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training your k-9 for

high-risk traffic stops

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HOW TO PREPARE FOR AND OVERCOME A VARIETY OF OBSTACLES.

During a high-risk traffic stop, a police service dog (PSD) often is used to clear a vehicle after all visible occupants have been removed and placed in a secure area. The PSD is sent into the vehicle to check for armed or dangerous persons that could possibly be lying in wait for the officers approaching the vehicle. This article discusses basic K-9 training techniques you can use to ensure your dog is ready to perform high-risk vehicle searches.

Beginning the Training

The K-9 equipment you will need to begin training is a long

line and a harness. I use a long line as back-pressure to reinforce the grip from the apprehension, and the harness to ensure that the PSD can breathe comfortably.

I begin training the basics of the high-risk traffic stop by having the K-9 team a few feet away from the open door of a vehicle with the agitator in the rear of the vehicle. At this point, I ask the handler to begin a warning announcement and ask the agitator to become verbal. I don't mind if the PSD is barking at the beginning of this training, because we are creating desire and drive to overcome the stress and pressure from engaging the agitator in a confined environment.

PHOTOGRAPHS THIS SPREAD: RODNEY SPICER



■ This page, top left, and top right: In this sequence, the dog must overcome a series of obstacles (moving boxes) to reach his target — the suspect/decoy.





I LIKE TO REENACT ACTUAL STREET INCIDENTS IN TRAINING

ALONG THE LINES OF "WHAT IF THIS WAS TO HAPPEN?"

During this time, the handler gives the PSD the command to go into the vehicle. For example, I use the verbal command "auto." As the PSD reaches the vehicle opening, I give the apprehension command. As soon as the PSD engages the agitator, I add tension to the long line to reinforce and maintain the grip. When I add tension to the long line, I am not pulling so hard that I am pulling the PSD away from the agitator, but I apply enough tension so that the PSD maintains his grip. During the engagement, I add slack in the long line as needed so that the PSD can re-engage his grip on the agitator. I also give verbal praise as needed.

Distance and Angles

Once the PSD has made the association that the agitator is inside the target vehicle, I start adding more distance between the K-9 team and the target vehicle. When the K-9 team is 10 yards away from the target vehicle, the team's vision is narrow and its focus is straight toward the vehicle. When the K-9 team is farther away from the target vehicle, the field of vision is wider and thus the team needs to be wary of distractions around the vehicle. Different angles between the K-9 team and the target vehicle also can affect the field of vision.

Generally, this training can become a pattern for the K-9 team. When given the "auto" command, the K-9 generally runs to an open, driver-side door. But what happens when we change the angle and the target vehicle's door is closed? Our goal is for the PSD to go to the target vehicle and, if a door is not open, to search for a way inside the vehicle. We want the PSD to go to and enter the target vehicle regardless of the distance or angle. If there is no way to gain access to the target vehicle's interior, then the handler should

recall the PSD. After the PSD has formed an association between the role-playing agitator and the inside of the vehicle and consistently goes straight to the target vehicle, I then move on to the next phase.

Multiple Role Players

In the next phase of training, I use multiple role-playing agitators — generally two to three. At this point, I prefer the particular agitator who is going to be engaged by the PSD inside the target vehicle to remain passive and nonverbal. I also prefer the other role-playing agitator(s) to be verbal and slow to comply with directions given by the handler. This scenario generally evolves very quickly, but we need to slow it down and let it drag out so that the PSD's initial stimulation will subside somewhat. However, we do not want the PSD to lose interest. The PSD must learn that the time eventually will come when he will receive the "auto" command.

The handler should make a loud and clear warning announcement as the role-playing agitators remain passive and nonverbal. When the announcement is complete, one agitator begins to comply with the warning and exit the vehicle. The handler then verbally directs the agitator to the rear of the scenario. The handler continues verbal directions to the remaining agitator, who is noncompliant.

Prior to the training deployment, the handler should always remain focused on the PSD to confirm that the PSD is focused on the target vehicle and not on the agitator who is standing at the rear in this scenario. Because we are adding the distraction of multiple role-playing agitators, I have a long line attached to the PSD to prevent contact with the agitator who is out of the scenario. The PSD must learn that all satisfaction is inside the target vehicle

PHOTOGRAPHERS: ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT, LEIDER PHOTOGRAPHY; OPPOSITE BOTTOM, RODNEY SPICER



and in no other location.

Also, during this phase (as well as during the introduction), I have the handler either take the PSD physically from the apprehension or do a verbal recall. The reason I do that is because the PSD should not begin to anticipate a recall and leave the agitator prior to being recalled. This exercise should be repeated until the PSD's response is consistent it is clear that he understands that all satisfaction comes from inside the target vehicle.

Environmental Obstacles

In the third phase of training, I add environmental obstacles to the target vehicle. I like to reenact actual street incidents in training and manipulate them along the lines of "What if this was to happen?" so that training is always progressive.

For example, a real situation that occurred involved an armed suspect in a car that became disabled. The suspect placed blankets over the windows so that he could not be seen. Nonetheless, the suspect eventually was taken into custody. I reenacted that scenario in training to see what would happen if the windows were broken, were rolled down, or a blanket had been placed over the doorframe and held in place by the closed door.

In most cases, the PSDs circled the vehicle because they viewed the blanket as a solid wall or object that they could not go through. Once the PSD was shown that he could go through the blanket, we repeated the exercise until the PSD clearly and consistently understood that all satisfaction came from inside the target vehicle, and knew there was a way inside. As a variation on this exercise I also have draped newspaper, towels, or construction paper over the doorframe.

Another variation is to place cardboard boxes or trashcans inside the target vehicle so that the PSD must go through, under, or over them to engage the role-playing

■ **Below:** A first, the police service dog (PSD) does not understand that a blanket or sheet over the window of a vehicle is permeable. **Top, left to right:** The PSD initially tries without success to breach the permeable barrier — a sheet. Once he is shown that there is a way in, however, he does not hesitate.





THE PSD GENERALLY WILL GO IN THE DIRECTION OF THE

OBJECT OR OTHER PERSON(S) HE IS FOCUSED ON.

■ **Above:** As soon as the PSD reaches the open window of the vehicle, the apprehension command is given. **Right:** Some slack on the long line allows the PSD to enter through the window and engage the suspect/decoy. **Below:** As soon as the PSD engages the decoy, tension is applied to the long line to encourage the PSD to maintain his grip.

agitator. The PSD must know that he can overcome environmental obstacles. Such training — and staging the scenarios — may take longer and be more difficult, but will result in achieving an important goal.

Arrest Team

In the final phase of training, incorporate an arrest team procedure into the high-risk traffic stop. Doing so will ensure that the PSD becomes comfortable and confident working in confined areas within such a team.

You may decide that your dedicated, preplanned action should include light or sound diversionary devices, chemical agents, or other options. With the dedicated responsibilities of the arrest team, that also may include less-lethal, lethal, and hands-on scenarios.

Final Notes

If the PSD is not focused on the target vehicle in a real-world scenario prior to the “auto” command, do not deploy him. The PSD generally will go in the direction of the object or other person(s) he is focused on.

Introduce the PSD to the target vehicle from different angles and distances with the door open, door closed and window down, obstacles on and inside the target vehicle, multiple role-playing agitators, and an arrest team.

When recalling the PSD from the target vehicle during a training session, the handler may want to display a training toy as the PSD exits the vehicle to ensure that the dog takes a straight path back to the handler.

The K-9 handler should be the only one giving directions to the role-playing suspect agitators. That will prevent the PSD from focusing on another officer who may be giving an announcement and hopefully will prevent an accidental bite. ■

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