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# Do you want to be a Dog Chauffeur or a K9 Handler?

*By Nate Harves*

Now that may seem like a strange title for a training article. I'll explain further and hopefully it will all come together....






I recently wrote a training article for *K-9 Cop Magazine* on Narcotic Detection Training. I then received word that a fellow K9 officer was enjoying bashing me, because he didn't agree with some of the things I said in the article because he didn't believe in them as training tools or intelligent theory, or that I even had a right to speak out opinions against his or the way some around him did it. That's okay. Things like this make me giggle at how truly closed minded some K9 guys can be and it really motivates me. I'm happy to report that as I was hearing this second hand from a friend, and that I was contacted by the magazine and asked to submit another training article because the one on narcotics was received so well. So the score at that point was one closed minded K9 handler 0, and one open minded K9 handler 1.





The message in this training article is to never get to where you think you know it all or that you are done learning, because the danger in being closed minded to the evolution and knowledge in any disciplined form of K9 training is this...When you think you are done learning, you are. At that point in which you feel you know it all, you have ceased your evolution in K9 training and signed your signature to your own position as a relic that time and industry will move past. That's why some handlers are so critical of others, so dismissive and judgmental, and try to find reasons to keep them quiet... any action

or speech that they disagree with (and more importantly can't grasp or understand) literally scares them on some insecure little level. It harms the ego they've built in their own mind and threatens the position they've created for themselves. And the really sad part is these people are often some of the most vocal "This is how it's done" type people. Rather than contributing to the evolution, they actually try to hold it back, and harm knowledge and improvement of work. The ironic thing is, evolution doesn't hold back. So the harder they try by shouting out their "It has to be this way" cries, the more it motivates



thinking handlers and trainers to say hogwash and step over them.

The title of this article is meant to encourage K9 Handlers to think outside their little world and become better K9 trainers and handlers that truly want to know all they can about their partners; interacting with each other as competent and knowledgeable teams, not just dog chauffer's driving around a partner in a backseat they know nothing about! Some of you know immediately what I mean by that. Just because you ride around with a dog in your backseat doesn't mean you are a K9 Handler. Don't brag to me about the time clock you've punched if you shut off your evolution at the beginning of your career or haven't ever done anything since you've been on that clock. Don't brag to me what your friend did or how many cool friends you have and expect that to identify you. Don't discount knowledge outside your chosen discipline if it can improve the work inside your discipline. (I know that's scary to some K9 handlers that someone might know more than the cops,

but I promise you many do.) And don't think that because you shut your mind to it, that it can't work without you and that it won't step around you. Because it will.

Too many K9 handlers are threatened by outside training. I for example started out as training protection dogs and then sport competition dogs before I ever started working police dogs. I then worked police dogs well before I ever handled one on the street. I was always amazed how many K9 handlers acted as if you weren't anything to be respected in training unless you were a K9 handler. That was right up until I unzipped their dog

and pulled out their blueprints to show them everything they were, everything they weren't, as a helper or decoy, and started fixing all the things they had wrecked or been blind to in their dogs, that they'd seen if they hadn't been running around closing their minds and bragging how cool they were. This would check the egos and open dialogue. Interestingly enough, I always noticed that the ones most resistant to knowledge or most arrogant about who they thought they were, were always the worst when it actually came to knowledge and ability. It's always been one thing I love about dog training... the proof is in the pudding. When I show you it works, unless you're mentally challenged or in flat denial, then you have to admit that even if you didn't believe it, it DID work! I promise you that as a handler and a trainer in many backgrounds, there are vast numbers of police K9 handlers and trainers that are dangerous with the knowledge (or lack thereof) that they try to operate within. K9 handlers need to always be open to new learning. The more you know about dogs, their drives, their genetics, how they think, what motivates them, how to design and shape and mold their behaviors, and how to recognize those behavior offerings, the better the actual K9 handler you will be. It is just that simple. You will train your dog better, handle them better, set them up in scenarios and situations better, and work more efficiently as a team. At the point you admit that maybe you don't know it all and take a step toward learning and watching and recognizing your dog, you take a step toward becoming more of a K9 handler than just a K9 chauffer.

I'll give an example of a situation in which I encountered a "Master Trainer" (which by the way I hate that police K9 coined term because I've yet to meet many that weren't laughable in their true dog knowledge) and it went something like this. I was at a k9 seminar and a man approached that had a black dog. He came to one of



## [ *K9 advice & opinion* ]

the venues and wanted to do some bite work. The dog then proceeded to not want to even bite a tug on a leash, let alone a sleeve, or a hidden sleeve, or a suit jacket, or under-cover arm, or whatever. This dog obviously had no place being a k9. And I watched in humored mood as a couple of “Master Trainers” each proclaimed they could get the dog to magically transform into a man stopper. After each had failed miserably they asked the man how old the dog was and he said the dog was “only two years old.” They all seized upon this and confirmed “Well, there you go! He’s just too young!” Forget that I’ve seen countless eight week old puppies show more drive and gripping behavior than this, and also that this was being done out of fun, happy prey drive in broad daylight. They then encouraged the handler it would come “in time.” I felt sorry for the handler because he didn’t know any better, and he’d come

to these “Master Trainers” to seek direction, and rather than identifying and informing him they instead further encouraged his false hope that his “Master Trainer” back home had told him. That his dog would “know when a real situation presented itself and it wasn’t a game.” His “Master Trainer” had told him this and they used it as justification to go ahead and allow this dog to work the streets. Of course it was absurd, delusional Rin-Tin-Tin thinking. It was like Al-Qaeda had set off a dumb bomb and these guys were all dancing in the flames together, reassuring each other they were right.

This situation continued to the next venue, a building search scenario. The decoy hid in a room in a school at the far corner. Between him and the door were stacks and piles of chairs, desks, etc. The room was crammed full. The handler was to come to the door, make his announcements, and send the K9 into the room to navigate the obstacles, work the scent, locate the decoy, and engage him. I happily watched hoping to learn some new something because I’m always open minded to it and come to learn something somewhere. I see the man with the black dog approaching. I shuddered at the thought, after having seen the bite work minutes earlier. I mentioned to the Master Trainer on the site that I had seen the dog on another venue and that there were major drive and gripping issues and that this scenario wasn’t going to be good for his dog and might need backed up a bit, because the dog wouldn’t bite a hot biscuit on grass when it was fun, let alone navigate this room and take a real fight to a fighting bad guy he couldn’t see. The “Master Trainer” smiled and said “Oh, we’ll get him to do it. I’ve got some tricks.” After watching it go up in flames and the dog refusing to even enter the room (what?! I know I was shocked!) the handler returned his dog to the vehicle and came back to ask more “Master Trainer” advice and consolation. When he asked what had happened and why





his dog wouldn't even try to enter the room, the "Master Trainer" looked to me and asked 'Do YOU know why?' I confidently stated "Absolutely. Genetics and training." He equally confidently stated "Nope. It's because he's a black dog." He then just paused, slowly nodding his head to each of us. For a moment I thought some joke was being played. Then it hit me! Oh my gawd.... This idiot was SERIOUS! He then stated 'Black dogs just don't bite good. Never do. You see a black dog, walk away from it. They will never turn out.' I stated to him "Oh my gawd....you're serious? You REALLY believe that, don't you?" I walked away shaking my head in amazement at the complete lack of knowledge walking around with K9 shirts and Master Trainer hats on. It would've been funny, if it wasn't so truly scary and sad.

These types of issues plague K9 training, in my opinion. I know that a lot of K9 guys don't like hearing this but there is a real information and knowledge gap that exists in some areas. At what point in his career do you think the trainer at that venue closed his mind and stopped learning? And for how long had he done damage by reporting this nonsense to others who didn't challenge it? That they then in turn returned and professed it to others? What a damaging cycle.

You can see how the attitude of all this affects learning. And rather than promoting learning through actual knowledge, it stifles the environment of learning. That's why you see so many guys only want to train in their own little world, never with anyone else. If you train with someone else and a difference of opinion occurs





you might have to think or worse yet....change! Or even worse yet, explain your position and why it's better and stay the same. And that's terrifying. It requires you might actually have to know something. Just to be safe, better stay at home. It feels so cozy being the big fish in your little pond. No need to venture out or open your training up to scrutiny. It's waaaay too scary. This is why most guys when they train never want to focus on what they actually need training in! They know they have one issue, but they don't want to admit they do, so they don't train it in front of people. Instead they just come out and do what their dog does well. I call this "the Schwarzenegger." You see, Arnold had a story about when he was working out. He enjoyed intimidating all the guys in the gym with what he did well. He'd work his arms, his chest, his back, etc. But the reality was he was ashamed of his calf muscles. So he always wore pants. Then he decided that rather than hide his weakness, he'd expose it; lay it out there for anyone to see. He cut the bottoms off the legs of his pants and wore sweatshirts. He hid everything good, and only showed the bad. It motivated him to improve his weakness until it

was just another strength. He then went on to win his titles that he wouldn't have been successful at, unless he had admitted he could do better and honestly admitted this to himself and others.

These types of handlers often fall into a deadly tailspin of just reporting to duty. Do you go to work every night with a hunter mentality? Utilizing the tool on your belt known as K9? Are you proactive and prepared to meet any foe the night may bring? Have you made sure you and your dog are the best team possible to tackle whatever challenge thrown at you? Do you objectively look at your deployments? What

went well? What failed? Was it a deployment tactical weakness? Or a training one? A K9 itself issue? Have you stopped wanting to improve and being the insatiable appetited handler, and accepted the goal of just wanting to drive a dog around and lie to yourself that you know it all? Don't be THAT guy. Become the best K9 handlers you can be. Open your minds to training, and theory, and practical proof. Think through training and deployment strategies in your head before you implement. Seek advice and oversight from knowledgeable people based on what they actually KNOW, not by their title or time in which they learned nothing. Commit yourself to always improving in every way possible. Expose your weaknesses to yourself and work hard to make them strengths. Be honest with yourselves. Be dedicated to your success and your dog's success. Always hunger to learn... put your fragile ego down and admit that there are people who have forgotten more than you know right now. That's what ultimately makes you a better K9 handler and less of a destined dog chauffeur..... Know your dogs, know your training, know yourselves, and always seek the unknown! ■