

## The “Obstinate K9” — Fixing the Call-off without force.

Taking refuge from the California sun in the shade of an oak tree, a dozen cops attended the International K9 Conference’s “Problem-solving” session hoping to fix their dogs’ “Outs”. One handler chimed up and said that nothing sells K9s to police administrators like the ability to have a dog “Out” upon command. He then held his tug toy like a microphone and adopted the persona of a K9 demonstration narrator saying, “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the K9 is the only tool in the police arsenal that once deployed upon an evil-doer can be recalled before delivering force.” In unison the assembled K9 handlers chuckled uncomfortably and said, “Yeah, right!”

I asked the group which they wanted to work on first, “Outs” from a bite or “Call-offs” (“Outs” from pursuit). Before anyone else could reply a handler named Schmidt jumped up and said ““Call-offs’! We’ve tried everything with Axel and nothing works.” When I asked him what he meant by “everything” he replied, “You name it. Verbal corrections, leash corrections, two-leash corrections, throw-chains, choke collars, decoy-delivered corrections, pinch collars, cattle prods, electronic collars . . . you name it, we tried it. Getting the sleeve is worth it to Axel no matter what we throw at him.”

I cringed as Schmidt went on to describe how they first tried to teach Axel the call-off. He told me that they put 30’ line on Axel’s pinch collar and put a quarry with a bite sleeve about 35’ away. Then Schmidt sent Axel at the quarry and when he was five feet from the end of the line Schmidt yelled “Out!”. Of course Axel kept running until he hit the end of the line, did a back flip, and stumbled back to his feet. Repeating the process never really got it through Axel’s head. I shook my head as he described so much needless pain.

Not being sure that it was the bite sleeve that Axel wanted, I asked Schmidt to take two tug toys and get a rollicking game of tug going with one. Axel threw everything he had into the game. Then I told the handler to release the first tug toy and immediately present the other one to Axel. It took Axel just a moment or two to spit out the tug he had fought so hard to win and grab the new toy with even more vigor than he did the first one. Schmidt repeated the process a few times with Axel’s move to the “live” tug coming more quickly each time. One of the K9 cops said. “It looks to me like Axel wants the game more than he wants the toy.” I replied, “Yes, and I think it’s probably that way with the sleeve too. Let’s find out. Hey, Schmidt, how does Axel handle wearing a muzzle?”

Schmidt replied that Axel was “cool” with the muzzle so we muzzled the dog up and set a quarry wearing a bite sleeve about 40 feet away. The quarry was positioned so that Axel could see the sleeve, and instructed not to move no matter what Axel did. Then we placed another quarry without a sleeve out of sight off to the side. Once everybody was pre-briefed on their roles, Schmidt sent Axel at the quarry with the sleeve and when Axel was about halfway he yelled, “Out!”. As before, Axel didn’t even break stride and hit the quarry full bore. For about ten or fifteen seconds Axel kept banging into the quarry hoping to get a fight out of him, but with the muzzle on he couldn’t latch on to the sleeve. Meanwhile Schmidt ran up beside Axel calling his name, “Axel!” and gesturing to the second quarry who stepped out from hiding and began agitating Axel. Pretty quickly Axel made the right choice, listened to Schmidt, and bolted to the second quarry who gave him a fun tussle. Schmidt ran up help Axel in the fight and slipped a hand in his collar whereupon the second quarry ran off screeching like a scalded cat. Axel barked furiously at the fleeing felon who disappeared around the corner of a building.

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Schmidt said, “Well, so much for the Call-off! Knucklehead here still creamed the bad guy.”

I replied that Axel didn’t have a good enough reason to Call-off . . . yet, so we repeated the exercise. This time there was a distinct break in Axel’s stride as he heard Schmidt yell, “Axel, Heeeeere!”, but he continued on and plowed into the first quarry. Schmidt was able to redirect Axel to the second quarry a bit more quickly this time. Could be that just maybe the lights were coming on?

On the third run, Axel took off just as before, but when Schmidt yelled “Axel, Heeeeere!” the brakes went on and Axel’s head was swiveling like a radar dish. It happened so fast that the second quarry hadn’t popped out of hiding yet, but when he did appear Axel redirected on his own and lit after his new favorite bad guy. Victory!

We stopped there and de-briefed the session. Schmidt said, “I can’t believe it! I’ve never seen him stop like that, even when we nuked him with an electronic collar.” I didn’t want to rain on Schmidt’s parade, but I felt compelled have the group put our results in perspective. I asked everyone, “Are we done yet?” A young red-headed handler said, “I don’t think so, but this is a step in the right direction.”

“How do you mean?”, I replied.

Red Head went on to say, “Well, in three reps of this exercise we got Axel to realize that when Schmidt yells his name that it doesn’t mean the fun is going to stop. Instead it means that Schmidt knows better than Axel where the **real** fun is. Basically, we made Schmidt worth listening to . . . for now.”

Schmidt chimed in, “Okay, I guess this leads us to the ‘What’s next?’ question. I suppose we need to repeat this in different environments, right?”

“Yes”, I replied. “And you need mix up the contingencies. Axel can never know exactly what’s going to happen when you call his name. He just needs to know that you are the gatekeeper to everything fun in life and that you always have something fun in store for him, even if it means the occasional “Out!”, “Heel!” or “Down!” along the way. You have to be mindful, consistent, and work within his limits.”

“What do you mean by ‘work within his limits?’” said Schmidt.

Seeing Schmidt was open to another perspective, I replied, “Let me answer your question with a question. What does it mean when Axel fails to perform as expected?”

Schmidt said, “Well, that depends. Sometimes it’s because he’s just being stubborn. Sometimes he’s more interested in something else. Other times he just thinks he’s got to be Alpha . . . and I don’t want to crush that. He needs confidence to survive on the streets.”

Pausing briefly to scan the group I saw most of them nodding as Schmidt spoke . . . except the red-headed guy, who just sat there grinning. I asked Red-head his thoughts, and he said, “Or it could just be that the dog just doesn’t really understand.”

Schmidt shot back, “Aw, c’mon, man. Most of the time he knows better!”

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Red stood his ground. “Really? You mean to tell me you don’t think the dog would obey if he **truly** knew he could get what he wants without a fight just by doing what you say?”

I looked at Schmidt and the group, and said, “Red here is on the right track. Here’s the fundamental truth: **If a dog doesn’t perform as expected it’s simply because you’ve asked him to do something for which you have not adequately prepared him . . . yet.**”

A sudden wave of realization swept over Schmidt as he looked at me and said, “If that’s the case then I have to shoulder responsibility for Axel’s performance . . . good or bad. I suppose that means from here on out I have to meet the dog at his level rather than trying to drag him to where I think he ought to be.”

“Exactly! I think you two are on the right track. Who’s next?”

Red Head jumped and said, “Me! I want to see if this stuff works on my dog’s guard and bark.”

I smiled. It was going to be a good day solving problems the easy way.