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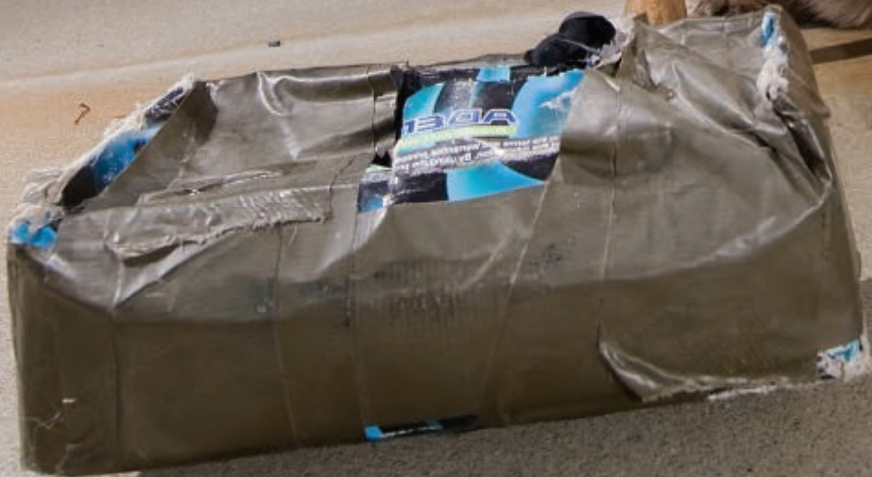
# Police **K9** magazine

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## Detector Dog Issue

Developing a Tactical Patrol Dog  
Part 2

Proper Deployment of Gun Detection K-9s



# Reality-Based

# DETECTION TRAINING



by Rodney Spicer

**R**eality-based detection training prepares K-9 teams for the “real world” by introducing typically occurring distractors and incorporating the same types of challenging environments the team will encounter while in the field. By simulating actual working conditions during training, we increase the likelihood of success once the team is deployed.

Once the police service dog (K-9) has learned an association with a specific target odor and has been conditioned to come to a final response by alerting to that target odor, I then proceed to the next phase of training.

This involved introducing masking agents and distractors such as food, animals, and animal odors. The final phase of training concludes with exposing the team to a variety of challenging environments.

I begin with masking odors which are commonly used by drug traffickers, such as fabric softener, coffee grounds, motor oil and grease. Any masking odor that has been encountered in the field can and should be used. I also incorporate odors such as food as distractors. I typically use scent boxes (4x4x12, with a 3-inch hole on the top) and a 6-foot or shorter lead during this phase of

training so I can systematically direct the K-9 and reinforce an alert if needed. It should be noted, however, that the ultimate goal is for the K-9 to range out and sniff independently of the handler.

To introduce masking agents, I put out several rows of scent boxes that contain different masking agents as well as target odors to which the K-9 has been conditioned to alert. For example, I might place several rows of scent boxes with ten boxes in each row. In the first row, I will place a masking odor such as coffee grounds in all ten boxes. Then I place a target odor in one of the boxes along with the masking odor of coffee grounds. This encourages the K-9 to discriminate between the undesired masking odor and recognize the trained target odor.

In the next several rows, I repeat the above strategy in each row, in a random fashion, using a variety of different masking agents as well as distracting odors. For instance, the second row might contain hamburgers; the third row, tacos; the fourth row, fabric softener; the fifth row, hot dogs; the sixth row, cat food; and so on. Once the K-9 alerts on a target odor, he receives his reward along with verbal praise.

If the K-9 becomes distracted by masking agents and distracting odors during the sniff, I keep him moving and calmly direct him to the next box until he is finally at the target box where he can receive his reward. If this method is not successful, or if the K-9 fails to alert on the target odor, I will lower the threshold of the masking agent or distracting odor and increase the amount of the target odor until the desired behavior is achieved.

Once the K-9 is successful with scent boxes, I transition into real world situations by using things such as envelopes, drawers and boxes to hide the masking, distracting and target odors. I then graduate to having the distracting odors, such as a hamburger, accessible to the K-9 during sniffs. Finally, I might place a cotton ball (permeated with a target scent) inside the hamburger as a final test. (Of course, actual narcotics should never be accessible to the K-9.)

After the K-9 is successful in the areas of masking agents and distracting odors such as food, I use the same method to introduce other distracting odors such as animal scent. Animal scents that are typically encountered during field searches are dogs, cats, birds, and mice. Animal scents often elicit either prey drive or aggression in the K-9. The K-9 must learn that satisfaction comes only through the handler after alerting to a target odor.



**FACING PAGE:** The real world is full of distracting odors, and your K-9 must be trained to focus on the target odor.

**THIS PAGE:** The target aid (above) must be detected despite the powerful presence of distracting odors, such as these hamburgers.



PHOTOGRAPHS: RODNEY SPICER



■ A warehouse filled with myriad distracting odors - much like those often searched in real-world scenarios - offers an ideal training location.

Introducing animal scent might begin with placing a target odor near a used or occupied dog crate. Using animal scent as a distractor can also involve incorporating sniffs in and near abandoned buildings as well as outdoor areas that pets frequent such as a walking path, or dog park. I have also been known to bury the target odor under dog feces in the search area. Outdoor searches can lend themselves to exposing the K-9 and handler to more challenging environments, which is the last phase of real world training.

If the K-9 begins to sniff and stay at the animal odor, I will calmly say “no” and direct the K-9 away from the animal odor. Once the K-9 comes to a final response and alerts to the target odor the handler will reward with a toy and give verbal praise. The handler must differentiate the command “no” from praise. No means “no” and praise means “good” — be happy. Remember this is an introduction to reality-based training — the real world.

If the handler is too harsh and corrections too strong, negative associations may be made and avoidance learned. The K-9 will either shut down and not continue, or go through the motions like they are sniffing when they are not. Show the way and praise when correct.

Regarding outdoor sniffs, the K-9 should have a clear, consistent command for relieving himself, such as “take a break.” For example, my dog will relieve himself three times at the beginning of the day and if he only goes twice then the third time will be during the sniff, which is not acceptable. Know your dog’s break schedule.

Introducing the K-9 to challenging environments during training ensures that he will not be distracted by different environments once in the field. Some of the challenging environments I include during training are vehicles, attics, crawl spaces, and outdoor areas such as busy parking lots, junkyards, fields, and riverbeds.

I conduct just over 200 K-9 sniffs per year and based

on my experience I can guarantee this: in the real world you will not send your K-9 into a vehicle with dozens of tennis balls on the floor and someone dumping buckets of tennis balls over his head; but I can guarantee that you will come across a vehicle with hamburger remnants between the seats, french-fries on the floor, drinks in the center console, and maybe some animal scent in the back seat. I have found that if we train for the real world we will be as successful in the real world as we are during training. ■



■ Special training room allows the K-9 to navigate right to the target.

■ Hiding the target in a kennel (above) or under dog feces (below) conditions the K-9 to differentiate between highly stimulating odors of other dogs and the target odor.

