



developing a tactical patrol dog

■ A canine that has been trained in off-leash searching has the ability to seek more creative solutions.

THE E-COLLAR IS A TOOL SURROUNDED BY CONTROVERSY: FOLLOWING ARE SOME STRATEGIES FOR ITS SUCCESSFUL USE.

BY DOUG ROLLER

This is the first article in a series. Over the next several issues, the author will discuss the steps required to develop a tactical patrol dog. Although much has been written about SWAT dogs, this series will deal with the fundamentals of patrol dog training. Topics will include off-leash control, perimeters, area-search tactics and more.

AS THE CHIEF TRAINER for the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD's) K-9 Platoon for 14 years — and previously a handler and assistant trainer for 8 years — I've had quite a bit of experience using the e-collar. LAPD has used the e-collar for approximately 25 years, and we have had our share of ups and downs. At the same time, however, we have honed and shaped our use of this tool, and it has dramatically enhanced our tactical abilities. In this article, I'll discuss how we've used the e-collar most successfully.

In Control at All Times

Before I get into some of the e-collar training methods, let's talk about police service dogs (PSDs) and why we use them in law enforcement. The PSD was initially introduced to make our job safer and more economical, while at the same time locating suspects, missing persons, drugs, and weapons that might never have been located by humans.

Let us expand on that premise. In my teaching at various departments across the country, I still see old methods of police dog training being used, and that troubles me. Remember that the PSD is supposed to make our jobs safer. We train and train and train our PSDs to locate suspects and bite them when necessary, yet there are handlers who cannot recall their partner back to their side if a bite has occurred, or direct their PSD to an area without the use of a long line or, worse yet, a relatively short 6-foot leash.

A tactical search with a PSD should be done off-leash.

Your partner should be able to clear an area or building in a systematic fashion while you control and direct him. Both to reduce potential liability and to enhance officer safety, you should have control over your canine at all times and in all places. If your canine locates a suspect, you should be able to tactically deploy yourself and your team while you quickly assess the environment, the suspect's tactical advantage, and your team's position, before recalling your canine back to your side.

Yes, I said "back to your side." It makes no sense to have to leave cover to physically choke your canine off the bite. Your canine should release his bite on command and return to your side. One command should be used for the release and return, rather than a myriad of preparatory commands. K-9 handlers search for bad people; we search for suspects who have actively demonstrated they do not want to go to jail. They have usually chosen to run from the police and conceal themselves from our view even after they have been ordered out. With that in mind, good tactics and good control of your canine are of the utmost importance for your survival.

Why Search Off-Leash?

Remember, our goal is to use our canine's innate talents and abilities for our benefit. The e-collar gives us enhanced tactical control over our canines in any environment. It

allows us to get out of a dog's way and work as a partner during the tactical search. A dog affixed to a long line (unless tracking) cannot problem-solve in the same manner that an off-leash canine can. A seasoned canine trained in off-leash searching learns how to work an area and even how to solve scent problems based on previous experiences. You will see such canines go into a yard and automatically hit the corners and detail on their own as a result of training and past successes. If trained properly, a PSD will learn to false-alert less often without handler interference or assumptions as the PSD works the area into the scent source. The dog learns to view the handler as a team member as they work together to clear areas.

The days of sending your PSD into a building and waiting for the suspect to yell out are gone (and never should have occurred in the first place). When you are searching with your PSD, it is your job to direct him systematically to cover the corners of the building, yard, or large containment area. It is your job as a handler to expose and direct your canine into each and every area where scent might be; it's your PSD's job to pinpoint the scent source. If he cannot be placed in a position to do that, then it now becomes a search-team problem as the K-9 has done all he can do in that particular environment. That is the mindset that each and every handler should have; if it's not, then in my

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■ Use of the e-collar should be a positive experience for the dog in that it gives him a clear indication of the desired behavior.

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verbal commands are. Using that mindset, training with the e-collar becomes a much simpler task. Just as I have seen the e-collar overused, I have also seen it underused. It is important to use it correctly and consistently. The canine must be properly and fairly conditioned, in the same way you would condition him to any other training device, such as a choke or pinch collar.

Many trainers believe that it is OK to start a canine on the e-collar without doing any leash work or other type of compulsion. I will focus only on the methods and techniques that I use. I believe it is important for each handler to have a complete understanding of how to properly use the leash, as well as how much force and finesse are needed for proper conditioning of the PSD. It is also important for the canine to connect the correction with the handler. That connection plays an important role later on, especially in cases of a dominant or strong-willed canine. The physical connection between action and correction was established when the canine was a puppy and his mother used a neck shake to modify his behavior.

Before you begin to train for outing off the bite or other decoy work, it is imperative that your canine has a complete understanding of the e-collar. That understanding should come about through low-drive training demands, such as in obedience work. You cannot expect the canine to understand the e-collar as a communication device if you start by using it as a punishment tool. Remember, punishment or negative reinforcement should *never* precede learning. That would cause you problems and, in many cases, build extreme tolerances to the e-collar as the canine reacts to the pain in fight drive. Such usage simply is not fair to the canine and causes much frustration and pain for all involved. The same applies to other methods of compulsion, whether it is the pinch collar or some other correction device. First, make sure the canine understands the behavior you are looking for and the method of correction for not performing it. Be fair.

Getting Started

Placement and proper maintenance of the e-collar are very important. Make sure the collar is on, fully charged, and working. The receiver should be placed on the lower left side of the canine's neck. When he is stimulated, that will naturally force him toward the handler's left side. Make sure the prods are long enough to make a connection to your canine's neck, through his thick fur. If the e-collar is placed too loosely, stimulation will be inconsistent. That is not good, and will hinder your training dramatically. Make a checklist of those points and use it each and every time you train.

Once your canine has an understanding of all the basic

commands you will be using in conjunction with the leash during his service, it is time to incorporate the e-collar. Just as we taught the canine to understand the verbal command with the leash correction, we will now develop that same understanding with the e-collar. The first thing we must do is to determine the correct level at which to start the canine. Various methods will accomplish that. Following are a couple of them.

Attach a long line to the e-collar strap or to a separate leather collar and allow your canine to walk about freely on the extended long line. When it's appropriate, recall him to your side while stimulating him at a low level. At this point, we are looking for an ever-so-slight reaction — such as a neck jerk — nothing more. If your canine vocalizes, you have set the collar too high. Every canine differs in his level of tolerance. I have seen hard, tough dogs vocalize at very low levels and vice versa. The long line plays an important role here. If the canine expresses confusion, you will motivate him to come to your side while pulling on the long line and directing him to do

so. That is the first step in introducing him to this new correction. If your canine understands the basic commands you have already trained, this part goes fairly quickly. The long line and the e-collar work together to marry the corrections to the "heel" command.

Timing is important, as well as when to stimulate and how long to stimulate. If you have a canine that dramatically expresses sensitivity to the e-collar, do not give in to him. If you place the e-collar on your hand and stimulate yourself with a low level, you will understand that this is not a big deal and should not be for your canine, either. So my point is, do not back off. Continue to use a low level of stimulation and be thankful you have a canine that responds so easily. Some handlers, and even trainers, make the mistake of thinking, "I cannot use the e-collar, my dog is too sensitive." That is nonsense. We must teach and allow the canine to understand this new type of correction; it is as simple as that.

Another important concept is when to let off on the stimulation. When I am teaching the "sit," for example, I

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opinion you need to reassess your attitude toward tactics and officer safety.

Finally, the e-collar allows us precise control during situations that require instant response from our partners. Consider the situation in which a citizen — or a sleeping transient, or a distraction such as a cat or a dog — appears in the search area. Simply put, the e-collar gives us the ability to correct a dog for disobedience without jeopardizing our safety. Ask yourself: "What would or could I do if my dog encountered an aggressive suspect with a knife 30 yards ahead of me? Could I recall my dog if needed to prevent him from being stabbed, or would he continue his suicide mission?"

The E-Collar

As discussed at the beginning of this article, my department has been using the e-collar probably longer than any agency I know of. A little-known fact is that development of the e-collar had little to do with law enforcement. Originally it was used by hunting dog trainers, who quickly realized the need for off-leash control of their hunting dogs at great distances. Eventually law-enforcement agencies adapted the sport dog training methods and further developed them for police work.

Over and over again, we've heard stories of the e-collar being misused as a punishment tool rather than as a conditioning and training tool. To move beyond those abuses, let's talk about what the e-collar is and should be. The e-collar is nothing more than a communication device, just as the leash or long line, tracking harness, clicker, and

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■ **Left:** The “down” is one of the last — but most important — commands for the K-9 to learn. **Right:** In using the e-collar to teach a recall, let off on the stimulation as soon as the dog makes the turn to come back to the handler’s side. **Opposite:** A dog that likes to chase the ball is one that has a strong hunt drive.



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the canine off the ball. That breeds mistrust and disobedience and there is no reason for that to occur. Once the dog understands that it is more enjoyable to chase and catch the ball then to sit and chew on the ball, you have won the battle. A dog that likes to chase the ball is usually a dog that likes to hunt; that behavior should be enhanced with your K-9.

The problem is that sometimes a K-9 has become so ingrained in disobedience that heavy compulsion must be used to teach the new outing behavior. A canine that does not want to out the ball probably does not want to out from the decoy either. Choking your dog off the ball each time you play with him takes away from the learning experience. Such a break-up in teaching while trying to reinforce a behavior using the ball as a reward diminishes drastically if the choke-off is your method of outing. The dog should be taught to trust you when you give the “out” command. He should understand that the sooner he outs the ball, the sooner he gets it again by performing the required task. Once that is understood, you can do great things with him.

It’s important to note that if you are experiencing dominance issues, including growling and aggressiveness

Outing the Ball and Motivational Obedience

Once the basic obedience commands are locked in and your K-9 has a complete understanding of the e-collar, it’s time to move on to advanced off-leash work. This part of training can be fun for you and your canine. I call this training motivational obedience as you incorporate the e-collar. When teaching motivational obedience, I do a lot of ball work. I also make sure that the canine is obedient and outs the ball on command anytime, anywhere. That will pay dividends later on when teaching him to out from the bite.

Many new canines have a problem outing the ball. Much of that problem comes from the failure to lay a good foundation with the ball. The ball is used as a motivator, and many trainers make the mistake of teaching the canine that it is OK to go crazy on the ball. Then they continually choke

during search work. I teach it as one of the last obedience commands. Place the e-collar on top of the canine’s neck, being aware that this area is sometimes more sensitive than the side of the neck. With the leash in hand, give your canine the “down” command while stimulating him into position and showing him the proper hand signal for the “down.” Sometimes using a food reward will help him learn this command. When he is completely down, immediately let off the stimulation and give the reward (food or praise). Remember, always reward when your canine is in the precise position you desire or he will learn to be sloppy and inconsistent in his obedience. Inconsistency will cost you later when training other behaviors.

When Not to Stimulate

The question of when to avoid using e-collar stimulation is answered through feeling and a watchful eye. If the canine is so conditioned that it appears he is or almost is beating the stimulation, then you have understanding. He is trying to beat the correction in the same manner that he may have tried to beat a leash correction. He hears the command “heel,” and before you can snap the leash, he is at your side. The same applies to using the e-collar. At this point, you can use variable and intermittent corrections. Those will actually lock in learned behaviors, while affording your canine the chance to work without constant reinforcement. The e-collar can be used as a reminder rather than as a behavioral encouragement. A good trainer must recognize the difference and a good handler *should* recognize the difference.

stop when the canine’s butt touches the ground. When I am teaching the recall in the beginning stages, I will let off when the canine is making a direct and positive return to my side. If he is too drivey and overshoots, I make a right turn and stimulate him into proper position with praise and motivation. Remember to keep the long line on so you can control and guide him into the proper position.

Another method is to simply start your dog off with basic “sit” and “heel” commands. Sometimes that works better while avoiding a specific problem with the long line method: using the long line too much can teach the canine that being at your side is the safe zone. If stimulation stops each time he returns to your side, it is easy to understand how he could interpret that position as the safe zone. That is an old training method that led to ongoing problems. Whenever the canine was confused, especially during high compulsion, he would return to the handler’s side rather than presenting the desired behavior. Use the e-collar in the same way you would use motivation, food, a ball, or praise.

I teach the “down” command by itself. That is an important command for K-9 handlers and one we use often



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■ To reward the dog, use a ball or Kong with a string attached for safety's sake. It can then be used in a tug-o-war session with the dog.

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take it again. Repeat the exercise several times and the dog should be outting more easily each time. Use as much stimulation as needed to make him out. As time goes on in each session, try to diminish your use of leash corrections and allow the dog to respond to the e-collar correction. I have been amazed at how much can be accomplished in one day of using this method, even with the hardest of dogs.

As the dog outs the ball more easily each time, take hold of the string attached to the ball and play a short session of tug-o-war. Stop suddenly, place the dog in the "sit" position, and give him the "out" command. As soon as he drops the ball, settle him and let him get the ball again. Repeat that several times and he will soon discover that he likes this game. What most canines really want is the fight; your playing tug-o-war allows him to get that fight. When the fight ends, the dog drops the ball and wants to fight again. You are now a positive part of this equation instead of a negative one. Once the behavior is locked in, or even as it starts to get locked in, mix things up and be creative. Instead of letting him have the ball each time, heel the dog away from it, or heel him away and place him in a "down" position. Start letting him have the ball from a longer distance and add more obedience to the routine.

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from your dog, do not use this method. Such dogs must be handled on a case-by-case basis, and the possibility that they are not suited for police work must be considered.

So how do we start? Now that your canine understands how to learn with the e-collar, you can incorporate the collar into all training. If you have a crazy-for-the-ball dog and he simply will not out it, the

following method should work. With leash in hand, place a pinch collar and the e-collar on your dog. Use a ball with a string on it (for safety reasons). Let the dog have the ball and try to relax him a bit. Short-leash him and stimulate him to release the ball while giving him the "out" command. Correct him with both pinch collar and e-collar until he releases. Settle him quickly into a "sit" once he outs the ball. Do not give up — he may fight the first couple of times into a short choke-off, but continue to use the e-collar. We are showing a new form of correction with this outing command. We also may be extinguishing locked-in learned behavior. The only difference is that we are going to win eventually while we diminish the choke-off.

Once the dog drops the ball, settles, and sits, give him the "get it" command and point to the ball, allowing him to

Now your dog is paying attention to you and not trying to outguess you. That is where we as trainers and handlers often make a mistake. As soon as your canine starts to figure out an exercise and anticipates a behavioral response, mix it

up. That will teach the dog to pay attention to the command and the exercise. That simple task will pay off later when you do "man work."

As soon as your canine starts to figure out an exercise and anticipates a behavioral response, mix it up.

When your canine is obedient with the ball, you can begin doing really fun stuff during your obedience sessions. Teach your canine to "down" at your side while you throw the ball and he awaits your "get it" command. You can later incorporate recalls off the ball, or downing in front of the ball, or even conducting a search for the ball, all the while using the e-collar to reinforce your commands. This is the best type of training and allows your dog to learn in a positive fashion while solidifying all of his learned commands. This is the foundation for everything that follows. You are now ready for advanced off-leash work. This is the start of developing the tactical K-9. ■

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