. In fact, even in a dog that is well balanced, one drive will tend to dominate. In the prey dog, channeling first means introducing defense after the dog has been worked first sufficiently in prey. Note also that we don't just work in prey. We will experiment from time to time with civil agitation. The stimulus to prey work is movement and frustration. We base the prey work on pass-by misses and bites. The focus at this stage of training is on grip work, using the opposition reflex, and encouraging full biting through proper grip development, and proper targeting. We are developing a dog that stimulates easily in prey and the commitment of the dog should be strong.

Separately, we will introduce civil agitation. In pole work, I usually tie the dog out during another dog's work, and have the helper, during breaks in the action, civil the dog on the pole. As the dog becomes more confident in the prey work, we should observe the dog barking at the stalking of the decoy as his defense develops. Note that in a balanced dog, the dog may readily respond in civil work.

Prey Dominant Dog: Channeling Prey to Defense

I like to make my first introduction to defense for the prey dog in a non-threatening way. This is an odd thing to say, since defense work by its very nature is threatening, one might argue. This is correct, however, defense comes in many forms: self-defense, territoriality, social defense (pack, handler, breeding rights, maternal), and defense of prey, to name some. It is this last form of defense that doesn't directly threaten the dog. In the other forms of defense, the stakes are higher in the sense that the dog can be more easily pushed into avoidance by a mistake. In defending his prey, the dog only stands to lose an object of prey.

It is critical that the decoy then make his threat focus on the prey object, and not on the dog himself. Threatening the dog directly over his prey can be added later. In the beginning process of awakening defensive moods in a prey dominant dog, we do not want to push the dog into avoidance. The decoy must avoid eye contact and look squarely at the sleeve, showing submission to the dog's barking and aggressive displays. I use my hand out in front of my body as I stalk the sleeve very slowly, using hissing sounds, and wiggling my hand and drawing it back as the dog barks at my approach towards his prey. It is critical that the dog see reaction from the civil decoy to his efforts to defend his prey. At first the dog may only try to jump back on the prey (real common in young puppies) instead of showing defensive aggressive behaviors. Positioning the sleeve in front of the dog but just out of reach can bring about the frustration necessary to kick the dog into aggression as his only option of defending his prey. Decoy behavior is critical: all movement should be straight towards the object and slow, as any other movement may put the dog into a prey mood and destroy any possibility of bringing about defensive aggressive behavior. Many decoys make the mistake of moving too quickly, or advancing too closely, or both. Once the dog begins to show aggressive behavior over the sleeve, these movements can be repeated without a sleeve on the ground, and by developing this conditioned reflex the dog will show the civil aggression we are trying to bring about, when the sleeve is not present.

If this strategy doesn't work it may be because the visible sleeve keeps the dog only in a prey mood. We will need to explore other things that may bring about the necessary stress to induce

defensive behavior. One way to do this is to use the variable of environmental stress. This can lower the dog's defensive threshold, and put him in a mood of defensive aggression. Common ways to do this are to use a civil decoy in a dark, unfamiliar place, or put the dog on a slick floor in an unfamiliar building, or perhaps both. Caution must be used not to put the dog in too much of a disadvantage that his avoidance threshold is crossed during agitation. Skilled helper work is crucial, to feel out the dog's mood and put just enough pressure on the dog to elicit the reaction we desire, and to allow the dog to win the confrontation by coming forward to the fight. The idea is to teach the dog that he wins stressful confrontations by becoming aggressive. In such a situation, the dog might become aggressive, then be allowed to chase the decoy across the room as he runs away and out a door, frustrating the dog. Or if the dog's nerves permit, giving him a hidden sleeve bite after some aggression is elicited. Usually it is the confident prey dog with whom you will need to go to these extremes to elicit defensive reactions, so doing a hidden sleeve bite under these circumstances may not be difficult.

In general, when trying to get the prey dog to switch into defense, prey guarding is a common useful method. This is true especially with younger dogs. At this point we will assume that the trainer can stimulate defensive behavior. The question now becomes how do we train the dog to channel from prey to defense.

Strategy 1: Introduce Defense through Prey Guarding.

We can initiate prey behavior through movement, using equipment like a visible sleeve, and using techniques like prey misses, where the decoy comes close enough to get the dog to commit to the strike, but snatches the sleeve away at the last second to make the dog miss the bite, thereby frustrating him. After a couple prey misses, the bite is delivered. If the dog is not strong enough to take defensive pressure on the bite, then the sleeve is slipped, and the handler kicks it out in front of the dog just out of reach. The decoy then withdraws to a comfortable distance for the dog, and begins to stalk the sleeve. As the dog shows defensive prey guarding behavior, the decoy advances and withdraws according to the dog's aggression, showing submission as he draws very close to snatch the sleeve, and begin moving again. The defensive behavior is rewarded by the decoy's reactions to the aggression, and then the subsequent movement after grabbing the sleeve begins another round of prey work.

As the dog becomes more confident in his defensive behavior, the decoy can increase the level of threat towards the prey item, and then switch his focus toward the dog. This is important. The prey item should fix the dog in place as he guards it, but now the decoy threatens the dog with body posture, hissing, frontal displays, etc. However as he does this, the decoy must react to defensive displays by showing submission to the aggression, then recovering, and advancing. For the aggression to take root, the decoy must show a mixture of threat and submissive displays. As the decoy draws closer and closer, the decoy should become more submissive. The dog must think his aggressive display is having an effect for him to continue with this strategy of behavior. Note however, that when the dog is biting he should feel safe, and also feel he is punishing the decoy. The decoy works the dog on the bite in a prey style, reacting when the dog punishes the sleeve in frustration. The dog should be working up a lot of defensive energy during the civil portion of the work, then put that energy into the prey biting and thrash the decoy by pushing into the sleeve during the prey work. When the dog is in prey mood, the decoy continues to work on the dog's grip, and can begin to introduce the dog to defensive postures while biting.

Strategy 2: Introducing Defense while the dog is on the sleeve.

When the dog is biting clearly and comfortably after the civil pressure on the grounded sleeve, the decoy can begin to introduce defensive movements while the dog is biting. However, be careful not to push the dog into avoidance. The first few movements should be quick with an immediate reward to the dog.

Begin in prey, maybe a miss or two, and then deliver the bite. Slip the sleeve. Immediately civil

the dog over the grounded sleeve in the proper way we discussed above, grab the sleeve, and move again into prey. Deliver the bite, allow the dog to punish, and pay attention to the grip. Now, quickly turn from a prey (side) posture to a frontal posture all in one fast movement. The decoy quickly turns into the dog, raises the stick, and makes a clipped yell, and slip the sleeve and withdraw. Normally the dog will thrash the sleeve, venting the stress from the sudden change into the sleeve. After withdrawing, the decoy moves to a safe civil distance and keeps eye contact, and waits for the handler to out the dog, then immediately begins to civil the dog, and repeat the procedure.

The goal is to decondition the dog to more and more violent defensive helper movements from the decoy while on the bite. These variables include deconditioning the dog to frontal postures, stick threats, voice threats, the defensive drive (making more and more steps into the dog on successive sessions) and eventually stick hits. I want to make a note on introducing stick hits. This should proceed in 2 ways. First, the threat should come up over the dog's head quickly, and then bring the stick down in a petting motion over the dog's head. This can be added during prey work as well. The dog should not fear the stick hits. At first he only is threatened and petted with the stick. Light taps can then begin on the back-tie line as the helper drives the dog, advancing over time to harder and harder hits to the line, and the area where the line attaches to the dog's flat collar or protection harness. Second, come the actual strikes to the dog. The first time you actually strike the dog, the hit should come from below and under the sleeve to the dog's shoulder. This area is heavily muscled and not a sensitive spot. If he is taking hard hits to the line, the first hit should come quickly and with an immediate slip of the sleeve as the hit comes from where the dog cannot see it. This should be done simultaneously. We do not want to give the dog an opportunity to avoid the bite by popping off when he is struck. Sticks should be changed up, deconditioning the dog to padded stick, reed stick, clatter sticks, etc. As the dog shows he can easily handle the pressure, the hits should come more often, during defensive drives, and end with a slip, or a strong reaction by the decoy moving into a submissive, prey posture.

Always assume changing the variable (stick, new posture, duration of the defensive drive, voice pressure) may have an adverse effect. Do not assume the dog can "take it" or you will end up pushing the dog into avoidance. Experienced decoys should be used who can properly read the dog's reactions to any defensive pressure. The most telltale sign that the defensive pressure is bothering the dog too much can be noticed in the grip. During the prey development stage of training, you should develop a "baseline" grip. Not every dog will have a genetically full grip, and many breeding programs (French Ring, KNPV) do not always stress full grips. But you should have a feel for what the dog's best grip is when he is feeling his most confident. Changes in the grip during channeling training will tell you that you may be on the verge of pushing the avoidance threshold. These changes include mouthy grips, moving to the hand or elbow under pressure, slipping on the grip away from the helper, etc.

Notice that all these movements I suggest start the dog off working in his strongest drive, prey, and move him into defense, and back into prey. This is the essence of channeling. The dog begins confidently in a prey mood, is stressed into defense where he is taught that aggressive reaction can wilt the pressure, then back into prey so he can relax after the stress: comfort, stress, comfort. He learns that over time any defensive stress can be released by fighting the decoy. This is how he learns to fight the decoy successfully and confidently.

Strategy 3: Multiples and Classical Conditioning

The next steps in teaching the dog to channel are teaching him he can do this work multiple times. I will use the following shorthand to denote the basic channeling training:

PREY è DEFENSE è PREY

Multiples are repetitions of this basic exercise. The dog is first stimulated in prey, taken into defense, then back to prey, and instead of slipping the sleeve after he returns to prey, the decoy

brings another round of pressure, always ending the sequence in the dog's calming drive, prey. Prey periods should start with longer duration, then become progressively shorter (in a variable way, not linear way) over time.

PREY è DEFENSE è PREY è DEFENSE è PREY

Multiples can go through many rounds. As the dog easily begins to move back and forth, taking the pressure, then calming down as the decoy submits to his aggression and fighting back, we then start to reduce the initial prey stimulus. Ideally we want the dog to feel comfortable beginning to work in either drive, not just starting out in prey all the time. Thus, we slowly reduce the initial prey stimulus, bringing him to civil aggression quicker right out of the box, so that we get:

PREY (slowly lowering the amount of stimulus) è DEFENSE (increasing variably over time) è PREY

Notice that after we reduce the initial prey stimulus to nearly zero, we are left with the dog beginning to get activated to work in a purely defensive mood. Channeling training is a classical conditioning exercise, where he learns that prey stimulus predicts a coming defensive confrontation, thus he is always ready to fight back. It also teaches him that his efforts fighting back through confident defensive aggression are rewarded, because he always defeats and punishes the decoy, i.e. defensive confrontation predicts winning through prey. The end result is the following:

DEFENSE è PREY (and multiples of this).

The last step is to slowly reduce the intensity and duration of the prey periods, so that the dog can learn to quickly relax, and also quickly return to a defensive mood. So, now our prey dog can stimulate easily in both drives, through multiple confrontations. He can take a lot of defensive pressure and intensity, and quickly relax when the decoy stops fighting. For the prey dog, this brings his foundation work to a close.