

MCK-9 Academies

by

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Debate continues over the best and most efficient means of purchasing and training a police dog team. MCK-9 Academies are springing up all over America, especially since September 11, 2001, when demand for dogs in law enforcement grew at historic rates. These 2 to 4 week wonder private academies or vendors that sell a department trained? Police dogs and provide all the training a handler needs in an accelerated program, are merely an extension of our desire to have things immediately. This is McDonaldization of Society as author George Ritzer has called it.

With a department investment of 2 to 4 weeks, it is promised that the handler will learn how to work this dog, train this dog, problem-solve this dog, know all the rules, laws, tactical uses AND WILL certify them as a K-9 Team. These 2-week wonder dog teams start rolling off the Henry Ford like Model T assembly lines that are produced at these MCK-9 Academies.

Chiefs are also intrigued that the department will have a dog ready to go in just 2 weeks. Traditional K-9 Academies are 10 and 12 weeks with some going to 16 weeks; the attraction of having a handler leave the department to attend training for merely 2 weeks is something that most chiefs would prefer. The attraction behind selling trained dogs and certifying the dog and handler in merely 2 weeks is to use skilled dog trainers to train the dog ahead of time, thereby causing fewer errors in training, fewer setbacks, and will produce a predictably good outcome in the dog. Training new handlers who then, in turn, train the dog is considered to be too time consuming and inefficient.

The problem is the dog is not a machine. It is not something that will have predictable results unless it is used in a manner consistent with its training. Herein lies the problem; the person who trained this dog is not the handler. Traditional K-9 Academies have long required a minimum of 400 hours of training throughout a 10-week course. The Police Officer Handler is paired with the dog, and they go through basic K-9 training together. The untrained dog is matched with the novice dog handler. The 10-week academy follows a basic timeline and lesson plans designed to have a final product at the end of the 10 weeks. Prepared by senior trainers who have trained hundreds of dogs, these lesson plans outline the average place a dog should be at any given time during this training. For example, by the end of week 2, the dog should be able to follow a human scent 100 yards with one turn in the track. By the end of week 5 the dog should be doing a 400 yards track with 3 turns and so on. When the dog does not progress at this designed speed, the head trainer is summoned to help problem-solve with the handler to get this dog back on track.

Traditional graduation day is one in which an independent certification takes place. The patrol type dog will be tested in obedience (ability to obey verbal and hand commands), agility (ability of the dog to surmount various obstacles such as a common picket fence), evidence recovery (dogs ability to seek out and locate evidence that has been touched by a human hand such as a discarded ski mask thrown into the woods shortly after a robbery), tracking (the dog must be able to follow a human scent trail), building search (the dogs ability to locate hidden humans inside a building), scent work such as bomb detection, and officer protection (the ability of the dog to protect the handler along with a verbal bite release command). It will be the dog and handler that will be judged as a team. Should the dog go to another handler for some reason, the certification is no longer valid as it was the team that had been certified, not just the dog and not just the handler. The evaluators are also important because they must have no vested interest in the dog team. Independent evaluations are critical in order to insure that the team had achieved a certain level of performance. Teams that are judged by the person selling the dog would certainly lend to an appearance of impropriety or not an actual fraud to merely complete the sale.

Another value of traditional K-9 Academies is that the handler becomes the trainer. Granted, this handler would not have enough experience after just one dog to be considered a head trainer, but the handler is the trainer to that one dog having put much if not all of the hands-on training with this dog. It is the job of the head trainer to teach the handler how to best train that dog, and it is then the handler who trains the dog. At the McK-9 Academy, there is no time to train the handler on how the dog was trained, merely time to show what the dog can do at that given time. No time for team development.

When it comes time to progress this dog into advanced work performance, the McK-9 Handler does not have the foundational training skills to achieve this. The McK-9 Handler with the grand total of 80-100hrs does not come close in having the dog training skills of the traditional K-9 Handler with 400-450 hrs. of basic dog training. The traditional handler will have experience and a knowledge base to be able to train the dog into the next level. The McK-9 Handler will be forced to keep making 911 calls to the vendor asking the dog trainer for continued guidance on training the dog.

The dog is not a machine and can not be treated like one. Through our zeal to be more efficient and more cost-effective, we lose reliability. Complex dog training is not "drive-thru" and takes time and skillful handling to be deployed with predictable outcomes. Teams deployed with poor training are a horror show waiting to happen. When this does occur, this one poorly trained team will affect the credibility of ALL Police K-9 Teams with public image problems and restricting court case law.

Let's look at a building search call. This type of call would be categorized as needing complex dog training because it involves obedience training (obey commands), scent training (locating by smell the hiding place of the bad guy), agility training (going up stairs in the dark or walking up a fire escape), and criminal apprehension training. All the subparts of dog certification are

involved in the building search. You must have a well-trained and balanced dog to conduct a building search with safety, skill, and predictability. After all, you can have the world's most obedient dog but if it does not know how to search, it will not find the bad guy and will not be a good building search dog. Conversely, a champion hunting dog that can not protect himself or the handler will not last long doing building searches as they will surely be assaulted by these bad guys sometime in the near future. The building search is a complex task requiring a skilled, trained dog.

Take our McHandler with a skilled dog in a building search but this time, the dog is not really interested in searching out the bad guy. It enjoys smelling the floor that has not been washed and still smells of spilled roast beef. How will the handler problem solve this? The 2- week McK-9 Academy didn't cover this and now the handler must think outside the box to find a solution. A more seasoned handler will probably be able to work around the issue right away while the handler with a grand total of 80 hours of training is forced to find a cell phone to call the trainer who is maybe a thousand miles away.

The truly effective dog team is not just the dog but the handler as well. A trained dog without a skilled handler is like a car with 3 wheels. Conversely, a skilled handler with a poor dog will not perform well either. The handler MUST be a skilled trainer, not for all types of dog, but at least for the dog that they are working at the time. Giving a trained dog to an unskilled handler is like giving the racecar to the teenager who just got a license and went through basic driving school. How well would that team perform?

The most effective way to produce a reliable K-9 Team must be with both of them training and learning together over time. Two weeks (80-100 hrs.) is not long enough for a handler to learn the intricacies of the training, tactics, and legal issues surrounding the K-9 Team. Most Police K-9 Academies have increased their training time from 10 weeks (400 hrs.) to 12 weeks (480 hrs.) and in some Academies as high as 16 weeks (640 hrs.). There are still others that believe it to take 6 months to a year to effectively train the dog team before its first deployment. It makes no sense in thinking that in just 2 weeks, we can now add a dog to this equation, and they are ready for calls.

Yet, McK-9 Academies promises just that, and they are popping up everywhere. Our desire to have more police dogs deployed and our need to have them right now has police administrators looking at these McK-9's as the solution. I am not saying the dog is not trained but the handler surely needs more. How will the handler be able to keep the dogs performance maintained or better yet improved upon when 80 hours is all the training they have? The handler needs to attend training and needs to train the dog as a partnership. The department bosses need to recognize that McK-9's are like a candy bar. There are a short-term gain and a feeling of being satiated but in the long term, a candy bars offers little but a temporary gain with long-term problems possible. The candy bar gives that nice sugar buzz but leads to weight gain, diabetes, and little nutritional value. The 2 week wonder team will also give that short term buzz in the form of media coverage and a feeling from the public that the police are doing

something. However, you will have problems when the dog turns from an image of security to actually being needed for security.

Established academies understand the need for time and the appreciation for the importance of the handler's involvement. The possibility of the MCK-9 is attractive to administrators looking to have a dog in place with little money and in little time. They want the Big Mac, and they want it now. Each year we increase the amount of training a police officer is required to have. This places more stress on the police budgets to pay for this training. When it comes to police dogs, the trend is to acquire the dog with training to pair them with a handler. It is more certainly cheaper in the short term but forewarning, it will lead to performance disasters and costly mistakes later on.

November 2008

About the Author

Chief David Ferland (Ret.) or 'Lou' to most, was a Police Officer in Portsmouth for 30 years. He acquired his Doctoral Degree from Franklin Pierce University. He has been with Police Dogs for over 30 years, is a nationally certified Police K-9 Trainer and Judge, and previous Head Trainer of the NH Police K-9 Academy. He also served as the Executive Director of the United States Police Canine Association (USPCA). He occasionally conducts K-9 Unit reviews or assists in cases requiring an expert in K-9 Training and Deployment. He can be reached by phone at 603-765-0571 or E-Mail at DavidFerlandK9@gmail.com.

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