"The Alpha Roll and Handler Aggressive Police Dogs"
by Gregg Tawney

Background

The "alpha roll" has been adopted by some trainers as a solution to unwanted behaviors displayed by the dog. It is mostly used by these trainers as a solution to handler aggression. It is linked to the perception that wolves perform this behavior in the wild. There are many versions of this technique with each version having slightly different nuances.

The act of "Alpha rolling" a dog involves the handler rolling the dog onto his back and straddling the dog in a dominant manner. Ideally, the dog would be on his back with both his back paws up in the air. The handler will then grab the muzzle of the dog and place his face against the muzzle of the dog and growl "no" at the dog. Once the dog "submits" by looking away or tucking his tail then the handler allows the dog to get up. Trainers that use this technique say that the technique is more mental pressure then physical pressure, although there are some trainers that add strikes to the dog's head if the dog continues to growl or not "submit" during the process. They justify the strike by saying that it is not meant to hurt the dog it is just added dramatics to impress the dog that the handler is the dominant partner. This is typically done with a muzzle, so the handler is not injured. I am not condoning this training, simply explaining how some trainers rationalize their techniques.

To understand the reasons why some trainers adopted this approach over forty years ago, we must look at the understanding of dog training in the 1950s and 1960s. We relied on the wolf studies by Rudolph Schenkel in 1947, which examined wolves in captivity. The wolves were constantly involved in dominance struggles and displayed aggression on a regular basis to establish pack rankings. It wasn't until the 1990s that Dave Mech observed wolves in the wild and rebuked Schenkel's early studies. Mech found that packs were primarily family units and worked together in an effort for pack survival. In the wild, dominance struggles rarely occurred as the primary focus was hunting and pack survival. The leaders of the pack were generally the parents and there was a hierarchy, however not the constant fighting that Schenkel observed. Experts later related Schenkel's study to trying to get an idea of human behavior by observing humans that were not related to each other in a prison with limited resources. In that environment, one may observe the worst of humanity.

I was shown the "alpha roll" technique in the 1990s by a trainer that primarily used the 'Koehler Method" of dog training and had been training dogs since the 1960s. The "alpha roll" was based upon the incorrect assumption that in the wild, one wolf is flipping another wolf on their back, and during the confrontation the wolf that winds up on their back submits by looking away, keeping their neck exposed, and tucking their

tail. In reality, the wolf that submits, rolls themselves on their back and is not rolled onto their back by the other wolf. This is a small but significant difference.

Over the years training has progressed and the use of this technique was only used for extreme aggression by the dog toward the handler and not as a routine correction in dog training. Most trainers realize that using a balanced approach to operant conditioning and developing a proper relationship with a dog is far more effective and humane then trying to train a dog through "dominance training". The modern approach is to train in such a way that the dog wants to perform the behavior through positive reinforcement and not through force. The results are obvious as one only needs to look at the best trainers in the world such as Michael Ellis, Bart Bellon, and Ivan Balabonov. They take a balanced approach to dog training which incorporates positive reinforcement and not the "old school" approach such as dominance training.

<u>Handler Aggression</u>
This is not an easy topic to discuss as there are many degrees of handler aggression and many reasons for handler aggression. There have been entire books written on aggression in dogs. However, there are some generalities that can be discussed. I have personally worked two dogs that could be considered "handler aggressive" and have trained several within my training organization that other handlers have successfully worked on the street. I have also returned handler aggressive dogs to vendors that I deemed not fit to work as a police dog.

Before we discuss handler aggressive dogs, I do not want to mistake handler aggression with dogs that bite the handler accidentally while trying to bite the toy or when the handler is on the ground, or tangled up with a suspect. That is not handler aggression. If you are a handler then expect that you will take an accidental nip every now and again. It comes along with the territory. For purposes of this discussion, I have put police dogs into three categories.

The first category are the dogs that are balanced and do not have a tendency to want to challenge the handler or fight the handler. This type of dog is resilient to an unfair handler and is successful regardless of poor training. This dog is often referred to as a "unicorn" as the dog engages on the street, doesn't challenge the handler and is typically social with everyone. I have had the pleasure of owning and training these dogs and it is what all trainers look for.

The second category involves dogs that have certain triggers that will produce an aggressive reaction. The triggers could be over resources, such as food or a toy, or something else the dog values. This category also involves dogs that can "boil over" and show aggression when their drive increases to the point where they need to put something in their mouth to satisfy their drive, which unfortunately may be the handler's leg or arm. There is not a lot of thought on the part of the dog and the

aggression is more instinctual. The handler needs to recognize when the dog is getting ready to "boil over" and redirect the dog's focus or satisfy the dogs drive in another manner. These dogs can be worked on the street with some finesse and can be very successful with the right handler and training.

The third category are dogs that have a low threshold for handler aggression and will react in aggression if the dog *perceives* that the handler was unfair with the dog. There are dogs that are truly dominant dogs that will not tolerate a handler giving the dog a correction. This type of dog is typically very committed to the fight with the handler and can be very dangerous. I will personally not train or deploy this type of dog. This is the type of dog that will jeopardize officer safety and could get a handler or someone else seriously injured.

Dealing with Handler Aggressive Dogs
The first category of dog is easy to train and maintain. This type of dog makes mediocre handlers look good and often develops overconfidence in a handler, until they get a second dog that doesn't not fit into this category.

The second category of dog mentioned above is a dog that can be very successful with a balanced approach to dog training and an understanding of what triggers the dog. A calm handler that recognizes that the dog has "boiled over" can calm the dog through applying leash pressure and staying calm which brings down the dog's overall drive and makes the dog less reactive. Another form of correction could be simply pinning the dog down until the dog's drive diminishes and the dog begins thinking again and not reacting. This approach is sometimes needed for the safety of the handler. The key to either one of these approaches is not to take it personally. Often times the dog has reached a reactive level and there is little thought behind the aggression. A handler that begins yelling and flailing about can increase the drive in the dog, which would be counterproductive. The thing to remember is once the dog's drive is diminished then the handler must resume training like nothing has happened. Dog's do not hold grudges and they live in the moment. If the handler remains emotional and is unfair with corrections after the incident, then the aggression may continue and resurface. Once the moment has passed the handler must let it go. Putting a muzzle on the dog after the fact, and then doing an alpha roll in an effort to assert dominance is counter-productive and in my opinion detrimental to the relationship. A good team is built upon trust and putting a muzzle on a dog and picking a fight so a handler can "assert their dominance" is going to create an adversarial relationship, which will have consequences down the road.

We must understand that the type of dog that we select in law enforcement is generally a dog that likes to fight, so it is important that we do not "pick a fight" and turn this desire toward the handler. If we overdo or prolong the correction, the dog can go into a

"self-preservation" mindset and the fight can increase in intensity and become more prevalent in training.

The third category of dog, I personally will not train. There are too many good dogs out there and a handler's job is difficult enough without dealing with this type of dog. Some handlers may see this is a macho thing or a badge of courage. I see it as a liability for all concerned and it is the responsibility of the department to insure that their dogs do not fit into this category. It is important that K-9 Supervisors regularly attend trainings, communicate with the trainers, and regularly communicate with their handlers.

Conclusion

There are many reasons and degrees of handler aggression and just because a dog exhibits handler aggression does not necessarily mean that the dog needs to be removed from the unit. The key is identifying the reasons for the handler aggression and addressing it with a professional trainer. The "alpha roll" is a technique used by some trainers to curb handler aggression. However, most of the top trainers in the industry use other methods and as always, "the punishment must fit the crime." For those that choose to use this technique it should only be used for valid handler aggression issues and not as a means to correct unwanted behaviors. Training through dominance is not backed by science and is not used by any respected trainer in the industry.

We have a responsibility to the dogs we select for police work. They do not volunteer for this type of work. They are drafted. It is important to know when a dog and handler do not match, and it is important to recognize when the dog is not fit for the handler, or too aggressive to be a police dog. Law enforcement is changing, dog training is changing, and we must change with it if we want to continue to be a part of the best job in the law enforcement - the job as a K-9 Handler.

Gregg Tawney © January 2021

About the author: Gregg Tawney is a retired police sergeant from the City of Elk Grove and currently the owner and co-host of the "Police K9 Radio" podcasts. Gregg has been a police canine trainer for almost thirty years and had been a K-9 handler for fifteen years. Gregg is the owner of D-Tac K9, LLC, which is responsible for the canine training for twenty-one law enforcement agencies in Northern California.

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