

Imprinting Dogs in Hunt Drive for Scent Detection

Dogs come well equipped and rapidly learn on their own if given the freedom and opportunity to hunt in an environment that they believe contains prey.



*article by Dan Reiter
photos by AceK9.com*

The method of imprinting the initial odor in green detection dogs can vary from one trainer to another. It is common to see dogs initially imprinted on boxes, wall systems with handler or trainer involvement running double leads, blocking, hand directing or using prey drive (visual stimuli), via a moving tennis ball enticing the dog to the box for a game of tug.

In any case, the dog is not being imprinted in hunt drive, but may very well have a good final response on the gear and odor he was trained on. However, the dog will struggle when moved to a new environment. Most will be puzzled when given the search cue or require more handler guiding or additional training steps. Spending a week or two during the foundation training in the same environment is highly counter-productive in the long run. This is especially true if

the dog will be used in large area searches or for long range detection.

Dogs come well equipped and rapidly learn on their own, if given the freedom and opportunity to hunt in an environment that contains prey. When searching for prey, dogs use just about every sense that they possess. Working from memory with the aid of mental maps, they systematically check their territory, searching for cues. Hunt drive, triggered by olfaction stimuli, is extremely important at the onset of the hunt. Prey drive, compelled by visual stimuli, becomes the primary sense only once the prey is sighted,

typically by movement. With this in mind, it is important not to over-condition the dog on any visual cue or set environment. A dog is always a product of his

conditioning and will go back to his foundation when under stress.

Imprinting in hunt drive involves nothing more than using a reward in which the target odor is the most abundant. I use an “odor imprinting ball,” which is just a heavy-duty wiffle ball with a poly rope attached, loaded with the target odor. Some trainers use scented towels or PVC tubes loaded with target odor to accomplish the same result. I have found the ball to be most effective with the average dog. The rope allows ease of throwing with some range and the ability to play a game of tug with the dog upon a successful find.

Begin by working with dogs that have strong predatory behaviors and have their obedience in place, as most training will be done off-lead or at times with a 20-foot belt type flexi lead. A verbal search cue should be picked that will be used exclusively for odor detection. With the dog at heel position, throw the toy into heavy cover and release him with a search cue, such as *find it*. This should initially be done outdoors with the dog brought in downwind, when available. This is all part of the dog learning to use his



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nose by ranging into odors from a distance, requiring no handler involvement.

The hides should be placed where the dog can access them and he should then be encouraged to retrieve them. Highly praise the dog during each find and reward him with a good game of tug. Always put the dog up while he wants more during the initial training. After a few sessions, release the dog into the same environment, with the search cue but with no visual stimuli, such as a fake ball throw.

Next, start placing hides on vehicles, just below ground surface, such as in landscaping rock, as well as

adding a few simple building and blank searches to the mix. The main point is to keep changing the environment so that the dog becomes highly conditioned in hunt drive (using his olfactory senses). Imprinting initial odor is typically done in a couple of days. At that time, the dog should be ready for alert training when released and locate target odor in a new environment 90% of the time, with no handler involvement and show a change in behavior at the source. The dog rarely needs more than a minimal amount of help, if any, from day one, assuming we are working with an enthusiastic dog, handler and adequate training aids.

With the alert established it is back to a variety of environments in which the dog would likely be deployed. With the use of the K-9 BSD® and related distractors.



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Next, in the case of a passive dog, this training should be moved to a wall system to establish alert more easily by fostering a proud sit position. The target odor will never again be loaded into the reward item. The dog will understand that active prey comes from the source. I use the K-9 Behavior Shaping Device, a remote controlled system, from this point on.

Once the alert is established on walls and boxes, the dog will have also learned to disregard the visual of his toy and related distracter odors. Then, it's back to a variety of environments that the dog would likely be deployed in. With the use of the BSD and related distracters, all initial hides are made from elevated or protected positions until the alert is well-conditioned. This allows reinforcing of the hunt drive and alert in a single step. I reserve the wall and box systems for initial alert training, new odors, maintenance or extinction training as needed.

Training dogs in hunt drive is not a novel idea. With detection dogs, this type of training has been used by some trainers for years. I was shown this same basic format 35 years ago to train bird dogs. The only difference is the use of scented bumpers and the environment. This process is simple to add to any current training program and is well worth the effort if you want a true odor hunter versus the handler-

led detection dog. A second benefit is that this also sets the dog up for more advanced training, such as large area searches, long range detection or following a moving target with a minimal amount of additional training, just like a hunting dog on game. ■

DAN REITER is the creator of the K-9 Behavior Shaping Device. He is a frequent guest speaker and respected trainer. Contact him by e-mail at dan@k-9bsd.com and find him on the web at www.k-9bsd.com.

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