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From a street survival point of view, both online and off line methods of tracking have merit. There is also a negative side to both applications. I have trained extensively in each method, and still train officers in both styles, according to what their individual preference is. I have come to the conclusion that online tracking is the best producer for me in my area, and as a result, I use an online method of tracking when working the street.

I was originally trained using a harness and line, and then I had an opportunity to participate in a training program where I worked entirely offline. I worked offline for a year after coming back from the program and was relatively successful with my new dog. It was in a discussion with a good friend who had seen me work my dog in pursuit of a burglary suspect that I decided to go back on line.

I had been called to the scene of a house break in and had started the dog on the track. He immediately went in pursuit of the suspect and soon located a jacket that had been discarded on the track. We soon lost the track on a road surface, and were unable to relocate it. We lost the suspects trail and called the search off.

I was approached later by my friend who told me that he could see how my dog was trailing the suspect, but that he was not consistent in the work. He tracked so rapidly that I fell behind and the dog would keep breaking his concentration on the track to stop and wait for me. The dog was also losing the track whenever the scent had drifted or had been dispersed from the air. That is to say, if the dog could not trail scent the suspect, he would quit. This meant that time delays could make or break the success of a track very easily.

I decided to go back to online tracking and work harder with the dog on the nose down tracking as opposed to the trailing routines. The result was that my capture rate increased dramatically. My dog was more methodical on the track and could concentrate fully on hard surface work. He was not so quick to give up if the trailing or tunnel scent was gone, as he would put his nose to the ground and work on the contact scent. As a result, for my purposes, I have stayed with the online method of tracking in my area.

This is not to say that I never free track, or that off line tracking is not a proper application. Quite the contrary. In certain areas one method will be better than the other, and you have to consider your working decisions and decide on what method will work best for you.

ONLINE APPLICATIONS

Online tracking, if properly applied can be beneficial in that it allows you total control of the dog. The dog has less of a tendency to overshoot the turns in a track, and less of a tendency of pulling you past a bad guy who has gone to ground. Even though the dog uses airborne scent to trail the suspect, he works the scent on the ground as well. When the dog hits a corner, he will pick it up far easier than a dog that is following trail scent on the run.

Scent has a tendency to drift and blow in wide patterns off the original track. Trailing dogs will follow that airborne scent, and often overshoot the corner of the track so far that it is sometimes difficult to get back on the track if there is a lot of drifted scent in the area. The online dog will have more of a tendency to note the corner and make the turn in the appropriate location.

An online tracking dog is not expected to track footprint to footprint as in a Schutzhund trained dog. The method is too slow for street level work, and the dog will not lift his head and give you an indication as soon as a dog that takes advantage of both ground and airborne scent. You want your dog to use the trailing scent as well as the contact scent in order to use the speed of the dog, and to take advantage of the dogs early indications that you are closing in on a suspect. You also do not want your dog to track with the speed of a trailing dog, as he will be more likely to overshoot the track.

From a street survival point of view there are a few aspects of online tracking that are particularly beneficial. A seasoned dog handler can "read" his dog in total darkness by the way the dog leans into the harness and the type of pull on the tracking line. By working online, the officer maintains contact with the dog in darkness, without having to use his flashlight, which would expose his position.

A dog working online will work slower than a free tracking dog and will not be as likely to initially run past a suspects location. For example, you are after an armed robbery suspect that has fled into a back alley. He is running along the right side of the alley northbound. The wind is from the southeast. He proceeds down the alley, and near the end of it he finds a small clearing that is covered in dense brush. You get to the scene and put your dog on the track.

An offline tracker will track the suspect at a run with the officer following behind. The dog is working airborne scent only, and from the point where the suspect has turned off to the right there is a lot of scent that is drifting off of him in a North Westerly direction. The dog will follow that strong scent and likely run well past the point where the suspect turned in. It is not unusual for the dog to trail one hundred feet past the turn. If you are running behind your dog, and are within fifty feet of him, there is a high likelihood of you running right by the suspect, exposing yourself to danger.

What saves our situation on most occasions such as this is that the dog has usually figured out the corner and is on top of the situation before we get that close to them. If working online, your dog is more likely to pick up the corner sooner, and give you a more accurate indication of the turn. If you and your dog are on the scene together, there is less likelihood that the suspect will want to engage you both at the same time, although if he does, the dog will be his first priority.

The online method also gives you constant continuity in court. You never lose sight of your dog and can testify that your dog tracked consistently on the track he was placed on, from start to finish.

The major disadvantage to online work is the fact that you are only thirty feet behind your dog. Once you start to get close in indications by your dog you know that you are probably within shooting range of your suspect. This can leave you exposed to the suspect as your dog closes in for the final apprehension. In such cases where

you know you are in pursuit of an armed suspect and you are working online, once your dog starts to give you close in indications, and you have a general idea of where the suspect is, draw your weapon and cut your dog offline to close in on the suspect.

OFFLINE APPLICATIONS

Once you try offline tracking it is hard to switch back to online work. There is something about offline tracking that is very addictive, and I know that I had a difficult time deciding to switch back to online work.

Offline work can be effective in rural, bush and suburban areas where the conditions are conducive to trail scenting type work. A good free tracker can rapidly close the gap on a fleeing suspect if conditions are such that the suspect's tunnel scent is still available to the dog. This is where these dogs excel. The free tracking dog offers a distinct advantage in street survival situations in that the dog is usually far ahead of the officer and contacts the suspect prior to the officer coming in range.

While the speed of the dog is an advantage in the pursuit of suspects, it can also be a disadvantage in that you cannot keep up with your dog. Off line tracking dogs often get out of sight of the handler, and the continuity of the track can come into question if it is ever proven in court that your dog was not always within your sight.

If working your dog offline I recommend that you make use of a reflective harness equipped with a strobe light. The system that I use allows me to locate my dog with a sweep of my flashlight if necessary, and if the strobe light is in operation, I know where my dog is at all times, and it does not expose my location to the suspect.

In our experiments with the strobe equipped harness, the suspect cannot pinpoint the dog as the dog is able to move twenty to fifty feet between flashes, and often in opposite directions. In fact our studies concluded that the strobes confused the quarry as they would see the dog off in one direction, and by the time the strobe flashed again the dog was on top of them, coming in from a different direction.

We also found that when using a strobe equipped harness that the suspect's attention was focused entirely on that light source, forgetting entirely about the officer. It has been described to me in this manner by one burglary suspect that my dog apprehended a few years back, "Its like listening to the theme song from jaws and watching the shark coming to get you." This is a natural reaction and very beneficial for the safety of the officer as the suspect's entire focus of attention is on that dog.

One major disadvantage of working offline is the lack of control of your dog and the cover you can provide him. I have seen numerous free tracking dogs who were struck down and killed by passing motorists when they suddenly bolted out into traffic while pursuing a track before the officer could react and recall them.

The aspect of covering your dog comes into debate, and it is something that each officer or agency has to decide for themselves. Most police dogs that are killed in the line of duty are offline at the time of their deaths, and a large number of them are out of sight of their handlers. It can be argued that the dogs saved the officers

life, but the question arises, would the suspect have confronted the dog if the handler had been with him when the confrontation took place.

Very few police dogs are killed when working on line. I know of a number of dogs that died at the hands of suspects when they were off line and out of sight and way ahead of the handler. In one case the dog was shot and killed and the suspect was later apprehended and had to draw a map to show for investigators to show them where the dog was. In another case a neighbor came out to report that he had an injured dog in his back yard. The injured dog was a police dog that had been killed minutes before by a fleeing suspect when the officer got delayed crossing a fence and the dog got too far ahead.

In both cases the offenders had an opportunity to engage the dog alone. There was no officer to contend with, and they thought they would be able to further their escape by killing the dog. In neither case could the officer have changed the circumstances. Both were impeded by terrain or obstacles that prevented them from keeping up with their partner.

In speaking with suspects that have been apprehended by the dogs, and who were armed at the time, one thing is consistent. If the dog had been alone, he would have had a battle on his hands. Even when I have been with my dog when he has had a confrontation I have had suspects that have tried to break his neck, have struck him with boards filled with nails, and clubbed him with a bat. In each case I was there to help him out as I was tracking online.

In trying to compare incidents where a K9 officer was injured or killed on a track, I tried to find out whether more online handlers were being injured due to the close proximity of the officer to their dog as opposed to handlers working offline. Most of the incidents I am aware of where an officer was seriously injured or killed while working the dog in a tracking profile have all been offline tracks.

Of interest also, most of the dogs killed in the line of duty were offline at the time of their deaths. These deaths do not include accidental deaths from falls or traffic, which are very common with free tracking dogs.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that more dogs are lost working offline. This is attributable to both accidental deaths and death as a result of felonious assaults. It can be argued however that having the dog working way out in front of the officer is a safety margin that is beneficial for the officer.

In some cases where the officer was shot the dog was off line. In every single case where an armed confrontation has taken place the dog was always taken out by the suspect first with the exception of one incident in Washington State. In that particular case it is unclear as to where the dog was at the time of the shooting, and quite likely may have overshot the suspects location in a manner as I have described earlier that is consistent with offline tracking.

Both methods have their merits and their drawbacks. For city work I would always recommend online work for accuracy and safety. Agencies that work a lot of rural

areas I would suggest that either way would be beneficial, and that in many cases off line work would gain better results. Only you can decide what method you feel the most comfortable with. Either way, be there to cover your dog. You are less likely to have a confrontation with a suspect if he has to deal with you both at the same time, than if he has the opportunity to deal with you separately.

QUICK REFERENCE

ONLINE

* Close in indications by your dog means you are within shooting range of your suspect.

* If shooting starts and you are in the open, release the dog and go for cover. He will likely be the first target of your suspect and will buy you valuable time.

OFFLINE

* Stay within sight of your dog. Command him to go down if necessary before he goes out of sight or if he starts to get too far ahead of you.

* Work cautiously in high traffic areas.

* Never work your dog offline on a high building or parkade.

* Be aware that your dog will frequently overshoot the suspects location, depending on wind conditions, and place you at risk of ambush.

* Try to be in a position to cover your dog. The suspect will be less likely to confront you or the dog if you are there together.

AUTHORS NOTE: In the years that the RCMP have been operating tracking dogs in Canada over the last century, only two dog handlers have been killed in the line of duty. The RCMP operate the largest contingency of dogs in Canada. In one case the officer was killed by a sniper before the dog was even deployed.

Note: More advanced information on this subject during sessions instructed at the International Police K9 Conferences held annually in various locations throughout North America.