



Protection Training with a Positive Reinforcer:

The Science Behind Positively Reinforced Directed Canine Aggression

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“We owe it to the animals that we care for to teach scientifically sound, practically effective, and humanely appropriate techniques to those who want to improve their training. But we need to make sure that we are not the very impediments that keep this from happening.” - Ken Ramirez, *The Eye of the Trainer: Animal Training, Transformation, and Trust*

I. Introduction and Overview of the Session

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Review of the agenda
- 3) Opening remarks

Though I began my training apprenticeship in the medical service dog world, my foray into protection training was not by accident. From the beginning it has been my mission to help more traditional correction-based trainers identify and utilize alternative solutions to an assortment of training challenges by introducing the idea of positive reinforcement. This was especially true regarding more traditional correction-based protection trainers who I believed would benefit substantially from the utilization of various scientific principles and tools to improve both their relationship with the dog they were training and the overall success of their training program. Due to my protection club's collective success in 2020, what began as a semantic and theoretical argument regarding positive reinforcement in protection training nearly a year ago has become (at bare minimum) a methodology worth exploring. – John Anthony Shahor, founder of Redemption Road K9



Through our work with both medical service dogs and deployment/sentry dogs, RRK9 does more than just train dogs; they collect data on best practices from an assortment of training methodologies that are used to develop environmental neutrality, sociability, and a natural desire to want to work alongside a human. We use these data points to test our theories on positive reinforcement techniques that can replace traditional correction-based methods in protection dog training in order to support better overall development.

Towards this particular end, we combine data, statistics, tactical evaluation, interactive games and critical analysis to develop a comprehensive assessment providing a window into a protection dog's individual cognitive learning, and problem-solving styles. We do this in an effort to better understand a dog's cognition as pertaining to its comprehension, communication, cunning, memory and reasoning. We believe that by using theoretically consistent and effective marker-based positive reinforcement (clicker training), we can achieve our end goal of a confident and social dog who is safe, clear in the work and is able to perform its job without taking the work personally.

By increasing the number of tools available in any one trainer's toolbox, we seek to help alleviate the stress related to training for both the dog and the trainer. By trying to offer trainers a new perspective on canine learning theory AFTER we have success using it, we hope to empower trainers to use more diverse tools that allow for better customization relative to their personal training style and the learning style of the animal in front of them. In the protection world especially, many of the biggest obstacles presented are related to possibly well-intentioned but ultimately poorly executed conversations on both sides of the positive reinforcement equation regarding "all positive" training, where correction-based trainers were condescended to or villainized for their approach to training/training techniques.



As Mr. Ken Ramirez mentioned in his book *The Eye of the Trainer: Animal Training, Transformation, and Trust*, the “all or nothing” philosophy as related to positive reinforcement training may come from a well-intentioned place but is ultimately unrealistic to maintain as a philosophy with flawed or incomplete definitions that alienate or villainize trainers who already have a successful history of using aversives and correction-based tools. It takes time for someone who has “successfully” used a particular technique for any extended period of time to switch their approach and feel comfortable utilizing new methods.

In offering certified decoys in a variety of protection related sports who work within the confines of a positive reinforcement methodology, our goal is to utilize small steps and successive approximations to begin working WITH more traditional protection trainers to (1) help properly define what it means to be a positive reinforcement based trainer, (2) to help properly define the terms “punishment” and “reinforcement”, and (3) to determine how best to help them transition to the use of positive reinforcement.

While we do not use electronic collars ourselves or recommend the use of electronic collars for any obedience related training, we recognize that, much in the same way we do with training actual dogs, we have to set people up for success by giving them steps and goals that are achievable and reachable in the short-term while simultaneously moving them toward the goal of using positive reinforcement as a training methodology. This new training process for our handlers has to be executed as carefully and as thoughtfully as any we may utilize with the animals we train.

A Note on Prong Collars:

The application of aversive stimuli in training, in particular the prong collar, is a highly controversial issue. In dog behavior terminology, “aversive” means something unpleasant to the dog that is used to suppress or diminish an unwanted behavior or behaviors. An aversive can be anything from an unpleasant sound or verbal correction to a physical correction caused by the use of a prong collar or electronic collar. Stated simply, it’s considered an aversive if it is something your dog will actively work to avoid. While the argument has been made that aversives are defined by the dog’s perspective (what one dog finds aversive may not be true for every dog), we firmly believe in setting our dogs up for success through the utilization of positive reinforcement. However, there is no doubt that, in the short term, the use of aversives “work” and will continue to be utilized. We fully understand that, in the absence of “proven” alternatives, aversives will continue to be used. We believe that while the use of aversives may suppress underlying problems, that these “bad” behaviors are never truly “fixed” without the use of a more balanced educational process that includes positive reinforcement. Our goal is to, while more brilliant minds set out to solve the problem of the use of aversives, offer an alternative approach geared towards (1) Understanding why trainers are using and recommending the use of aversives, (2) address those concerns while simultaneously changing the tools utilized to administer aversives, and (3) minimizing the use of aversives while increasing the utilization of positive reinforcement to offer our canines a more balanced and motivating learning environment. We invite participation and discussion about alternatives to the use of aversives, including but not limited to the prong collar and electronic collar.



II. Protection Dog Defined

- 1) A **Protection Dog** is trained to protect a moving subject, usually a person, through directed aggression and to disengage upon command. This is contrasted with a **guard dog** (which protects a stationary object), an **alarm dog** (which alerts), and an **attack dog** (which is trained to attack on command or on site). The difference between these types of dogs are in how they are trained and in the types of situations they are utilized.
- 2) **Protection dogs** are often of one of the following breeds: German Shepherd, Doberman, Rottweiler, Belgian Malinois, and Cane Corso. These breeds are selected for their natural drives, confidence, physical capabilities, and their defensive profiles (such as in the guardian breeds).
- 3) There are widely popular protection sports, such as French Ring, Mondio Ring, Schutzhund, and American Protection & Patrol Dog Association (APPDA), in which these highly trained canines and their handlers compete for titles, trophies, and medals. Many of these sports also function as breed standard tests geared towards evaluating if a dog has the appropriate traits and characteristics of a breedable working dog.
- 4) Historically, the training methodology of a protection dog has involved the utilization of positive punishment through compulsion and the use of aversives. Our goal at Redemption Road K9 is to help transform that culture of protection dog training by redefining the canine-handler relationship, creating a more clear communication system based on positive reinforcement rather than positive punishment, and more explicit criterion for our training program that we believe produces a more confident and social dog who is socially safe, clear in the work and is able to perform its job without taking the work personally.

The following presentation, while not an exhaustive or complete analysis of the subject matter, is a working alternative approach to protection training, one that we are happy to share for peer review.

III. Characteristics of a Protection Dog

Strong protection dogs require a natural foundation of desirable genetics coupled with specific foundational skills that are taught over time. These skills need to be developed to motivate a dog to engage and then disengage a person upon command. At Redemption Road K9, we seek the following characteristics and focus on further developing the following behaviors:



- 1) Natural characteristics include, but are not limited to Poise, Prey Drive, Positive Sociability, Resilience & Adaptability
- 2) Taught behaviors include, but are not limited to Confidence, Pack Drive, Defensive Drive, Environmental Stability

Keep in mind that many of these nature versus nurture behaviors are influenced by a puppy's environment and are shaped by early training and exposure. Our particular selection of characteristics comes in contrast to the socially dominant and environmentally aggressive traits commonly deemed as desirable in a protection dog. While these traits can and do produce effective protection dogs, our stated goal is not simply to create protection dogs but to produce a less defensive, more confident and social dog who is socially safe, clear in the work and are able to perform its job without taking the work personally.

IV. Fundamentals of Protection Training

- 1) Our standard protection training field has a layout similar to the graphic in this slide. We will discuss each station briefly:
 - a. Agility & Physical Fitness Course
 - b. Prey drive & Prey Guarding (+ Environmentals)
 - c. Alert on Command
 - d. Grip development
 - e. Static & Agile Targeting
 - f. Targeting Tables & Agitation
 - g. Outs & Disengage
 - h. Strike & Civil Drive Channeling
 - i. Defense Profile Education & Man Orientation
 - J. Drive Channeling
 - k. Bark & Hold
 - l. Agitation & Targeting tables
 - m. Car Defense
 - n. Send Out
- 2) Critical to achieving a well-balanced protection dog is proper development of each one of the dog's different drives (Social, Prey, Defensive). Our protection dog trainers must take care to avoid rushing through the training to ensure both dog and handler execute each component accurately and safely.



- 3) Proper protection training also requires an understanding of the dog's breed nuances, which influences the speed at which the dog grasps each concept, drive expression, threat interpretation, threat threshold and engagement. This approach helps reduce the risk of a dog becoming unnecessarily "defensive" or "redlining". These are both terms that refer to a dog that has lost perspective on the work and is unable to properly distinguish threats.

Total Canine Healthcare

As with any human athlete, protection dogs are elite canine athletes and require similar nutrition and conditioning to achieve and maintain peak performance. Below are some common foods and supplements we use to help our protection dogs reach peak physical condition:

1) Nutrition: As a species, the dog is a member of the scientific order Carnivora, a large group of mammalian animals that share a similar tooth structure. The dietary needs of animals belonging to this order vary. Some members of this group have an absolute requirement for meat in their diet (called obligate or true carnivores), while others can meet their nutrient requirements through eating plant material (herbivores) or a combination of meat and plants (omnivores). Cats are an example of an obligate carnivore, cows are an example of an herbivore, and dogs and humans are two examples of omnivores.

Because of the dietary needs of dogs, both their tooth structure and intestinal tract have become adapted to an omnivorous diet. This means that, under normal circumstances, dogs can meet their nutritional needs by eating a combination of plant and animal foods. The source of the proteins and fats is less important than the quality and digestibility of these essential components of the dog's diet.

The six basic nutrients are **water, proteins, fats, carbohydrates, minerals, and vitamins**. These essential nutrients are required as part of the dog's regular diet and are involved in all of the basic functions of the body. At RRK9, our nutritional guidelines have been developed in conjunction with guidelines set by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). AAFCO guidelines are the general basis for the nutritional content of commercial pet foods. We select diets with real, recognizable, whole-food ingredients. At RRK9, we prefer a medium-calorie diet for our working dogs consisting of a combination of kibble (to maximize fortified vitamins and minerals), raw meats (for additional nutrients lost during the cooking process), fruits and vegetables as well as an assortment of supplements, including but not limited to: Dyne (when appropriate) which helps with healthy weight gain and muscle development, glucosamine for hips and joints, fish oil, Canine Red-Cell, and Di-Calcium phosphate to help with vitamin and mineral absorption.

2) Conditioning: At RRK9, our 333 Program includes 3 hours of running, 3 hours of skill and mechanics work, and 3 hours of weights/cardio conditioning 3 days a week. This includes but is not limited to strategic warm-ups and warm downs, static and dynamic stretching, proper muscle



development, cardio work, weight pulling, sand workouts, hydrotherapy treadmills, red-laser therapy, mechanical adjustments, hyperbaric chamber, CBD roll-on, and canine Reiki. Some of these treatments are more commonly associated with older dogs and dogs with injuries, but in fact, they are excellent preventative tools to help a working dog recover from intensive training sessions.

We believe proper nutrition and conditioning are an essential prerequisite for optimal canine performance.

Demonstration

We will now transition to the demonstration portion of our session. We will begin by showing a sample of protection-work techniques that are fundamental in achieving a controlled and effective “send out” (a dog that is sent to engage the decoy). After each demonstration, we will explain the philosophy and concepts that are embedded within each demo and answer questions at the end:

- 1) **Demo 1: Puppy-prey drive:** To begin building and utilizing prey drive, building confidence and introducing praise to the puppy whenever they engage the simulated prey item. Here we also begin developing cues to protection engagement and begin working on the “alert on command”. It is critical to create positive associations in this phase of training.
- 2) **Demo 2: Grip development and proper targeting:** To build enough prey drive to motivate the dog to want to chase down and bite the prey item. We also begin conditioning the bite as the “reward” and stress release. Here we utilize marker training to teach the dog how and where they should be biting the prey item.
- 3) **Demo 3: The “out”:** To begin strengthening the bond between handler and dog in an effort to establish a true partnership between dog and handler. This relationship will help in developing the dog’s ability to let go of the prey item to receive another equal or better play item through positive play.
- 4) **Demo 4: Full send-out:** A dog that has mastered the fundamentals should be able to alert on command, engage the decoy when given the command, target its bite on designated areas of the body, release when commanded, and return to the handler.

Questions?