

I AM A POLICE SERVICE DOG

by Don Sterling

As a working police dog I believe that there are some misconceptions or perhaps simply misunderstanding about what we are all about. What you term a training program we like to believe should more aptly be called an “education program” in which you teach us to use our inherited and natural skills and abilities to do what nature has programmed into our DNA over thousands of years and that is to hunt. All your entire education/training program teaches us is simply how to use these inherited characteristics to hunt for things other than food.

We often hear handlers say, “I taught him to track”. That is somewhat arrogant. **Nature has taught us to track.** If you had to “teach us to track” it would take you thousands of years and we doubt your agency would be willing to pay that kind of overtime nor would you be capable of doing what nature took so long to do and I might add, did so well. So please, recognize that your task may be to redirect our natural abilities from tracking rabbits to tracking perpetrators but don’t assume that you have “taught us to track”, as we already knew how. The same goes for all the other venues of scent work. The only difference between our natural ability to use our olfactory senses is to change the target from prey to some other target but all you handlers can really do is to change the target, not teach us a “new skill”.

The difficulty some handlers have in what you term your training program is in your ability to keep us motivated. Nature taught us to hunt when we are hungry and to either sleep, play or (have sex occasionally) the rest of the time. If, as a handler you cannot keep “the hunt” interesting enough we may very well quit hunting. Now we are not stupid. We know the difference between your training exercises and “the real thing” and we will generally work well when we know it is a training exercise because we know that we will receive our trained reward be it a ball or some other form of enjoyable exercise, but if we experience too many actual jobs in which we fail to receive our reward, locating a target, be it a perpetrator, an explosive, or anything else, we may eventually begin to fool you into thinking that we are working when in reality we are just beings dogs, sniffing around the environment because we have come to learn that real jobs so often end in failure and **you have failed in your part to keep us interested and motivated.**

Now keeping us motivated requires that you must be at least as smart as we are and plan your street training exercises to be as realistic as possible so we can never detect in advance if we are training or actually on

a real job so we remain motivated each and every time we are called upon to work. In training exercises we are guaranteed success are, whereas actual work requirements often end in failure, granted through no fault of yours, but failure none the less, and if anyone, man or canine, fails too often, they will tend to stop trying. Training exercises, if not carefully planned to duplicate real work exercises, are easy to detect. Don't overwork us on "routine calls" when it is obvious there is not a valid reason to ask us to work. All that does is add more probability for failure and a "**withdrawal from our enthusiasm bank**" and the desire to work in the future. Let me point out that repetitive routine training can sometimes become boring and does little to increase our ability in much the same way the repetitive training you may receive loses its desired effect of improving your skills or knowledge. Training simply for the sake of "filling in the blanks" on your training reports is, more often than not, counterproductive. Training must be interesting and programmed to add to our ability, not simply to repeat already mastered skills.

Additionally let me get into the question of obedience. Obedience, if one wishes to call it that, is also programmed into our DNA as we are social animals, living and working together as a group. We recognize leadership and some of us, depending upon our own individual personality, either accept a subordinate role in the group or challenge the leader for dominance and a successful leader can quickly recognize our position through our actions and body language. This ability can sometimes be a problem for people to understand and it is here that they seem to have difficulty with our **individual** personality. A strong pack works well together **based upon the recognition and acceptance of leadership** and the understanding of that leadership. Any failure on the part of a leader to lead will quickly be recognized as a weakness that will soon be challenged or perhaps even worse, ignored. If a subordinate does not follow a leader's "directions" the ability to hunt will be diminished as a hunt can only be successful if every member does his or her "assigned role" in the hunt. Some surround the prey, some begin the chase while others lead the attack. This cooperative effort is the key to survival and requires that every member know their place in the unit. **Let authority break down and failure and confusion is sure to follow.** You are, or should be my leader, and your failure in that role will ultimately create conflict in our relationship. You must be fair and consistent in that role. Never too aggressive but never too lax as either will lead to disappointment on both sides of the relationship. If you tell me to do something and I do not do it and you do not do anything about my failure to comply I will quickly come to understand that your authority is weak. But it is

quite unfair to allow me to disregard simple basic commands and then severely punish me for those things you feel are important.

So let me explain how leadership works in my species and perhaps yours as well. No leader seeks to “pick a fight”; only a subordinate will do so. At that point a leader will defend his position but only to a certain point, no more and certainly no less than necessary to both remain in control and accept the presence of a willing subordinate. Once a subordinate is dominated the superior will cease to fight with a challenger as he needs the subordinate to sustain pack strength. However, should the challenger fail to either submit or continue to attempt to dominate the leader he will be driven from the unit. Either way force beyond what is necessary to keep harmony within the unit is neither necessary nor prudent in a successful group. What I am seeking to explain is simply that as a handler you must show me leadership in both a fair and justified way because without it I will either challenge you or disrespect your leadership.

On a personal note I would seek to remind my human companions that I work best when I am comfortable and perhaps a little hungry. **My olfactory senses are sharper when I am hungry** and my drive level is higher so it is probably best not to feed me just prior to my work schedule. I am also more comfortable relieving myself on my own schedule, not yours, so frequent opportunities to do so during our work tour would be appreciated. Oh, and another thing, riding around in the back of your car or even walking around all night can get boring so a little “fun time” during our work together can only help to strengthen our bond. And one other thing, please remember, I don't have a seat belt so take it easy on those “fast turns” when you are in a hurry, it gets rough here in the back of the car. (Perhaps you may wonder why some of us show premature aging. It's because we are riding around in that back of that patrol car all night).

On to more understanding between us. We are smart and nature has taught us to be **observant of everything** that goes on around us. We miss little and understand a lot. You may think that we do not understand you, but we do. **We rely upon consistency in our relationship as it removes doubt and confusion as to what our role is and what is expected of us in that relationship.** If you are inconsistent in either your authority or your appreciation of our efforts we will soon discover this and our work will suffer. We respect authority and appreciate reward, even if it simply a kind word for a job well done. But we can tell if your kind words or acts are artificial. **Sincerity is not recognized only by humans.**

Just like our handlers, we must be friendly yet strong enough in personality to be aggressive whenever called upon to do so. We must be intelligent

enough to use good judgment and not allow our “authority” to supersede that good judgment. And as we are in a partnership with our handlers and not in our canine community this judgment to be both social and aggressive **is guided by your leadership**. Without this guidance it is easy for some of us to become too aggressive or lazy as all our needs are supplied by you so we don’t have to “work” for our food. Your role as our “leader” is far more important than you may believe. You should never abandon it or fail to remember that as a leader **it is your directions that will determine our behavior**.

Every day in our relationship is important because **we learn something every day**. We miss nothing, and like you, today will influence our behavior tomorrow. And we are just as susceptible to emotion, excitement and boredom as you are. If someone attacks you today, you will be more cautious or perhaps more aggressive tomorrow. Well we are exactly the same. But where you have a greater ability to rationalize previous occurrences than we do, you must be prepared to guide our behavior in the correct direction. I know that if I apprehend a suspect who hurts me on Monday I will most likely be either more aggressive or perhaps more timid on Tuesday and **it is your job to help to keep me on an “even keel”**. In many ways you have the more difficult task of leading, all I have to do is follow, but if you do not lead then I will most likely do what pleases me and that may not be exactly what may please you. Do not abandon your role of leadership or you will be disappointed in my performance and when that happens I often receive the blame when in reality it is your fault, not mine.

Let me conclude this by thanking the author for allowing me the opportunity to voice my opinions on our relationship and hope that what I have said will improve our relationship as I am pre-programmed by thousands of years of survival instinct to work together as either a leader or a follower. **If you fail to follow nature’s design of my instinctive behavior you will fail to benefit from my abilities. Take advantage of my abilities but don’t take advantage of me. Be fair, be firm, and be consistent, with a firm hand and a kind heart.**

And try to remember, my life is in just as much danger as yours and there are dangers out there that can injure or kill me so just as I am willing to protect you, you should be just as willing to protect me. I have poor depth perception so don’t let me fall off a roof, run in front of a vehicle even if I am persuing someone or leave me in a hot car. Take good care of me and I will do my best to take good care of you. Loyalty is also built into my DNA, but it is strongest when it is earned and deserved. Treat me with respect as I may be your best friend and protector when you need help the most.

P.S. One final note. I believe that you probably have loved me as much as I have loved you, and I know what I am about to say may bring tears to your eyes or sadness to your heart however I believe I must say it anyway. When the time comes, and it always seems to come too soon, but when I am too old to get up and move around comfortably and no amount of medication can sooth the pain, please, do this for me, regardless of how difficult it may be for you, the last final act of kindness and allow me to be put to sleep. I know that such a decision can be difficult but after a lifetime of activity and although I might miss it I can only enjoy my retirement if I am free of pain. So do for me the greatest and most likely most difficult kindness you can do for me and let me rest in peace.

May I be remembered as your best friend.