

TRAINING BEYOND CERTIFICATION BY TRAINING FOR FAILURE

by Don Sterling

Continually training a dog for what he already knows is of far less value than training for what the dog does not know. Advanced training requires that we present both the dogs and their handlers with challenges if they are ever going to overcome and be prepared for the reality of unknown conditions on the street. We are all victims of human nature. I do not care how smart one is as the flaws of human nature afflict us all, the smart as well as the not so smart. And most people tend to do those things they do well, find pleasant or rewarding or tend to make them look good or feel good. The easy things. The problem is the easy things tend not to teach us much nor advance our cause. It is the difficult that leads to progress. Back in the 60's when I was a young police handler we did not have bomb dogs, we did not have narcotics detection dogs, we did not have arson dogs, we did not have cadaver dogs, and tracking was relegated to chance and luck rather than anything else. Hard surface tracking was thought by many experienced trainers, good trainers at that, to be impossible. Yet today all these things are taken for granted. We did not learn all these things by practicing the things we liked, the things we knew, the things we were already good at, (bite work), or the things that made us feel or look good. We learned these things by venturing out beyond the basic concepts, by seeking higher levels of performance, by not accepting "good enough".

Speaking in general terms, (realizing that there are many departments with excellent training programs), I still find that some department training programs do not present a challenge to their dogs or to their handlers. I still see many of the same difficulties and problems that confronted handlers twenty and thirty years ago. Things such as difficulty in control, low levels of proficiency in tracking, a lack of coordination between handler and dog in scent work, **and most disturbing, a lack of understanding between the handler and the dog, which leads to less than maximum proficiency in**

the dog's performance and less than satisfaction in the handler's appreciation of that performance.

It is my feeling that many of the difficulties I have described come from problems in understanding how dogs think and how we think of our dogs. Often training becomes "a routine necessity", mandated by department regulation rather than an opportunity to both teach the dog something beyond what he was capable of doing previously as well as an opportunity for the handler to learn something more about the dog he or she is working. **If a department's training program can not produce observable progress in a teams performance over a given period of time there is little if any benefit or justification for expending the time, energy or expense in conducting training that simply maintains a level of performance reached long ago in the teams career.**

I have been judging certifications for many years and I can understand and fully appreciate the satisfaction and pressure on handlers in achieving certification as I also had to certify my own dogs during my career. But let's not kid ourselves, certification is a base level of acceptable performance. Depending upon the certifying body, or as with the USPCA, the region or the judges, some are more difficult than others, but none are extremely difficult, nor are they designed to be so. Certification tests are not intended to attempt fail any team, but rather to judge basic performance levels, no more and no less. **But training should not end at certification. Certification for a working police dog should not be the goal of his training but rather the beginning of his ability to continue his "higher education".** You could look upon this in much the same way we look upon children as they complete their education...the real learning only begins when those children receive their diploma, certification for our dogs, and they enter the real world of employment. One should understand when practice ends, and learning begins. Teaching, or training, is what we do with the dog during basic training. **Learning is what the dog does with what we have taught him during basic training. Learning, on the part of the dog, begins when he uses his own intelligence to figure out problems presented to him that he has not faced previously in training.** Thus, once basic training is completed, I have found it is often best to "train for failure". Now please, don't jump the gun until I explain.

When training basic concepts such as tracking, scent work, etc. we never “train for failure” but rather for success. We all understand that. But once a dog has grasped concept and demonstrated basic competence it is of no benefit to continue offering the dog, (unless he is having other problems), the same level of difficulty he has already mastered. That would be like having your child repeat the fifth-grade year after year even though he has passed fifth grade education requirements. Not only does this not allow the child the opportunity to advance his education, but quickly leads to boredom and a lowering of proficiency over previous levels of performance. **Thus, I will often set up a training exercise that tests the limits of my dog’s ability, exercises in which the dog must call upon his own experience, intelligence and prior training to finish the task.** Doing the same old exercise, week after week, month after month, year after year, teaches little if anything, and often creates the opposite effect, a bored and disinterested handler and diminished drive and interest in the dog.

So, let me offer an example of “training for failure” and how it may differ from training for success. I see my detector dog hesitate as he is searching. I know that the aid is near the location he is hesitating at. I stop. I would have no reason to stop if I did not know that the aid is in this location as the dog has failed to give me a strong enough indication, but I stop anyway, wanting the dog to succeed. I change my dialog with the dog from “find it” to “is it in there?” The dog alerts and I am successful. Poor training for a certified dog. **What should have occurred is the handler should have not have changed his dialog nor his search procedure but continued on as he normally would have had he not known where the aid was located, finished the search and taken the experience to figure out why the dog failed to locate the target, not help him to do so.** That is one reason many teams fail certifications and many handlers fail to trust their dog.

Another aspect of training for failure might be by purposely placing an aid in an environment in which the dog would have difficulty locating the target due to environmental conditions to evaluate how the dog would react to the situation. It is not absolutely necessary that the dog find the aid, but more importantly that the dog tell you that there is a target odor present and he is

having difficulty following it back to source so you, the handler, can observe the dog's reaction to the situation, attempt to find a way to work out the source and **give the dog an opportunity to learn how to do so himself**. Thus, by "setting the exercise up for failure" rather than providing a guaranteed successful outcome you learn more, increase the dog's determination in the face of difficulty, training him not to "give up" and afford the dog the opportunity to learn.

Moving on to another situation. Tracking. We lay a nice long track on a golf course. No fences, no people, no traffic, no garbage laying around with all those discarded Mac Donald wrappers around, no "back yard smells" to interfere with the track scent. And the dog does a great track and we all feel good. (In twenty years, I can only remember two real street tracks that crossed a golf course). It is not wrong nor incorrect to train just beyond the dog's ability if we wish to move him forward, forward beyond certification.

Control on criminal apprehension. We send the dog to catch the bad guy. He does. We tell the bad guy to stand still, he does. The dog releases and everyone is happy. But is that the way it happens or simply a way to make us feel like we have a well-trained dog? What would happen if we had the agitator challenge our control, just a little bit by reacting a bit less cooperatively? Perhaps by acting frightened, trying to give up but by not standing still? Would the dog release as well as if the agitator didn't stop moving? Sure, it might not make for such a perfect outcome as if he had, but it would certainly teach the dog to follow your commands better. **We should train for the road and not just for certification as the average perpetrator has not read the certification rule book.**

Agility. Sound simple? But what if the dog is required to jump over something, he has never faced on the training grounds? Try a flat bed trailer. Many dogs that can easily scale a six-foot training wall will fail to jump up on a four or five-foot-high flatbed. Try it some time yourself and see. What I am aiming at is that we should all seek to advance our training beyond minimum requirements. We should not always set up training scenarios that tend to guarantee success but rather scenarios that

challenge the dog, indeed, challenge the handler. Now I have never found it good practice to embarrass a handler but I do find it beneficial to set up exercises that teach the handler to understand how his or her dog works, to recognize when a dog is having difficulty, and how to deal with a dog's failure in the street. Try the following if you like. Place an agitator on the ground on one side of a four-foot-high chain like fence. Have him agitate the dog and lay downright next to the fence and send the dog from the other side. Ninety percent of all dogs will fail to jump the fence but will try to grab the sleeve through the wire. Have the agitator get up and run. You would be surprised how far they can get before the handler figures out what to do and gets the dog over the fence, if at all. This is the kind of training exercise that might prove far more beneficial than an exercise that the dog has done thirty or forty times previously on the training grounds.

With ever increasing frequency we find the trend in law enforcement moving towards more and more stringent regulations, guidelines and scrutiny. And the patrol officer on the street is most often the target of such trends, few more so than the canine handler. I do not choose to comment on the correctness of this trend but rather to face the necessity to deal with it as there is no way to avoid it. Thus, we either deal with the situation or become a victim of its reality. The idea for this article was derived, in part, from this premise as well as from an idea that the training of the police service dog has been moved forward by those handlers and trainers who have sought to achieve performance beyond adequate, beyond acceptable, beyond good enough, beyond certification. If we wish to get the best from our dogs, we must understand that practice should last only long enough for the dog to master the required skill and after that, practice should end, and higher education should begin. **Ask for more from your dog and it will usually be granted, ask for less and most assuredly that too will be granted.**

Remember, someone out there may be trying to kill you and tonight may be the night, so keep your head down, look out for the bad guys, and trust your dog.
Only fools go where angels fear to tread