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## Using Canines as **SWAT Tools**

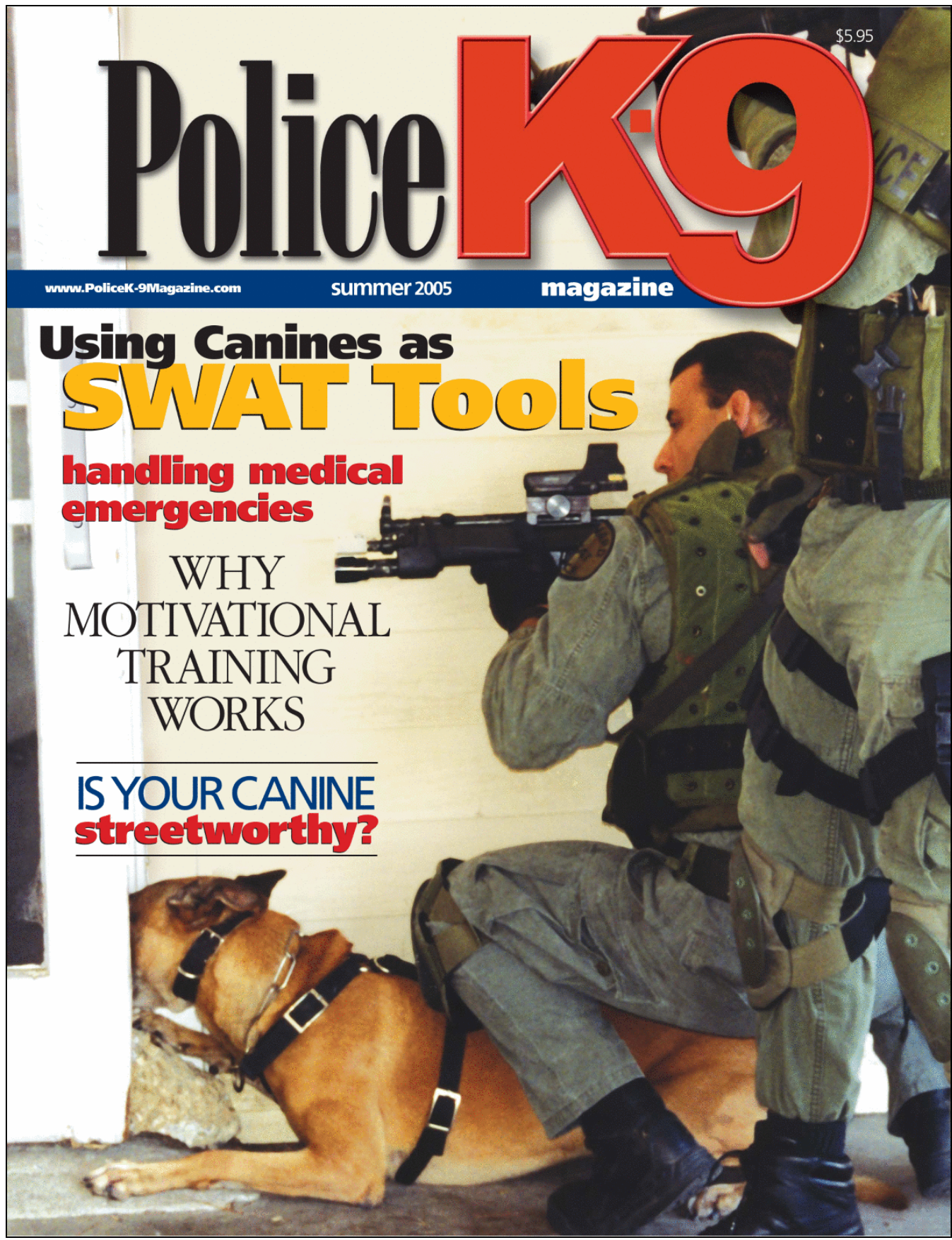
**handling medical emergencies**

WHY  
MOTIVATIONAL  
TRAINING  
WORKS

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**IS YOUR CANINE  
streetworthy?**

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## in my opinion

# Successful Muzzle Training

*Choosing the correct size and style and desensitizing your dog to the muzzle are important aspects of muzzle training.*

BY RODNEY SPICER

**T**HE CANINE MUZZLE is an excellent training tool, but how you use it determines success or failure. This article discusses how to choose the right muzzle for your dog and how to use a muzzle most effectively.

### Getting Started

First, identify which type of muzzle is best for your dog, depending on what you are trying to accomplish. Styles include the leather basket muzzle, the ram muzzle, and a muzzle that has a built-in bite bar. Each has a specific purpose and function. I prefer the leather basket muzzle because it allows a dog to breathe more easily while working and it is big enough to allow the dog to bark while wearing it. Also, a muzzle should not be so small or tight that it prevents panting, which dogs do to dispel body heat and alleviate stress and tension.

After you've selected a style, determine the size. If you are unsure which size to get, ask a vendor or another handler who has a similar dog which size he or she recommends. To test the fit, grab the front of the muzzle and lift the dog off his front feet. If the muzzle comes off, it is too loose and must be tightened. Don't make it so tight that the dog can't breathe, but don't allow it to come off, either.

### Muzzle Desensitization

The next step is to desensitize your dog to the muzzle, which is one of the most important aspects of muzzle training. Dogs that are not desensitized will try to pull the muzzle off with their paws. Also, if a dog wears a muzzle only during bite work he can develop a negative association and will



PHOTOGRAPHER: RODNEY SPICER

■ When an agitator hits the ground he should keep rolling away from the dog and use his arms to protect his head and face.

begin to whine, bark, and look for the agitator as soon as the muzzle is on.

Begin by having the handler put the muzzle on the dog and take him for a walk. If the dog starts fighting the muzzle, place the dog in a "sit" or "down" position and pet him until he begins to relax. Start walking the dog again and repeat the calming actions as needed. Depending on the dog, the handler might also correct him each time he fights the muzzle until the behavior stops and the dog accepts being muzzled.

When the dog is comfortable wearing the muzzle, put it on him while transporting him to and from training locations. After a few days of the dog's wearing the muzzle during walks and transportation, begin doing obedience training with the dog muzzled and eventually add obstacle course work as well. After a few weeks, the dog should accept the muzzle and be comfortable wearing it. There should be no negative associations; the dog's response to the muzzle should be no

different than his response to wearing a collar. The length of time needed for desensitization varies with each dog.

### Training with the Muzzle

While the dog is being desensitized, conduct building and area searches and handler-protection exercises with no muzzle so that the dog develops associations. The handler sets up to make an announcement before sending the dog in to search. The dog is released to search and finds the hiding agitator. After many searches, the dog associates certain activities with the handler. Then begin doing building searches with the dog muzzled. After the dog alerts the handler that the agitator is behind a door, the handler praises the dog and put his leash on while backing him away from the door. The agitator then opens the door and stimulates the dog as needed. The agitator goes back into hiding and the handler praises the dog, takes him away, and starts another search. Repeat that scenario several times.

When the dog has been desensitized to the muzzle and there are no negative associations with having the muzzle on, begin apprehension work.

Instruct the agitator as follows: When the dog hits you, immediately drop to the ground. Interlace your fingers and put your hands over your head, protecting your ears and face. Begin rolling on the ground as though you are on fire. If the dog is on one side of you, roll in the opposite direction. You are the dog's prey, trying to escape, and at no time should you ever try to grab the dog because he is much faster than you, and he will go right through your hands and hit you in the face. If the muzzle malfunctions, stop rolling and the handler will get to you as fast as he can. If he can't see you, yell out calmly "real bite, real bite."

The agitator should never be in a defensive posture, squaring off with the dog and threatening him while

**"A muzzle should not be so small or tight that it prevents panting."**

he's off lead, because the dog cannot grab the agitator while muzzled and may soon realize that he has no chance of success. The dog will then begin barking and not engaging the agitator. All of my muzzle training is in prey mode except for passive apprehensions. Once the dog makes contact with the passive agitator, I always have the agitator begin rolling with his hands over his head.

After the dog has been desensitized to the muzzle and has not developed negative associations while wearing it, I don't necessarily continue his apprehension training muzzled, but I do transport him to obstacle courses, walks, searches, and so on wearing the muzzle.

These training methods are not set

in stone, but I have had much success with them. Remember, the muzzle is simply another training tool; it is not a fix-all solution. Be realistic in your training and remember that some dogs have courage and some don't. You may be able to disguise a weakness, but in a real-world scenario a dog will revert back to his true nature. ■



Rodney Spicer is the owner and training coordinator at Gold Coast K9. He has been training dogs since 1985. For more information about the company, visit [www.goldcoastk9.com](http://www.goldcoastk9.com).

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