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**Creating
an Effective
K9 Unit**
Part 1

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**FLSA and the
K9 Handler**
Canine Care &
Handler Compensation



What Makes a Great K9 Handler?

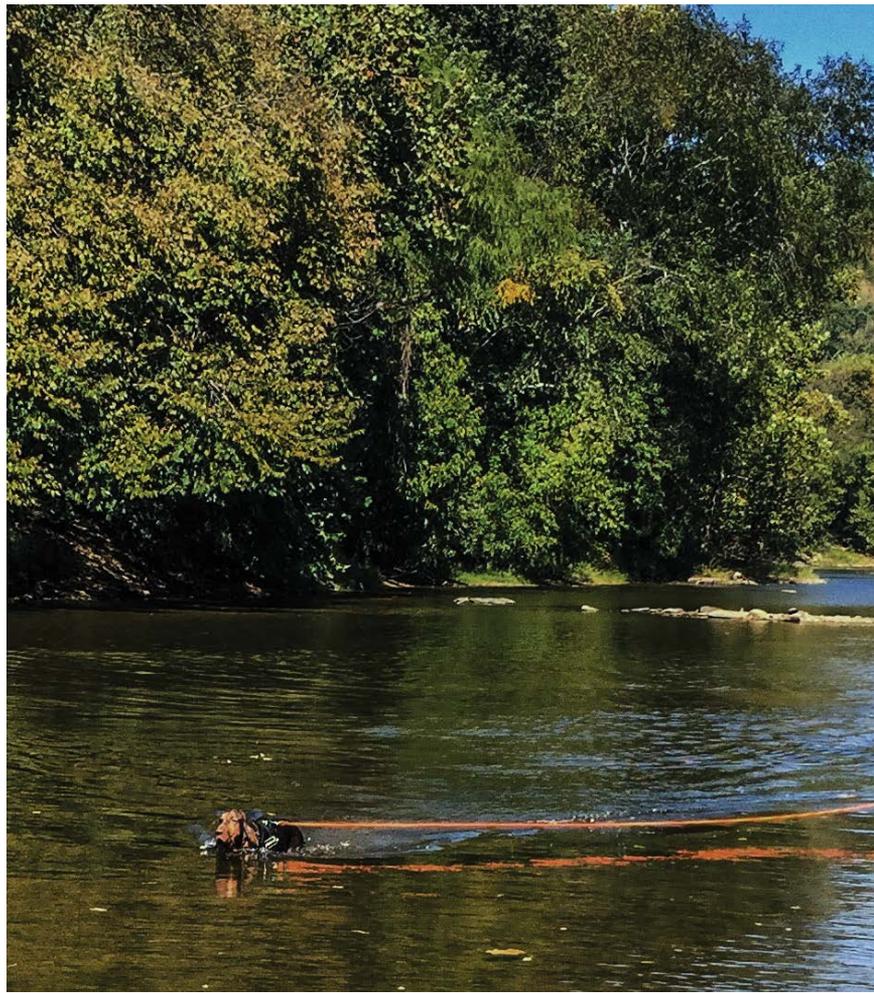
GET THE MOST RETURN
ON YOUR INVESTMENT

By Jason Purgason

A long-standing tradition in selecting new handlers is to fit them with a bite suit or sleeve and have them run away from a pursuing patrol dog. The conclusion is often the same. A prospective handler is getting off the ground, covered in dirt, while a patrol dog shakes him like a favorite toy. What have we learned from this exercise? That our prospective handler will engage in a risky endeavor that requires considerable skill with little to no experience or instruction. Otherwise, I would contend that we haven't gained anything that is useful.

When adding dog teams to any agency, many administrators have struggled with choosing a handler for their new K9 teams. Due to the number of variables that should be considered, this can be a complex and precarious process to ensure that the right person is chosen and that the team is effective. K9 teams are somewhat of a marriage, and as such, to be prosperous, both partners must work hard each day to make it succeed. Traditionally, certain characteristics, abilities, and outside commitments have been considered to choose a prospective handler who will give the most return on investment: arrest numbers, work statistics, home life, marital/family support, physical fitness, etc. Although they bear some significance when considering a handler, I would suggest that other attributes are often overlooked or not considered that can give us further insight into a handler's future success in the unit.

"Work ethic!" a police chief responded when I recently asked about the single most important factor that he considered when choosing a good handler. Examining the work ethic of a potential candidate is definitely important. However, I would contend that being a hard worker alone is not enough to make a great K9 handler. I've worked with many driven individuals who wouldn't make good handlers even though they were excellent police officers. They had no desire to assume the added responsibility of caring for, training, and working with a police dog. It was simply a change in their lifestyle and in their work that they had no interest in. Good dog handlers have a keen interest in taking on additional work and the role of a K9 handler. A former Marine Corps bomb dog handler brought out another perspective on work ethic. During an interview, he stated, "To be effective and safe, you had to be a good rifleman as well as a good dog handler." The role of a dog handler requires doing two separate jobs well. A police K9 handler must be a good police officer first and must be willing to take on a "second job" to be a great dog handler.



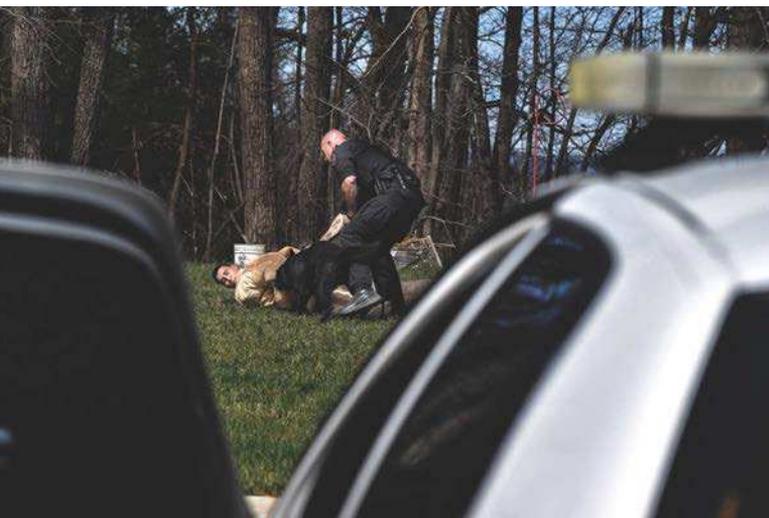
“A police K9 handler must be a good police officer first and must be willing to take on a ‘second job’ in order to be a great dog handler.”





Critical thinking is also a significant attribute for developing great K9 handlers. Objective analysis and evaluation of problems and events to form a sound judgment about what actions to take is vital to success. In a recent interview with an experienced police K9 handler, we discussed the importance of critical thinking as it applies to police dogs. "I never released her," he stated when describing his actions with his police dog during an encounter with an armed robbery suspect. "With everything that had happened, I didn't feel good about it." Officers successfully apprehended the suspect, and the dog team played a major role even though the dog was not used to physically bring down the suspect. An excellent point comes from this story. Great dog handlers understand how and when to deploy their dogs, but more importantly, they understand when not to. In some encounters, deploying the dog will be more of a hindrance than help. Great dog handlers can recognize these situations and make the right call.

The K9 community has learned much over the past 15-20 years. Being open-minded is another characteristic that is often found in great K9 handlers. They understand what methods and techniques work well for their dog but are flexible enough to welcome new ideas. Great handlers are often inquisitive and want to know the why and how of what they do. They are not inclined to engage in training exercises just because someone says so, and they have a solid comprehension of what the outcome of certain training methods and techniques will bring. I had the opportunity to instruct and work with a police officer from Australia for about six months during his time in the United States. He was a great student and a remarkable dog handler who quickly comprehended training techniques and even more quickly applied them. He loved working with dogs and often had questions about what he was learning. The officer wanted to know why things were done as much as how they were done. This curiosity was a result of his desire to learn all that he could about training and working with police dogs. After years as a police officer, he applied to be a dog handler. They turned him down for the position for over four years because he "asked too many questions." Great handlers have the knowledge to explore new training practices but aren't led to adopt techniques that aren't working.





Working with dogs can be a complex and imperfect system, and as such, it is inevitable that the dog, human, or both are going to make mistakes. This particularly holds true in the early stages of training and getting to know one another. Great handlers can recognize these mistakes, take ownership, and learn from them. Most great K9 handlers work to seek out deficits in their training and performance in the field as a method for improvement. The ability to accept constructive criticism is also a trait of great dog handlers. Frequently, trainers are going to provide feedback and constructive criticism about certain issues, and great handlers will use this opportunity to develop their skills instead of getting upset and arguing. Officers who are quick to make excuses are not likely a good choice for handlers.

Another common characteristic that I have found among great K9 handlers is possessing a strong sense of humor. In a job that is extremely serious most of the time, great handlers can laugh at themselves when things don't go as planned. Inevitably, something is going to go wrong, get "messed up," and they can't beat themselves up about it. They need to be able to laugh. Someone is going to fall in mud or get shot in the face with a sim round, or their dog is going to eat a suspect's dinner in the middle of a search warrant. It's simply "the price of doing business" for the most part. A handler who has a sense of humor will be more adequately prepared to deal with these types of situations that go with the territory.

Great K9 handlers take pride in their profession and appreciate the accomplishments of their labor. They trust in their work and, more importantly, the dog that they have helped develop. They fully understand their dog's capabilities and limitations. For example, I recently worked with a Marine bomb dog handler who told a story about his dispute with a second lieutenant who oversaw his unit. Their team was on patrol when his assigned bomb dog responded to an explosive odor in a brick wall that surrounded a compound. On this occasion, though, the dog didn't respond in its usual way by laying down, but instead it gave a strong head turn along with a substantial change in behavior. The handler called the dog to return and told his superior, the second lieutenant, that a bomb was in the wall. The lieutenant argued that the dog didn't lie down, as he had done in the past, and as such he didn't believe that the dog had alerted to explosives. The handler explained that because of a ditch and the location for the bomb that the dog would not be capable of lying down. At this point, the second lieutenant ordered the handler to send the dog back to check again. The handler refused, as he was convinced that there was a bomb ahead. EOD checked the wall and found a large homemade explosive device inside, sizeable enough to kill several soldiers. Even though the handler knew that if he was wrong, he would be in big trouble, he trusted in his dog and the work that had gone into their training.

An inclination to get dirty is another important character trait of great handlers. I once worked with an officer who kept his uniform and cruiser immaculate. He would get upset if his boots got scuffed, a prisoner made a mess in his car, or even if he had a hair out of place (so much that he kept a hairbrush between the seat and console of his police car). The administration selected him to be a dog handler. As you can imagine, having a 70-pound Malinois "messing up" his uniform and patrol car was not a welcomed addition in his life. This created a situation that wasn't successful for the handler or the dog, as the handler was more concerned about keeping his cruiser and uniform clean than he was with working with and effectively deploying the dog.

Great K9 handlers generally have extroverted personalities. This particular quality is important in many ways. First, the handler often trains others within the department about the proper utilization and deployment of the dog. In many cases, this includes superiors. Each member of the department should understand the capabilities and limitations of the police dog as well as the legal application in searches and apprehensions.

Additionally, handlers must engage the public with their dog, which at times can be intimidating for everyone involved in the encounter. Through their training, most handlers are prepared to engage suspects hidden in buildings and individuals during traffic stops. It's the more collective encounters that can sometimes be just as important to the success of a K9 team. K9 handlers with police agencies are also tasked with performing demonstrations and giving talks to groups within the community. Often, administrators give considerable value to these events, considering them "public relations goldmines." These gatherings can garner considerable public support for agencies, especially their K9 teams. Great handlers know the importance of these meetings and capitalize on each of them.

I once spoke with a military working dog handler who told the story of his deployments in the Middle East. He stated that his unit was responsible for patrols in a dangerous province of Afghanistan where Taliban fighters were heavily embedded in the community. The goals of the dog teams were to locate IEDs that these Taliban fighters had constructed and hidden and to conduct route clearing for other armed forces. During these patrols, he encountered several villagers living nearby. He soon learned that these locals had never seen a Labrador retriever before, and they were infatuated with this handler's bomb dog. Unlike other handlers, he allowed them to pet the dog whenever they met, and this struck up conversations with these local villagers. One day, a local farmer who had grown particularly fond of the yellow Labrador and his handler stopped the soldier while he was on patrol. The villager told the handler that Taliban fighters had planted an IED under the roadway a few hundred yards beyond his home. Because of the previous contact with this dog team, countless lives were potentially saved.

Unfortunately, the character traits of bad handlers make a relatively long list, and many handlers take on the job for all the wrong reasons. I have seen handlers who wanted to be a part of a K9 team only because they would receive more pay or get an assigned cruiser. I have even seen handlers who have elected to get a dog because they thought that K9 handlers had more comfortable uniforms and a better work schedule. They often believe that they will work less as the result of being a handler. Bad handlers aren't critical thinkers and don't do well in stressful situations. They impede the progress and overall success of good K9 teams.

Great K9 handlers are made through hard work and dedication to their craft. They are not born with gifts and talents that will develop great K9 teams. All great K9 handlers possess one common characteristic: a genuine interest in working with dogs. They strive for constant improvement in not only their own skills but the performance of their dog in training and in the field.



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