

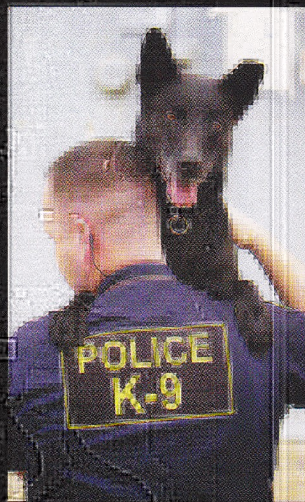
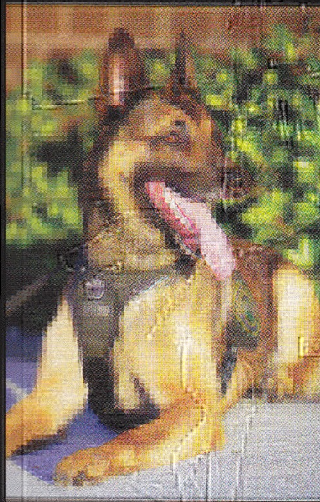
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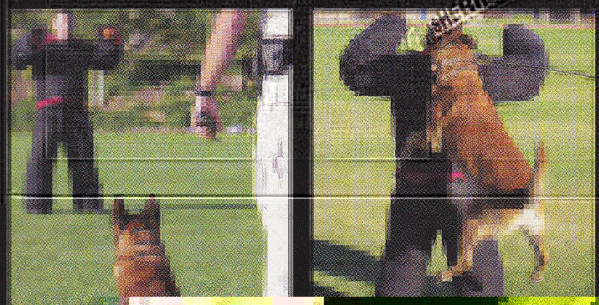
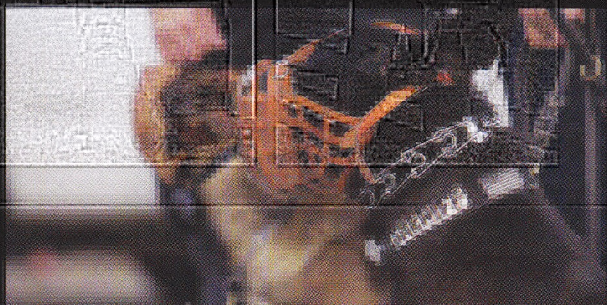
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Odor Imprinting: Think Outside the “Box”

There are several methods to imprint odor with detector dogs. You may find it helpful to try more than one.

By Ken Pavlick

I think many of us have been frustrated by a supervisor, trainer, or even departmental policies that are stuck in the Stone Age. I know I have experienced such frustration during my career in law enforcement. However, as I advance into that group of “the old guys” in the K-9 world, I pride myself on being willing to try new methods and to learn things from new trainers. I wasn’t always that way, as you will learn in this article. We all tend to get stuck in particular methodologies, but when we do so, we severely limit our potential as trainers and handlers — and we limit the success of our dogs.

There are many ways to conduct the odor imprinting of detector dogs. Any or all of them can help you train your dog to recognize the odor of a substance you wish him to find, and then give you an outward signal that he has located that odor. Each of these various methodologies has proponents who feel strongly about the methods they employ. This occurs for a variety of reasons. A given method



■ Above: By recognizing that not all dogs can be trained successfully using only one method, one can increase the odds of having detector dog candidates complete their training programs.

may suit a trainer’s personality especially well, or may work best in conjunction with the facilities available to the trainer.

I believe that strict adherence to a particular training methodology results in many trainers not selecting, not training, and missing out on some excellent detector dogs. However, by recognizing that not all dogs, or even the majority of dogs, can be trained successfully using only one method, one can increase the odds of having properly selected detector dog candidates complete their training programs. In this article, I will provide brief overviews of some of the most popular methodologies for odor imprinting detector dogs, and then illustrate how — using some, all, or none

of these methods, depending on the dog you are training — you can increase your odds of success.

My Training Evolution

The core of my training for odor imprinting was the use of four wooden boxes, the “four-hole variable” training method, which I was taught back in 1982 during my first detector dog training course, the DOD/FAA Explosive Detector Dog Handler Course at Lackland AFB in Texas.

Several years later (1991), while I was training my first civilian police dog at Adlerhorst International in California, I was introduced to the German method of odor imprinting via the prey-play-retrieve method. In

1998, that method was further refined when I was introduced to the "four-in-one method" of odor imprinting and the concept of primary reward during a course at the Utah POST Academy.

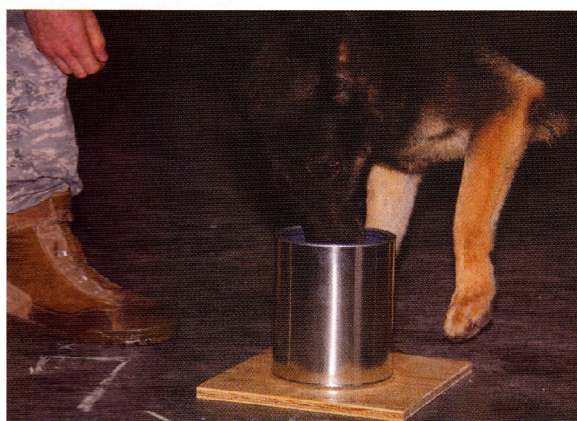
Then in 2007, I spent some time at Vohne Liche Kennels in Indiana, where I saw refinements they had made to the design of the box used in the four-hole variable method. Vohne Liche's design changes incorporated elements of the "four-in-one method" along with the concept of primary reward.

In 2008 and 2009, at several different police K-9 seminars, I was introduced to Randy Hare and the concept of "fight at the odor source." At those seminars I also had my first exposure to the BSD remote reward device.

By now you're probably wondering what this little history lesson has to do with the title of the article. These experiences and lessons have shown me that there are many ways to odor imprint a detector dog. Aside from the people and organizations mentioned previously, I have to thank many other friends and colleagues across the United States and Canada whom I have had the pleasure of training with. But I digress.

Problem Solving

As I stated earlier, the core of my training methodology is the four-hole variable box method, utilizing the improved box design of Vohne Liche Kennels and the four-in-one method learned at Utah POST, with a primary reward at the box. But there are some dogs that, although they may be outstanding in the initial selection test, will not go near a wooden box. They cannot be coerced in any way to stick their nose into a hole in a box. With



■ Above and left: The "four-hole variable" method is one training method taught during the DOD/FAA Explosive Detector Dog Handler Course.

some of these dogs, if they show a propensity to tug, a game of tug with a ball on a rope is used at the box to encourage them to come closer to the box. This leads to the dog having to put his nose into the hole of the box to play tug. After that, the odor imprinting can continue using the four-hole variable method.

In some cases, a dog will pass the initial selection test, but won't go near a wooden box and will not engage in tug play, but they will retrieve anything. With such dogs, we proceed by using the German method of imprinting through prey-play-retrieve: we have the dog retrieve a toy that contains the target odor.

But what about a dog that looks great on the initial selection test, but will not go near a wooden box, doesn't like to tug, is low on retrieve drive,

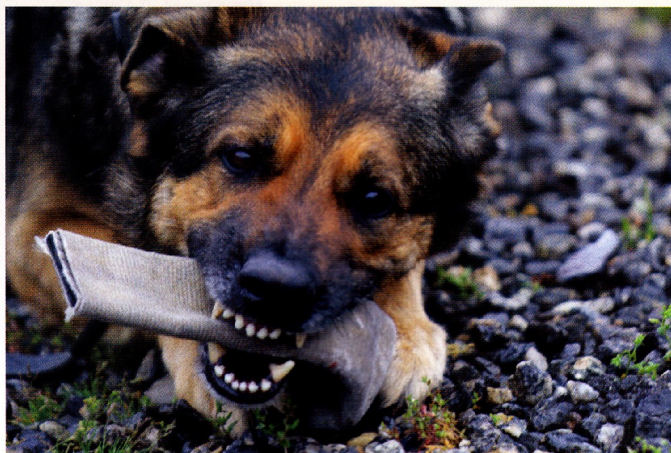
but is a hunting fool? Hunting is the most important behavior we need in a detector dog. For such dogs, what has proven successful numerous times is to hide the reward object together with the target odor in readily accessible areas, like open drawers, pigeon holes in walls, or behind chain link fences.

I would encourage everyone to step out of their own little "box." Seek out different trainers. Find different training partners. Growth doesn't happen in a vacuum. Throughout my career I, too, have been unwilling to change or try something new.

I can recall back in the mid-1980s when electronic collars first appeared on the scene. I did not understand them, so my attitude toward them was that they were a crutch for a less-skilled trainer, and that there wasn't a

in my opinion

■ **Right and below:** In the author's experience, transitioning imprinted detector dogs from pseudo scent training aids to live training aids proved to be seamless.



dog that couldn't be trained without an e-collar. But when I attended a Patrol Dog Instructor/Judge course at Utah POST in 1999, I was shown the proper way to use an e-collar and how to imprint and condition the dog on it. I found that the e-collar speeds up the learning process tremendously. Since then, I have never looked back, and all my patrol dogs train and deploy in them. If you don't train or deploy in e-collars, get yourself to an e-collar class. Some great instructors in e-collar are out there. You can find several of them in the pages of this magazine.

Prior to going to Utah POST and learning about the four-in-one

method of imprinting multiple odors at one time, another law-enforcement trainer in Idaho, where I was working at the time, tried to encourage me to use that concept. And I had always imprinted each odor individually. My response was, "This is the way I have always done it, and it works just fine." It wasn't until I finally tried it for myself, and saw how it accelerated the training process, that I embraced the method. And I still do!

Another "hot" topic in the police K-9 industry is the use of "pseudo" scents, or scientifically manufactured training aids. Again, in the early 1990s I was first introduced to

the concept of using pseudo scents in odor imprinting, using them to imprint aggressive response narcotic detector dogs on the "hard odors"—heroin and cocaine. And they worked. Transitioning the imprinted dog from the pseudo aids to live training aids was seamless.

Trying to understand how these pseudo scents worked, I contacted my father, a research chemist for Exxon with advanced degrees in both chemistry and chemical engineering. He explained to me, in overwhelming detail, the concept of perfume chemistry, and how by manipulating the chains of a molecule you could produce a compound that "smelled" like something it wasn't. The explanation was more than I could really understand, except in general terms. So, for the next 10 years, I had a "laissez faire" attitude toward pseudo scents; I knew they worked but I figured "why bother with them?"

Years later, while attending one of the first HITS seminars, I encountered ScentLogix products. I sat in a seminar about them, and much like when my father explained pseudo scents, most of what was said went over my head. But I grasped the scientific concept of isolating the part of a compound that actually emits the odor that the dog recognizes. By that time, I was no

longer a full-time law-enforcement trainer responsible for 20 to 30 dogs, but a private vendor, training 60 to 70 dogs per year, the portability of these training aids made sense. Not having to use major security protocols while training in public places, especially with explosives, was a huge time saver.

As a little private test of the efficiency of the ScentLogix aids, I trained two dogs, one Labrador Retriever and one Golden Retriever, as explosive detector dogs using nothing but the ScentLogix training aids. At the end of their training, both dogs went off to their mandated governmental certification, which utilized only live explosives. Both dogs passed with flying colors. I am a believer!

Times change. Technology changes. We have gone from .357 revolvers with speed loaders to semi-automatics with high-capacity magazines, and from utilizing phone booths to contact dispatch to get additional information on a call, to scrolling through multiple pages of text on an MDT while en route to a call.

Step out of your box! Try something new! You might learn a helpful new method, or you might learn about something you don't want to do. Either way, you are expanding, growing, and challenging yourself to be better. Embrace a phrase heard frequently around our training facility: "Just because it's different, doesn't mean it's wrong!" ■

Ken Pavlick operates Pacific Coast K9 in Washington State. He is a former police officer with 25 years experience working, training, and supervising patrol, explosive, narcotics, and SAR dogs. Contact him at ken@pacificcoastk9.com.