

THE VALUE OF MUZZLE TRAINING

He knew his dog was good. After all, he'd placed first in two major competitions and second in another. In each case, the man work exercises went like precision clockwork, impressing the judges and spectators alike with tough, hard hitting routines in the apprehension and bite exercises.

Training sessions went virtually the same way. Time after time, the dog hit so hard he'd nearly knock the agitator off his feet. His bites were hard and determined and his outs were clean and instant.

This dog, to his handler and those who knew him, was a great working animal and certainly a good "street" dog.

Many evenings, while on patrol, this handler envisioned what he and his canine partner would do when they faced that incident where he would have to use his dog as a force to stop a felon. That evening finally arrived. The call came out that a holdup had just occurred at a local convenience store and a description of the suspect's vehicle was broadcast. Within only a few minutes the vehicle was spotted and a short chase followed. As the suspect's vehicle finally rolled to a stop, the handler began to wonder if this was going to be that moment he had envisioned and always anticipated. Even before he was able to approach the suspect's vehicle, the suspect jumped from the car and began running down a residential street. When shouts to "stop" were ignored, the decision was made: "send the dog". Without hesitation, the dog left the patrol car and moved like a rifle shot down the street after the suspect. When he caught up with the fleeing man, who was moving as though he had seen a ghost, the dog ran along side the suspect, down the street and around the corner into another unit that had just arrived as a backup to the responding K9 officer. The suspect was arrested without further incident, and without a bite.

What went wrong? Why hadn't this tough, hard-hitting dog made contact with the running suspect and held him until his handler arrived? Unfortunately, this phenomenon occurs all too frequently where dogs have been worked on sleeves and, even to some extent, on concealed sleeves. Why? There are probably a number of reasons, but the biggest seems to be the imprint of a training device established early in the dog's training. This, coupled with the posture and behavior of the agitator, whether wearing a concealed sleeve or conventional sleeve, establishes a behavior to be expected of the "bad guy". In about all cases, the agitator cues the dog through his movements in anticipation of being hit by the moving canine.

In an effort to offset this phenomenon, the muzzle has evolved as a viable and necessary training device. Used properly, it allows for more street-type exercises without the use of training sleeves or regular agitators, with whom the dogs become familiar after several training sessions.

Now, don't rush out and slap a muzzle on your dog and expect him to do a yeoman's job the first time out. In a few cases you might, but in most you won't.

To be effective, the muzzle must become second nature to the dog. In other words, he should be adapted to it long before any agitation or apprehension exercises are even undertaken.

First, a good, strong, lightweight muzzle should be fitted to the dog. The dog should, then, be allowed to wear the muzzle for varying periods of time for at least two weeks before any manwork is undertaken. This, so the dog has learned to accept the device without fighting it, thus distracting him from the apprehension training and agitation exercises.

Start by putting it on the dog and allowing him to work out a short period of adjustment to the unit. Then follow with short obedience (heeling) exercises, using turns with leash corrections and praise to offset any attempt the dog will make to paw at the muzzle. In other words, each time he paws at the unit, make a quick, right or about turn and when he returns to heel, praise lavishly. He will soon show signs of lessening attention to the muzzle and more to the handler and exercises.

It is also advisable to let the dog wear it for a day at a time, as long as he can breathe, bark, pant and drink freely.

After the initial two weeks of introduction, you should be ready to start with his leash agitation.

Why not start right away? Why the two week adjustment? Because slapping the muzzle on the dog and starting agitation becomes another pre-conditioning exercise that says, "We're going to do apprehension work now". Then when the muzzle comes off and it's back to the street.... you could be back to square one.

The leash agitation should be just as it is any other time, except that the agitator will not be wearing any sleeve. As the dog increases in his intensity during agitation, the agitator should turn to run and the dog allowed to make one quick hit at the agitator's back. The agitator should continue running from the area and the dog praised profusely for his attempts at contact.

Gradually, the intensity of the fighting between agitator and dog should increase before the agitator turns and runs.

When the dog has reached a point where his interest will not divert from the agitator, you are ready to let him hit the agitator while you follow with the leash.

As he hits the subject, the agitator should fall to the ground and let the dog dominate him. The first few times, praise the dog the moment the subject falls. As the dog gets tougher and more determined, he must hit harder and longer before the running agitator falls. At this point, off leash work can be started.

When working off leash, start close, about eight to twelve feet from the dog and gradually increase the distance of agitation and chase. After the dog brings the subject down, praise him, hold him and let the subject scurry away, keeping the dog's interest peaked. Eventually your dog should give determined chase with tough hits, going the length of a football field or more. Once he shows strength and determination in these exercises, then you can introduce the "out".

Now you're ready to start some of those "street exercises" that you've wanted to try.

Some of the exercises that lend themselves very well to muzzle work are:

- * Chase of a suspect through a crowd
- * Foot pursuits and apprehensions
- * Handler protection / car stops
- * Handler protection, multiple suspects
- * Area searches
- * Building searches
- * Crowd control
- * Correcting fighting problems
- * Socialization

Chasing a suspect through a crowd is an invaluable exercise for metro areas with a high density of people and high crime rates, where a running suspect can disappear quickly in a crowd. A properly trained dog, under the right conditions, can scent lock on the fleeing subject and follow through a crowd much easier than his handler, and usually help effect an arrest.

Handler protection exercises, particularly following a car stop, can be done almost anywhere in a quiet part of town, using new subjects each time, not normally familiar to the dog. This provides more realistic situations with usually higher stress levels in the new agitators; this serves to create an ideal training medium for the dog and handler.

Multiple subjects, assaulting a handler, afford an excellent exercise to condition the dog to systematically take each subject down.

As the subject hits the ground, he or she, remains motionless and the dog is encouraged to hit the next and the next and so on until all are down. This keeps the dog from being too focused on only one subject. When done properly, it's very impressive.

Area searches allow the use of "greener" subjects, who tend to work under greater stress than seasoned agitators. Again, this produces a more realistic street situation. An attempt at fleeing from the area, discovery by the dog and falling when hit hard by the dog, provides excellent realism.

Building searches can be conducted in the same manner and multiple suspects can be used. Also, in some cases, multiple dog teams can be used without fear of fights.

Crowd control exercises have more realism and allow for occasional bumping of a subject by the dog.

Fighting problems can be addressed without fear of injury to the dogs, with proper use of the muzzle.

In all, the **muzzle**, properly adjusted to the dog, is an **excellent training tool**. Be sure when fitting your dog that the unit has the following qualities:

- * Lightweight (5-10 oz.)
- * Strong (preferably riveted construction)
- * Not affected by water or saliva
- * Allows dog to breathe normally, even during high stress
- * Does not obstruct vision
- * Prevents entry of agitator's fingers into bite area
- * Can be disinfected easily and regularly
- * Clean lines to prevent dog's nails from snagging
- * Safe to dog and agitator

Before each exercise, always be sure to test the fit of the muzzle to the dog, particularly for the safety of the agitator. One good method is to cup the muzzle portion of the device in your hands and lift up towards your ribs, while the dog is sitting directly in front of you. Lift high enough so the dog's front feet come off the ground. Should the muzzle come off at this point, it's time to re-adjust the fit. The second test is to pull straight out along the axis formed by the top of the dog's nose. Grasp the nose end of the muzzle and pull as far out as it will go and then pull down, off the end of the dog's nose. The muzzle should not clear the end of the nose. If it does, be sure to tighten slightly and test again until the muzzle will not come off. **Always test after every fit of the muzzle and before starting any exercise.**

As with all training equipment, **keep your muzzle in excellent condition**. Any sign of wear should necessitate repair or replacement of the muzzle in order to prevent serious injury.

There are many muzzles available, ranging in price from \$10.00 to \$200.00. Price alone should not be the determining factor in your purchase. The \$200.00 unit is not necessarily better than the \$25.00 unit - only more expensive. Lesser-priced models can be as effective as the expensive models. It really depends on the intended use of the muzzle, the safety of the dog and of course, the safety of the agitator or helper.

Always remember - **SAFETY COMES FIRST IN TRAINING**. To this end, the agitator or helper should always reserve the right to test the muzzle fit on any dog that he or she will be fighting with.



Photo - Dog trained only in muzzle work - no sleeve training

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