

# Mealtime for Working Dogs

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In the last 20 years, the quality of the dogs being trained in law enforcement has improved greatly. We are now seeking out and training dogs with high working drives, sound nerves and temperament, and with physical and emotional hardness and resiliency. These dogs are more willing to perform under adverse conditions such as when a suspect is fighting back. Many of these patrol dogs also have fight drive which is activated by pain, causing them to get tougher when the going gets rougher.

Unfortunately, these attributes can also make this type of dog difficult to train with traditional compulsion based systems. The chain choke collar corrections and physical manipulation used in the past that was accepted by more compliant dogs has little effect on these harder, driven dogs. Often, if more painful methods of compulsion like prong or shock collars are used without the proper learning foundation, the dog actively fights back, destroying the dog's ability to learn and causing the dog to fight with the handler.

In an earlier article, I discussed the concept of "negative punishment" which, means taking away ("negative" or minus) something the dog wants or anticipates as a reward. This taking away decreases the likelihood that a dog will do a behavior (the definition of "punishment" in behavior science). Another way of putting it is to take away something the dog values as a way of communicating to the dog that what the dog just did was not what was wanted by the handler or trainer.

For a number of reasons, negative punishment is a highly effective way to enforce commands given to a working dog. First, for most dogs, it avoids the unwanted effects of opposition reflex (to physical manipulation) and it does not elevate the dog's fight drive. Second, it can be used very effectively in everyday contexts to create obedience in a willful dog that is not easily influenced by physical manipulations and corrections. Third, most willful dogs manipulate their handlers by trying to gain access to valued resources that the handler controls, and each time the dog successfully manipulates the handler, the dog gains points in the pack hierarchy. Eventually, the dog can come to feel that he is the pack leader instead of the handler. This rarely happens with police K-9s, but causes many problems in pet dog homes. However, each time the dog "wins" a battle over resources or control, the handler loses the dog's "respect." Enough of a loss of respect means that the dog will feel free to disobey his handler in other areas. Gaining compliance to commands in every day contexts and creating an impression in the dog's mind that he must seek permission to access valued resources (like food, like going outside, like playing with a toy, etc.) causes the dog to feel submissive to and causes the dog to be obedient to the handler in all contexts.

**"Yes" and "No" and Communication**

The use and training of a working dog must be based on communication with the dog. With some very basic commands, a handler can tell the dog when he is right and when he is wrong and create effective training. Dogs are very literal. If handlers consistently use the right words and consistently reward good behavior and punish disobedience, dogs will learn rapidly and work well. Dogs notice detail in handler communication and words that handlers aren't aware of. Unfortunately, handlers are rarely as consistent as they should be.

In Ivan Balabanov's training system (see the DVD "Obedience Without Conflict – Clear Communication" produced by Canine Training Systems), Ivan relies on particular words or signals to tell the dog what is right and wrong. One of these words means, "What you just did is NOT what I want," and a common word used for this is "No." In his system of communication, "No" means that a reward will not be given for the behavior, that the reward may be taken away, and, in some cases, when needed, a physical correction may follow the word "No". "No" is a marker for wrong behavior just as the click in Click! And Treat is a marker for correct behavior. Many working dog handlers use "Good Dog" or some other verbal marker for correct behavior.

If the communication system has a "wrong behavior" marker that means something good will be withdrawn, then a "correct behavior" marker is needed, and that marker must be consistently followed by a reward the dog values. I prefer to teach handlers an enthusiastic "Yes!" word for the correct behavior verbal marker because "Yes!" is a word that is rarely used in conversation. Some handlers use "OK" as a release or marker word, but that word is dangerous because people use OK often in conversation. It is very important that the reward marker be followed by a reward close to 100% of the time the marker is used, or the reward marker will lose meaning for the dog. Thus, a word that is not used in everyday communication is best. Using a word for a release that many people use unconsciously in conversation also runs the risk of having the dog released from behaviors when the handler doesn't want the dog released.

Ivan uses a third word that means "good job, keep going," to encourage and sustain behaviors that have duration, like a down stay or extended heeling. This word is often not formally taught to the dog but gains its meaning through tone of voice and everyday use. "Good" is commonly used as an encouragement word.

In the simplest world of dog training, the handler or trainer should be able to show the dog his reward, ask for a behavior or set up the training situation to encourage a particular behavior, then use the simple signals of "Yes," "No" and "Good" to tell the dog what to do. Kind of like the children's game of "Red Light/Green Light" where verbal signals tell the children playing whether to stop or go.

### **Real World Dog Training**

However, the real world of dog training is like this:

One, the dog, while usually not "smarter" than the trainer, has enhanced senses that give him some advantages over the trainer. Specifically, humans can't even begin to understand how much the dog smells and hears that humans can't.

Two, the dog has an eye for detail that allows him to pick out the finest differences and similarities in all situations, particularly details that affect his ability to gain reinforcement from the handler or his environment. These would be details like

where the handler's hands are positioned, where the handler is looking, the tone of the handler's voice, the tension or relaxation of his muscles, smell of the handler's body as it is effected by emotions and hormones...need I go on?

Three, the dog, if he stays with the handler most of the time, has all his waking hours, 7 days a week, probably 12 to 18 hours a day (if the dog sleeps lightly), to study how the handler behaves, what the handler does, what events and behavior precede the dog getting reinforcement or punishment, etc. The average police dog handler probably is lucky if he gets to spend a combined total of 1 to 2 hours a day studying his dog as closely as his dog studies him. In short, most of the time the dog is studying and trying to train the handler rather than the other way around.

Fourth, the dog, if a well-bred working dog, is faster than his handler is, can endure more pain than the handler can and is a strong willed, smart and resourceful animal that knows what he wants and actively tries to get what he wants, 7 days a week.

Some dogs are genetically naturally cooperative or "obedient" and live to please their handler. Most patrol dog prospects are more willful and have to be convinced that it is only through obedience to the handler that they will gain rewards. Some of the hardest dogs for novices to train are dogs like Labrador Retrievers that never growl or are openly aggressive, but use their intelligence to manipulate their handlers and con the handlers into giving the dog unnecessary rewards. They train their handlers help the dog with training problems when the dog has the capability to do the problem himself.

I see many detector dogs that appear lazy or unable to do exercises when they are really just getting the handler to do their work for them. The less the dog works, the more the handler helps, and so on, when really the handler should be calling the dog's bluff and telling the dog to do the work himself.

The same problem occurs with patrol dog handlers, but the consequences can be more serious. Patrol dog handlers teach obedience commands with physical compulsion and the dog complies when on the obedience field where the temptations and drive level of the dog aren't high. Then the teams start apprehension training. As the dog learns to enjoy biting and fighting, the dog's drive level gets higher and the dog becomes less influenced by the discomfort of corrections, and/or the pain and restraint of physical corrections only aggravates the dog's fight drive so that the dog becomes stressed out or uncontrollable using physical corrections. The result is a dog that cannot be controlled using "traditional" collar corrections and systems during apprehension work, a phase where the finished level of training must reflect a high degree of control.

### **Compliance Must be the Dog's Choice**

The only way to gain true obedience or compliance and work effectively with a dog in a variety of situations is to have the dog make the choice to comply. If the handler "helps" the dog to comply, like pushing on the dog's rear or pulling up on the collar to make him sit, or correcting to dog with pain to have the dog sit, the handler is "helping" the dog and the dog is not doing the work himself. Sure, the dog does eventually sit, but the reason the handler has to push or pull on the dog is that the dog chose not to sit on the first command to begin with. If the handler rewards the dog after correcting the dog, or just leaves the exercise as is, and the handler is thinking that the dog has complied, the handler is sadly mistaken. The dog has "won" that round and has learned that he doesn't

have to sit on a on the first command and that the handler will help him to sit if needed. If this pattern exists in all parts of the dog's life, like the handler physically blocking the dog from exiting the vehicle, the door, etc. while telling him "stay," or pushing the dog back in the car while saying stay, the dog is not complying. The dog also never earns any "consequences" for failing to stay. The willful dog will always push the envelope. A willful dog should not always be prevented from being disobedient, but has to learn that disobedience results in consequences just as compliance produces rewards.

Training should be time when the handler is prepared to deliver the consequences, good and bad, for the dog's behavior choices. The training situation is set up, the commands given and the consequences, reward or punishment, delivered so the dog can learn. Training is a controlled environment where the handler and trainer hope to stay ahead of the dog.

### **Rewards and Compliance**

The best way to train any animal is to have a reward the animal values and anticipates and deliver that reward when the animal performs the desired behavior. Dogs can learn to recognize words or other signals, so the words or signals can be used as commands and as guides to what is correct and incorrect behavior, like "Red Light, Green Light."

Unfortunately, handlers tend to think of training as the time they are assigned to work with a trainer or at a training ground. What they don't realize is that if they are not actively engaged in thinking about training all the time they are with their dog, then chances are the dog is training them instead of them training the dog. Does the dog jump out the cruiser door the second it is opened, even if the handler commands "stay?" Does the dog yank and pull on the leash to drag the handler into the work area and stand and bark when it doesn't get what it wants? These are examples of the dog thinking, "I can be in control of the situation, and I can make the handler do what I want."

Each time the dog "wins" in these situations, the dog gains rank in the pack. Pretty soon the dog is acting hyper and out of control in work situations and not focusing on the task at hand when it needs to focus, like when starting a track, a building search, a narcotics search, etc. To prevent these problems, the handler has to require some obedience and control before the dog is allowed access to a resource the dog enjoys (like tracking, building searches, narcotics searches, etc.).

### **Mealtime**

Mealtime is an excellent time to teach communication, obedience and the concepts of consequences and rewards. If a handler is not taking 2 to 5 minutes every mealtime to teach or reinforce some command or word, the handler is missing a great training opportunity. Most working dogs really value their meals. Meals are probably one of the most anticipated events of the dog's day, unless the dog is overweight, overfed, or just one of those rare working dogs that doesn't care about food. For these dogs, handlers will have to substitute another activity or resource, or cut back on the dog's food until the dog loses excess weight and values the food once more.

The concept is simple. The dog has been getting meals from the handler since it joined the handler's household and has a strong expectation of getting a meal at a particular time. The handler should definitely be the one to feed the dog his meals except in exceptional times because the person who feeds the dog his meals is a person the dog will bond with. The meals are always preceded by preparation activities that only serve to build the dog's anticipation. By the time the dish is on the counter ready to be lowered to dog level, the dog is probably sitting by the dish, drooling.

In this situation, the meal is the final reward for the training exercise. The reward must be delivered with the reward marker like "Yes!" The reward marker allows precise timing when telling the dog what you just did is what I want. For example, when rewarding the dog for doing a sit, the reward must be timed when the dog's rear is settled on the ground. If the "Yes!" is spoken when the dog is in half crouch, the dog will learn to half crouch.

When training at mealtime, the consequence for failure to perform is that the dish with the food is not given to the dog when he expects it. Additionally, the dish may be put away out of sight of the dog to reinforce the idea that the dish is only available when the handler wants it to be.

If the dog hasn't been trained at mealtime before, to be fair to the dog, the dog should be fed several times by just picking up the dish, holding it out of the dog's reach and saying "Yes!" and delivering the dish to the dog. It is extremely important that that "Yes!" precede the lowering of the food dish, or the lowering will become more important than "Yes!" as a marker. After a few of these repetitions to give "Yes!" the meaning of a reward marker, the handler should pick up the dish and give a basic command **that the dog knows**, like sit or down, whatever the dog is not doing at the time, in case the dog is already sitting by the counter. Let's say the dog is standing in the kitchen and the handler says, "Sit." The dog sits. The handler immediately says "Yes" and then puts the food down for the dog (reward marker and reward). If the dog doesn't sit, the handler should say "No" and put the food back on the counter out of the dog's reach and step away from the dog and/or turn his back on the dog for a second or two, to make it clear that the dog is not going to get the food right away. This is the no reward marker and negative punishment. The dog really wants the food, the handler makes it clear that the food is not coming, and that "No" means that what the dog really wants is not coming.

After the "No" and "removal" of the reward, the handler starts over, to give the dog another chance. The handler picks up the food again, tells the dog "sit," and waits for the dog's response. Most dogs understand very quickly and sit immediately on the second try. Some really smart and dominant dogs may require more repetitions. When the dog sits on the command, the handler says "Yes" and delivers the food.

If the dog is not used to having to work for food, or isn't obedient in the face of distractions (the food can be a major distraction), the dog may get stuck just looking at the food. This may be a fixation on the food, but more likely it is the dog's way of saying, "Give me the food!" The handler cannot give it until the dog complies, even if the dog's drool is making puddles on the floor. To give in is to give the dog leadership of the pack.

Each time the dog fails to execute the command, the handler has to make it clear the food will go away. The food bowl can be put in a refrigerator if needed, out of sight.

Most dogs value and anticipate their meals so much that they comply quickly when they realize that all they need to do is a simple obedience command.

If the dog repeatedly fails the command and seems in real emotional distress, running away, whining, acting submissive, etc., then the handler may have to re-evaluate whether or not the dog really knows the command. When dogs are being stubborn, they usually just stare at the thing they want or make direct eye contact with the handler. Avoidance and repeated submissive behavior will surface when the dog doesn't know what to do.

After simple, single behaviors are used to teach the meaning of "Yes!" and "No," a behavior requiring duration should be used so the "encouragement" command like "Good" can be used. An example would be a down stay. The handler picks up the dish, says "down," the dog goes down. The handler then walks around the dog or away from the dog with the dish, saying "down, good down" if needed to remind the dog that he should be staying down, and using "good" to mark the desired behavior of the continued down. When the handler is happy with the duration, he can put the dish down after saying, "Yes!" and releasing the dog. This can progress to putting the dish down at a distance from the dog in a down; reminding the dog to down at the same time the dish is put down so that the dog does not interpret the motion of putting down the dish as the release from the down. Once the dish is on the ground and the dog shows proper control by not releasing himself, the dog is given the "Yes!" release.

If the dog gets up before the release/reward marker in the first instance where the handler is holding the dish, the handler says "No," puts the dish back on the counter, and turns his back for a second or two. Then the exercise is repeated until the dog gets it right. The handler must be careful not to distance himself from the dish on the ground until the dog is very good at the down stay. If the dog releases himself and gets to the food before the handler can pick it up, the dog wins and learns he can get away with misbehavior.

### **Mealtime: The Best Time to Work on Problems**

Once the basic communication commands of "Yes!," "No" and "Good" are taught, mealtime becomes one of the best training times to work on particular problems. The dog is highly motivated to get his meal; the environment is usually familiar to the dog and usually somewhat quiet, depending on your household. If there are multiple dogs present and they are not fed in separate rooms or crates, this routine will not work. The dog and handler have to be relatively undisturbed for communication to be direct. I have multiple dogs, but I feed the dogs I am not training in their crates and work only with one dog at a time.

Breaking these exercises into their basic parts is also good practice for the handler. At mealtime, the handler quickly sees the result of poor word control and of poor timing.

Reading the dog is important to determine if the dog is just defying the handler or just doesn't know the exercise. A command that is often a problem for patrol dog handlers is a sit from a down at a distance. If the handler gives the sit command and the dog just lays there staring at the handler with upright ears and a steady gaze, then the dog is probably refusing to do the command and trying to see what the handler will do next.

If the dog looks away, squirms, lowers his ears and looks confused or anxious, then the dog probably doesn't know the command in that context. To see what the dog knows, test the dog at mealtime. For the disobedient dogs, you will be calling their bluff, and you can repeat the exercise for several mealtimes until you are convinced that they know it and they are convinced that there will be consequences for failing to perform. For the confused dogs, you will see immediately if they know the exercise because their confusion will be magnified. If a dog is confused, go back to the basics to teach the command and have the jackpot reward of the meal to back up good behavior.

The dog doesn't "out" the toy? Try working "out" at mealtimes. Don't start by playing vigorously for five minutes with the toy and setting the dog up for failure, but give the dog a chance by only presenting the toy so that the dog takes it. Another step back from having the dog take the toy would be to show the dog the toy so he has the opportunity to take it, but say "out" before he takes it and trade the "untaken toy" for a "Yes!" and food. "Out" is less about letting go than it is about who possesses and controls the toy. The food vs. toy trade will also give the handler an idea of what the dog values most, the food or toy. Some toy-crazed dogs will go for the toy over food; others won't even look at the toy when food is around.

Mealtime is a time when most dogs will show you their true understanding of an exercise or command because they are highly motivated by the anticipation and reward of a meal. It is also a time when the handler can reinforce the position of pack leader and easily provide consequences for non-compliance. Taking the few minutes needed to teach and reinforce commands at mealtime will pay great dividends later on.