

# train HARD FIGHT' easy

## Reality-Based Training and Successful Field Deployment

"We  
do not rise  
to the level of our  
expectations. We fall to  
the level of our training."

Archilochus  
Greek soldier  
ca. 650 BC

*by Nate Harves*

*photos by Lorna Thomas*

Are you  
training as  
hard as you  
could be?





As K-9 handlers, there are many important factors to consider in preparing to do our jobs safely and effectively. These factors greatly impact our chances of success and survival. If asked, many of us would state some of the obvious answers, such as selection of the proper handler, dog and equipment and receiving proper training. But I want each of you to honestly answer this question: Are you training as hard as you should be?

When I work with K-9 handlers, I preach to them to train using reality-based training that complements the way they will actually deploy their partner in the field. The training done within your unit must be focused on improving the efficiency and deployment capabilities of your teams in the field. The training should mimic and replicate the actual conditions, circumstances and environment that the K-9 team will encounter.

Two obstacles to reality-based training are lack of dog training knowledge and complacency. Sometimes handlers are limited in their abilities to read dogs and fail to structure training on an individual-need basis for the teams they are overseeing. They have done something for a very long time and feel that this gives it credibility. To the new K-9 handler, it can be difficult sometimes trying to get the “old dog to learn new tricks.” But this must be done. Just as law enforcement itself evolves and changes, training must adapt and change as better ways are discovered to communicate to the dogs and handlers what they are expected and required to do.

In everything you do, train in the way you will deploy in the field. As K-9 handlers, you should be critical of yourselves. After each deployment, you should debrief yourself and scrutinize what you did. Make each event a learning platform. Go through the actions you took in your head and replay the event as it unfolded. What could you have done differently? Was your perimeter set big enough? Did you trust your dog? Did you listen to all the radio traffic when the district car was giving the initial information? Did you communicate all you should have to your assisting units? Only when you have been critical of yourself and your actions and looked for something you might have done better, should you move on and prepare for the next opportunity.

In the training environment, I make the teams that I oversee talk about these events at our in-service training. We begin every training session with “war stories.” We discuss deployments that were unsuccessful so that everyone can learn from a mistake made and learn as a group and also so we can be critical of the training we’ve done and adjust as needed on an individual or group basis. We then talk about successful deployments and what the

handler did that paid off or what actions the dog took.

This has been invaluable to the group as a whole, to learn and share tactics. This can be done very constructively, without being overly negative. It has proven to serve as a great motivator to some of the teams to step up their efforts in their patrol functions.

There are many things that should be done in your training to promote realism. Let’s discuss some very

common mistakes made in training that negatively impact field performance.

Many times, I have seen fundamental, groundwork things done improperly with K-9s. Dogs are defeated in their training or dulled down in their

drive by too much pressure and not enough reward. Properly train your dogs to do what you ask of them in a way they understand. Avoid pressure when not necessary. Reward when reward is deserved. Be consistent in all you do and be sure that every training situation builds the dog’s confidence and leaves them feeling stronger. The dog should never be defeated in training.

Your searches should be blind searches, whether in a building or an open area. Direct your teams in ways such as “Confine your search to the first floor,” or “Once you’ve located the suspect, consider this building cleared and remove your K-9.” This type of instruction limits unnecessary search for training purposes in situations where time is a constraint or you do not want to defeat the dog by having him search a 10-story building unsuccessfully. Remember, the dog always wins.

Demand that your teams use correct officer safety and are methodical in their searches. By performing blind searches, the handler should use cover and concealment when making their K-9 announcements and move through the building in a methodical door-by-door, room-by-room

*Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.*

**John Wooden**



course, while not knowing where the bad guy is or inadvertently leading the dog. If a handler is going to make a mistake that could get them hurt, it must happen in training rather than while on duty! The same goes for the dogs. Show them success and end on something positive so they have confidence in their abilities as well.

We had a training night where we went to a large fairground complex area after dark. I put two civilian 'suspects' into the complex on foot. They started from a parked vehicle and went

mobile. We had secured a tac channel on the radio for this training and had officers on the radio acting as district cars and dispatchers. An excited officer put into the radio that he had a vehicle refusing to stop, his location and that multiple suspects had bailed from the vehicle and ran into the complex. We dispatched two K-9 units to the area to begin their track and area search. Those units responded and began to coordinate

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the search with each other while a perimeter was being set up. Information was being relayed here and there over the channel. The suspects were given instructions to stay mobile, if possible, but remain quiet and make no attraction. If a team missed them, they were to become mobile again when able and once located, they were to act either completely passive or flee, obey or disobey commands and once apprehended, give a good pain performance for the K-9s. It was excellent training for the handlers and the dogs. They were excited and searching for mobile suspects within a perimeter, utilizing officer safety in their positioning, regulating their flashlight usage, listening and broadcasting on the radio and coordinating with each other in their searches. I specifically wanted non-police suspects who might act more like bad guys and give off more adrenaline than officers would. I wanted my K-9 teams in the uniforms they would be wearing with access to their duty equipment. We debriefed each search with the teams of what could have been done differently, what was done great, etc., and one officer got a wakeup call when the suspect told him that he and his dog walked by him within 10 feet on two different occasions and even though the suspect saw the dog trying to pull to him, the handler didn't trust the dog and pulled the K-9 away. You can believe that officer started trusting his dog on searches.

Create scenarios where the K-9 learns through the process of self-discovery. This most often involves creating situations where the dog does something through a natural behavior without any outside motivators encouraging them to do it, such as a handler cueing them. For example, we'll position a man in a bite suit in tall grass, brush or tree line just a few feet in and out of sight. The handler will then bring the K-9 on lead and act as though they are simply airing the dog out. The

handler may even say "Go to the bathroom," or whatever command, but never a "Where's he at? Find him," type of command. The handler simply walks the dog along the area without a cue of any kind. While the K-9 moves through this area, he'll catch a scent of the man odor and show a behavior change as if to almost say, "Hey, Dad. There's somebody in there!" The handler then issues commands and deploys the dog for a bite. This not only encourages the dog to trust their nose and recognize man odor, but also teaches the handler to recognize the behavior change in their dog when they are in odor.

K-9s should be taught in training to work in active drive state and not to just react to stimuli. They should be able to act without encouragement from a decoy and should be trained to engage a completely passive or noncompliant subject, in an up or down position, who yells or doesn't yell or fights or doesn't fight after being apprehended. They should also see multiple decoys, not just one guy who always does it. They should see varying sexes and ethnicities, in all shapes and sizes. Your suspects should be civilian clothed. *Never* allow a police K-9 to apprehend, bark at, show aggression to, muzzle hit, be agitated by, etc., a uniformed police officer. If you do this in training, you are setting yourself up for an accidental police officer bite at some point. Your K-9 should learn through training to work as safely as possible around backup and assisting officers.

With that being said, use backup officers in your training. If you will take a backup officer with you on a track or search, make sure your dog is used to seeing that in training. They will become accustomed to seeing other officers with them while working and not be distracted by them or improperly focused on them. Exercise excellent leash control in these situations and work the dog through it. Invite your normal district

cars to attend training. They will be the ones going with you in most jurisdictions. Get them used to safely and properly working with the K-9. Educate them on what you need them to do and be sure to cover what to do should the K-9 accidentally bite an officer. Many good police dogs are shot and killed by officers who were not trained on how to handle an accidental K-9 bite.

Train in the areas and environments that you deploy in and train in different places. Don't become locked into one location or one time of day. Your teams should be training in day and night environments of varying locations. Train in the heat, the rain and the cold. You

will not have the luxury of being deployed only when it is sunshine and 72 degrees. Train your dogs to navigate obstacles, like climbing fences and jumping in windows. Teach your handlers what environments to use good judgment in when determining whether to deploy or not to deploy, such as with bodies of water, areas with things that could easily be used as weapons or crawl-spaces and attics. These can get you or your K-9 hurt very easily and deployment may not be the best option.

Your suspects should always be experienced decoys who can assist the dog as needed to be sure that the dog wins each encounter. They should be civilian-dressed, act real and act as if they've been pained



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Train in 'deploy' and 'don't deploy' scenarios where handlers must use their judgment on whether to send the dog or not. Also, show your handlers 'shoot' and 'don't shoot' scenarios. Sending a K-9 on a suspect armed with a knife, baseball bat, hammer, gun, etc., is a suicide send. Countless K-9s are killed in the line of duty every year unnecessarily because handlers deploy K-9s on knowingly armed suspects. Do not overestimate your K-9's ability to stop this type of threat. You may be a K-9 handler, but when guns come into play, you are an armed police officer first. Gunfire should never be taught as an attraction to the K-9. Muzzle your K-9 partners and take them to the range to neutralize them to gunfire to prevent officer or K-9 injury in the heat of the moment.

Utilize low profile equipment. Use items such as hidden sleeves under civilian clothing and lots of civil agitation. The muzzle is probably the least used and one of the most important pieces of equipment for this. Teach the K-9 to wear the muzzle comfortably as a piece of equipment and train them to fight the man in the muzzle. When properly done, muzzle work will encourage the K-9 to bite when able to and is great for building fight drive and frustration. Mix muzzle work in with training bites. When the dog is really hitting well in the muzzle, strip it off and give the K-9 a grip on a hidden sleeve. I use bulky bite suits and bite sleeves as little as possible because they make the K-9 too equipment-focused. I

want the K-9 to be man-focused and not just locked onto the equipment.

Loudly praise the dog in their bites and encourage them to fight the man. Get the K-9 used to all the yelling that might occur during an apprehension and let them see that when you come up, you are there as a partner and not just there to make them out off the grip. Build the bond with your K-9 partner so that they feel strength from you as a handler. It is extremely important that in training, the K-9 is encouraged to work successfully through their aggression and to comfortably work in fight drive and do this both in proximity and away from the handler.

Training should also expose the K-9 to some degree of pain from time to time to expose them to working through some stress and pressure and help the association that the man can hurt them but they will win if they stay in the fight. It is imperative that this is done by a skilled decoy who reads and rewards the dog properly. Grapple with the dogs, flank them and fight with them. Let them win when they are really giving their best efforts. They will encounter bad guys who will fight. Be sure that the first time they do, it is not on the street.

There may be more tactics and training scenarios that will help to make your K-9 perform at their top levels. I hope you will utilize some of what has been mentioned here and that it has given you food for thought on your own training regimens. Train for the way you deploy and never "hail mary" something on the street that you haven't worked on in training. Take the fight to the bad guy and go home safe as a team after every shift. ■

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