



## Detection Dogs Handling and Training

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Detection dogs are some of the greatest tools we have to locate hidden substances, whether they're narcotics, bombs, termites, incendiary mold or any other ODOR you have trained your dog to locate. However, one thing that can make a detection dog *ineffective* is a poor handler. This may or may not be news to you, but you must be aware of it or you are doomed to fail. You must also know that it is not necessarily my style to place "blame" on the handler for messing his dog up, but it is important to know the ways in which you could cause your dog to become or remain ineffective.



### **Selection of the Proper Dog**

To ensure that you are working with a dog that has been properly selected, I first need to discuss what is essential in a detection dog. I'm sure that every handler believes his or her dog is one of the best, and was properly selected; however, I have taught at many seminars where the fact that a dog was not locating odor was not the fault of the handler...simply, the wrong dog was selected for the job.

Whether a dog is being trained with food or a toy, the most important thing is that he has a *strong* motivation for one or both. This desire must be natural, and not forced upon the dog. If you have to starve a dog in order to motivate him, that is not a natural desire for food; similarly, if you have to force his interest in retrieving a toy, the method is not going to work. The reward, whether food or toy, is the motivating factor that causes the dog to search for the odor/s we have



imprinted on his brain, and desire for the reward should be the foremost thing on his mind. This motivator *must* be stronger than anything else that could prove distracting (animal smells, rodents, humans, etc). A dog who is easily distracted will almost always be a poor candidate for this work.

Next, and just as important, your dog must have a strong desire to hunt, meaning he will stay on task to find *the one thing* that he is seeking (in this case it is the food or toy he's been trained with that has been linked to an odor). In some cases, dogs have a strong desire for food or a toy but will not hunt for it...these are the ones that go crazy when they see the toy in your hand or bouncing about on the ground (visual). They will chase and retrieve this toy as long as they see it, but as soon as it's out of sight they stop and stare at you to throw another one, or want you to go find the "lost" toy. In other words, they have no desire to hunt for it. Other dogs may hunt for a short period of time and quit. What you need for detection work is one that never quits, or at least does not quit easily.

Some of the other traits you will (obviously) need in a dog:

- Healthy
- Trainable
- Courageous
- Sociable
- Confident

### **Working With the Dog's Natural Talents**

Every dog has a natural ability to hunt and detect what it wants. And I stated before, individuals respond on various levels to different motivators. The challenge for *us* is to train a dog to search for something that *we* want to find, such as an explosive. So, what we have to do is teach the dog that we are searching for something that *he* wants. Sometimes the problem is that we forget this and become emotional about it, or we begin to "force" the issue with the dog. Remember, it is natural for dogs to search for things that *they* want, so use this to your advantage.

Do your best not to get caught up in the emotion of "having to find something," or in the pressure of the moment. Years ago, I was searching for narcotics in front of my administration at the Anaheim

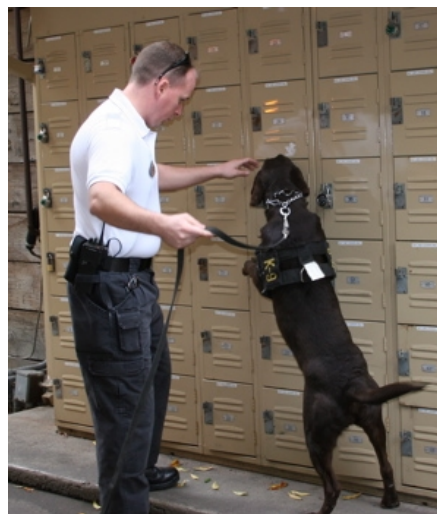


Police Department and the DEA; this was a huge case for the department, and I was told: *Your dog **has** to find something.* Naturally, a fantastic detection dog was then turned into an average dog that appeared to be untrained and had absolutely no ability to find anything! I had allowed myself to become emotional about the search, and the dog was confused and did not understand why I was acting so strangely. It is very true that your emotions go straight down the leash to the dog.

Therefore, you must do your best to work as you train and train as you work. This detection thing is simply a game and you both should enjoy doing it. If at any time it becomes work, or stressful for either one of you, your effectiveness will diminish or become nonexistent.

### **Your Role as the Handler**

If your dog is properly selected, properly imprinted and properly trained, he should not need you. You are merely a taxi cab driver and facilitator in the searching process. I know this is hard for you as the leader of your pack, but in the case of running a detection dog you are going to be following the dog's lead...in general. Now, don't go crazy on me with this aspect, but you really are going to simply make sure that your dog gets to the search location, and then assist him in getting to the places he needs to be in order to have the highest probability of locating odor. The less you distract him and get in his way, the more successful you will be. You do not need to tell your dog to "seek, seek, seek, seek" endlessly, or point out search areas until he begins to ignore you. Save your motivation until you really need it to complete your search. I see and hear far too many handlers annoying their dogs and distracting them from the task at hand.



This philosophy goes back to the understanding that your detection dog has a natural ability to hunt, and truly wants to find the odor he has been trained to find. Over time and with proper training, the dog will learn where he needs to sniff in order to be successful; so, although you may occasionally need to point out a seam in a car or an electrical socket, over time and with proper training your dog will seek



and locate things on his own. When you see this happen, you only need to say “Good Boy,” and move on. After a period of time you will only reinforce every so often, and eventually there will be a point when you barely speak to your dog at all. You will no longer need you to “help” him, you will only need to ensure that he goes to the places in your search area that he needs to go.

### **On Leash or Off Leash**

Simply put, it depends, but you should train your dog to do both. I believe there is always a time for one or the other. You might go on 10 to 20 searches that require you to handle your dog on leash, and then you will get that one...or just the opposite. Your dog may have a preference at first, but that is why we have the philosophy at Falco K9 Academy to “Train what you are bad at...not always what you are good at.” Sometimes as humans we get into a rut, and we do what comes most easily. So, if you are struggling with your dog at doing off leash searches, then you probably should reduce the size of the search area and teach your dog how to search off leash.

Training off leash will help take you out of the picture when it comes to influencing your dog. With the leash we tend to communicate where the find is, or where we *think* it is. Sometimes we cannot help pulling up on the leash, or dropping it when we know the dog is close to a find. If your dog is good at off leash searching, you can stand back and simply watch. If you learn not to talk to your dog so much, you will not make the mistake of verbally queuing him, and he will learn to make the find on his own.

In training or working on leash, you have to be careful not to use the leash as a communication tool. It should be, in most cases, loose and only used to redirect the dog to a location that needs to be searched. Your hands needs to be soft on the leash, with the ability to move it in and out of your hand in order to prevent it from getting entangled or tight. Working the leash is an art, and it should ultimately be relaxed and natural.

### **Videotaping your Searches**

Videeing your training and searches is a great tool for you and your dog’s effectiveness; this is the best way to see how you influence and help your dog make the find. It is extremely important that your dog shows *you* where the find is, and not the other way around.



As you watch the tape, look for some to the following:

- Changing your pace near the find
- Pulling or extending the leash near the find
- Dropping the leash near the find
- Changing the pitch of your voice near the find
- Constantly talk to your dog
- Forcing the dog through the search
- Getting in the dog's way
- Missing changes in the dog's body language when he is near the find
- Pulling your dog off finds
- Bending at your waist during the search and then standing up straight near the find
- Reaching for the reward near the find, before the dog shows interest or when the dog shows interest
- Dragging your feet near the find
- Look for any other changes in your behavior as you near the find

Do not worry about any video of your training being used against you in court. These videos are part of the training process, and will show that you are conscientious about improvement and are constantly in review of the effectiveness of you and your dog. As long as you are not abusive to your dog, or he never finds anything on the tape, you are only going to benefit from it in court; the opposition will not want the jury or judge seeing you doing effective training.

## **Summary**

My hope for you as you read this is that you will become a better handler by becoming less involved in the search. This will allow for the dog to do the detecting, and for you to be the brains of the operation. As you become less involved in working the dog, your world will open up and you will see more of the search area, and actually see the sudden changes in your dog as he gets into and out of odor. By

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being less involved in pointing, blocking and whatever else you may think you need to be involved in, you are able to actually stand back and supervise. This means evaluating your search area with one eye, and watching your dog's signals with the other. You will be amazed at what happens when you just allow your dog to work. Happy Hunting!