

Testing for a proper Police dog

By Christian Stickney

There is a lot of pressure that comes with testing for a Police K9. You are looking for that perfect K9 partner that will do the vast number of tasks we now expect in a Police dog for the next 8-10 yrs. hopefully. But we expect these dogs to work in all conditions, cold, hot, rain, snow, sand, to name a few. We want these dogs to work endlessly to find a suspect, drugs, explosives, etc. We NEED these dogs to engage a suspect in the direst of situations. As we all know, very rarely does it happen in a picture-perfect field that is open, no civilians around, 65 degrees and clear. We want these dogs to be loyal and faithful. So, having all these criteria in mind, what do we look for when testing for a prospective candidate. Below are the most important elements that make up a solid police dog.

Social Testing

We certainly need to be able to handle the dog without concern that he/she will continually turn on us or even worse, any possible civilian within 20 yards. Watch the dog's behavior when approaching you for the first time. What is the dog's body language displaying? We all have seen that person walking towards us on the sidewalk 30 yards away and think to ourselves "that would be a good fight". Well the same can be true for dogs. Is the dog's mind open? How can we tell? Well, the body is a direct reflection of where the dog's mind is. Are they confident, ears up, scorpion tail, hair normal, mouth relaxed, and is the dog coming to you freely? Or is the dog showing fear? Tail mid to tucked, fur standing up, ears pinned back, and the dog is neutral or moving back? Lastly, is the dog aggressive? Ears forward, tail straight up over its back, eyes locked, body stoic but leaning forward slightly?

Ideally, I want the dog with the open mind and body to follow. They should want to engage with you and be confident when doing so. Take some time with this first test to engage the dog. If things are going well, how does the dog react to you touching the dog. Start on the side of the dog and move around from there staying neutral.

Environmental soundness

Years ago, it was all about how big and mean the dog could be. We all wanted to see how the dog did during bite work. Was it a strong bite, etc. My opinion is partially still there. I do still want to see a strong bite, but I am testing the dog's stability in various environments before I even get to looking at any bite work. Why is this so important? The reality of it is this, if the dog is too afraid of where they currently are or going to be, they will never search reliably for a suspect, drugs, EOD, or whatever it is you want them to. They will be stuck in their mind due to the fear they have. Let me put it in another analogy. We have all seen or ourselves been part of this scenario. We are on the top of a cliff about to jump into the water. The person is locked in fear and cannot move. It is not that they physically cannot jump, all they must do is take one step, or for that matter fall forward. The reason they are "locked is due to their state of mind". They are full of fear due to the environment they are currently in. This is a powerful force that can crush a prospective police dog. I am sure many of you have seen a dog on a field that looked like a complete rock star. Hit like a tank, ran like a cheetah, BUT the minute you took the dog inside a building with slippery floors they hit the deck like the ground caved in. Their mind froze up and that was the end of that. I don't really care what the dog does in an open field. I want to see the dog in

some uncomfortable environments for their age. It is ok if the dog is not 100 percent, but rather what is the reset to the dog? Do they come back and gain mental and physical strength to the challenge or is like starting all over and no progression? If so, this is the ones with concern. I want the dog that comes into the environment and “owns it”. How we develop this can all be discussed in a future article. I like testing dogs up on a picnic table playing with a toy/tug. Will the dog stay up high or hit the deck. Some will still hold the reward but lie on the table. I want to see the dog up high holding the toy and showing the same behavior as if on the ground.

Hunt Drive

The next aspect of testing is that of Hunt Drive. Once again this seemed to be one of the aspects that was lagging when I first started. The bite work was more important than the hunt drive of the dog. This is the next aspect of testing and it is a BIG one. If your dog will not truly hunt for you, you are going to be challenged to find anything be it a suspect, drugs, explosives, etc. You need and want that dog that will not give up until they find what they are looking for. They will search in any environment, snow, sand, rain, heat. When you find this dog, that is the one to pay attention to. How long will the dog use its nose and continue to search for you? When testing I am not concerned with if the dog finds the object, I am looking at how long will the dog continue working for you. How much does the dog use his/her nose to search for you? This is the dog that will get you to the “reward”.

Ball/Bite development

This is where I will test the dogs desire to play with a toy reward and show their bite work. For the toy I want a dog that “can’t live without that toy”. Each time they see it, it is as if they had never seen it before. This gives me motivation to work the dog. I now have leverage to get a dog to work for me with much more compliance because I have something they truly want. I also am looking to see a dog that wants to be with me when playing with the toy. I want to engage the dog in play. Through this the dog and handler can develop a relationship that is strong. In opposition, I don’t like the dog that will take the toy and run away from me and be happy to lie down and chew it without me. This is more work to teach the dog to engage with me and come back. I prefer to see the dog “off leash” and come back to engage in the game with the handler. Not that I will deploy very often off leash but that I now have a dog that will search independently away from me with confidence but will then want to be part of the reward with me.

For the bite work, this is the last thing that I test. I now want to see the dog worked on line connected to harness or flat collar. I want to see the confidence in the dog. What is the body showing me? Again, the body is a true reflection of the dog’s state of mind. Are they committed to the bite before making contact? How can I gauge that? I look for a strong stance/posture, tail high, ears up, mouth neutral. I don’t want to see the dog with tail tucked, hair raised, teeth showing and growling. This is not confidence. Listen to the dog’s bark, this will tell you a lot about their state of mind. Is it a confident strong, rhythmic bark, or rather a yelping whaling bark? Lastly, how is the grip of the dog. Does the dog grip with the back of the teeth on the item, rag, bite builder, sleeve, etc. Do they move around when on the bite, or better yet sink in and show a deep full mouth grip. Can the dog handle some touch, and possibly slight pressure? I am always about building a dog to strengthen them. I will see what the dog is giving me and always try and leave them better than when I started regardless of testing or working dogs.

My hope is that you can take some positive things away from this article. I am always open to learning and growing as a handler and trainer. Feel free to reach out to me with any concerns or question's, I enjoy meeting and sharing techniques as we all have things to share. Stay safe and train for the real world.

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