

Identifying training errors that build handler dependency in your detection dog.

Your detection dog can read your behavior which may lead to Handler Dependency. Handlers should avoid the following behaviors which will build handler dependency in the detection dog.

A. Inconsistent Reward Systems

When handlers keep their food rewards or article in a pocket or plastic bag thereby creating a delay in the reward process and building a dependence in the dog to the sound of the reward coming from a plastic bag, pocket or Velcro snap as the reward is retrieved by the handler for presentation to the dog.

The use of a well-made, easily accessible treat pouch is critical to the timely delivery of a reward. *(science has taught us that the quicker a dog is rewarded for a desired behavior, the quicker the dog will be imprinted with that desired behavior. i.e., Sit response.)*

B. Handler lacking patience and unconsciously building dependency on the dog for the handler to pinpoint odor source.

When the dog is working a scenting exercise and displaying difficulty solving where the source of the odor is located, handlers will often attempt to assist the dog by directing or detailing the dog to the odor source so they can reward their dog.

The lack of patience by the handler during training is problematic.

What usually occurs during this fault in training, is that the dog learns when there is a complicated or more technical search that occurs, the result will be positive for the dog, because the handler will step in and direct them to the source of odor and be rewarded.

The dependency of shaping the behavior of the dog, by the handler, is usually an unconscious act by the handler that is repeated many times during the foundation of the detection dog's training.

It is critical that the dog be allowed to work independent of the handler and problem solve the exercise, which in turn builds confidence and independence in their dog.

C. Telegraphing (communicating) handler movement.

When the dog starts getting close to an odor source, our reaction is to prepare ourselves to give a timely and effective reward.

In doing so the handler may give unconscious behaviors such as reaching for the treat bag, moving into towards the dog or verbalizing “praise”.

Another common form of “telegraphing”, the handlers intentions to the dog is the handler stopping when the dog is getting close to source. If the handler is stopping every time their dog is getting close to source, the dog will start to anticipate a reward is coming.

This can and will result in your dog becoming handler dependent.

Understand that your dog has a greater peripheral vision than you, the handler, and will soon become dependent on that behavior by the handler.

This behavior is usually demonstrated by the dog displaying a “fringing” or false indication of odor source.

Being aware of and avoiding handler behaviors that “cue” your detection dog will promote an independent and consistent detection dog. (FH 2023)