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It is difficult, if not impossible, to train or maintain a patrol dog by yourself. At some point you will need someone to search for, apprehend or act as the aggressor to allow the dog to protect you.

Over the years this other person has been known by a variety of titles. He has been called an agitator (because he gets the dog agitated enough to bite); a catcher (since he catches the dog on a protective sleeve); a helper because he helps the dog learn its job); and a decoy (since he imitates the actions of an adversary. Regardless of what you call him, this person is one of the most important tools you have for training your dog. For simplicity, I will refer to decoys as males, but I know some excellent female decoys as well.

The Decoy's Vital Role

The decoy's skill, or lack of it, will dictate just how far you can take your dog. A good decoy will bring any dog to the peak of its potential. He can improve marginal dogs, help average dogs become good and turn a good dog into a superb performer. A bad decoy will decrease the performance level of any dog he works with. The good dog will drop to average or lower. The average dog might retain marginal skills and the marginal dog could well be ruined completely. Over time, it is even possible for good dogs to be completely ruined by incompetent decoys.

If you are working with no decoys at all, most dogs will slowly deteriorate and some will decide for themselves what they should be doing on the street (since no one else is defining their behavior). How the dog responds to the lack of work depends on its temperament. Weaker dogs will start biting poorly and eventually stop biting completely, even when the handler needs protecting. Without work, more aggressive animals will become control problems.

One of the first "behavior problems" brought to me years ago was a dog with strong predatory and defensive drives. The dog had been inactive for some time, and when the officer started working it again, it completely refused to release after biting. Prong collars, electricity and other tools had already failed to correct the problem, so I went back to square one with myself as the decoy. By lunchtime the dog was releasing normally, and we had not used prongs or shock collars. We discovered that the officer's decoy had been giving signals that stimulated aggression right at the time the handler wanted the dog to release. In effect, there was no behavior problem. Having access to a good decoy is important to every trainer and handler.

A Wise Investment

Unfortunately, volunteers for this type of work do not grow on trees. Officers are often forced to work with people who have no training in the area (and consequently limited skills), simply because no one else is willing to help. Other officers have decoys with minimum to average skills and consider this sufficient. It is not. Decoys should be carefully selected, trained to the highest possible skill level, and given periodic refresher courses for maintenance. The extra time and resources invested in training decoys will not only yield better dogs, it might prevent many future handling problems. A good decoy is worth his weight in gold.

Is Training Necessary?

Why would a decoy need to go to school? Can't he just come to training sessions, put on a sleeve and start learning the hands on way by doing it? Certainly this has been done in the past and sometimes is the only available option, but is not the best approach. It's not even a good one. Any fool can put on protective gear and take bites, but being a good decoy requires sophistication.

First, the decoy must be schooled in canine communication. If he cannot read the dog properly, he cannot respond correctly to what the dog is telling him. For instance, there are times when the dog's confidence level drops in the middle of a drill. By the time the trainer can tell the decoy to release pressure, signal insecurity and move away, it is already too late for the dog. The decoy must react instantly and correctly to such problems, then consult the trainer about what to do next. If he can't read the dog well, he can't do this.

After the decoy has learned to read the dog, he needs to learn how to speak the language of the dog with his own body. Decoying involves combining different signals that dogs use with each other in such a way as to establish the decoy as a lower-ranking animal in the pack. The mixture of signals is then changed so the decoy is speaking to the dog in an inappropriate manner for such a low-ranking pack member. If this is done well, the dog's natural instinct to preserve pack order will take over and it will discipline the decoy. The decoy has stimulated the dog to bite him without ever having to touch or frighten it. He cannot do this well until he has learned to convey the dog's body language with his own body. I frequently conduct lectures and workshops on decoying and am always amazed at how little most decoys know about this part of their work.

Next, the decoy should start working on physical skills involving sleeve presentation, focusing the dog's attention on different parts of the body, catching the dog on the sleeve, and working it after it gets there. These vital decoying skills should be practiced in drills involving no dogs until they are fully learned.

Bring On The Dogs

The decoy is not yet ready to take his first bite. Drills are conducted with belt flags, placement tapes, sleeve leashes and other devices to allow another human to imitate the action of the dog. Only when the decoy is proficient at drills without dogs should the added complication of a living animal be introduced. When he can read dogs, speak properly with his own body, control his approach and the sleeve arm minimize the chances of injuring or discouraging the dog, place the dog exactly where the trainer wants it on the sleeve, and work it in a stimulating yet safe manner. Once it gets there, he is ready to start working with dogs under the supervision of an experienced mentor. And this is just for basic on-leash work. It says nothing of moving pursuits, stick and weapon work, realistic scenarios with hidden sleeves, muzzle agitation, full-body suits, multiple assailants and so on.

The list could go on, but the point should be clear: Becoming a good decoy is not a simple matter. It requires technical schooling in subjects and skills that take time to master. Consequently, prospective decoys should be committed to a long learning process and program administrators should support them as best they can. There

are always enough people available to put on a sleeve and "take a bite", but there are never enough good decoys.

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