



Training Records & Maintenance Training

By, Linda Porter

Whether or not you are a Law Enforcement K9 handler or a Search and Rescue volunteer, we are all required to maintain and accurately document our K9 training. Maintenance training and accurate record keeping is important on several levels as we will discuss in the article.

Let us start by addressing the law enforcement industry standards for K9 training hours. The recognized minimum standard amount of maintenance training recommended for Law Enforcement K9 teams is 16 hours per month. This standard was established and is currently favored by the 3 largest police canine organizations in the US. NAPWDA, NPCA and the USPCA.

More and more, Search & Rescue K9 teams are being called upon by Law Enforcement agencies to assist in locating missing persons or even trail in criminal cases. It stands to reason then, that SAR handlers should adhere to the minimum standard of maintenance training and keep accurate and honest training records. Even if you are not a law enforcement officer, you never know when you will find yourself out on a criminal case or being served a subpoena for court.

Training Records

Accurate training records should start the day the handler obtains his or her K9 and should be maintained throughout the working life of the dog. Proper documentation of your training is import on 2 different levels.

Training records prepare handlers from day one for courtroom testimony. They are the foundation that enables handlers to accurately articulate such things as the dogs training methodology, skills and development. It is common for defense attorneys to sift through and scrutinize training records and deployment reports looking for anything that might reveal false or inaccurate claims, errors and even flawless K9s. (There are no perfect K9s). Records need to reflect successes failures and remedial training if necessary. If you are not prepared, you may become a target for a good defense attorney to reek havoc on your testimony. Training records also allow us, as handlers, to keep track of the dogs performance, failures, successes and any remedial training that may be required. They give handlers valuable information into the dogs progress allowing them to see improvements or document and work on areas that still need attention.

What should we be documenting in our training record? This information will vary from agency to agency or handler to handler but should, at a minimum, include the following.

- Name of the handler and the K9.
- Names of trail layers.
- Time and date of training session.
- Location.
- Environmental conditions.
- Trail information; age, distance, time set, time run, type of terrain, ect.

- Proofing exercises.

Details describing the type of training and any deficiencies or corrective measures and other relevant information required by your department or search group.

Some handlers add more details such as maps, sketches of the track, surface conditions, track layouts, scent items used, weather conditions and day or night training. (You can download our free sample training record [HERE](#)). It's acceptable to combine training records and certifications or performance evaluations for convenience, court testimony or easy access for supervisors. It is consider "good practice" for K9 unit supervisors to review handler records on a regular basis to ensure compliance to standards.

Maintenance Training

There are two parts to a K9 team. Training should focus on both members. All to often handlers are concentrating on developing the dogs skills and ignoring the possibility that they can also be a weak link in the teams performance.

New handlers should attend an initial training class with a reputable entity that offers a structured curriculum, competent trainers and training designed specifically for tracking or trailing teams. Basic tracking schools should include teaching handlers critical skills like reading and interpreting K9 tracking behaviors and basic or advanced training skills for maintaining or progressing the K9s skill level. After initial training is completed, handlers and their departments should be prepared to support K9 teams through annual structured training. Handlers should attend at least one structured training event annually that is tracking or trailing specific. Annual team certification or performance evaluations should also be obtained annually to stay compliant with US industry standards.

K9 teams should also attend weekly or bi-monthly training sessions. This can be with a group or on your own. Handlers should try to meet the minimum standard of 16 hours per month. Group training has an advantage, there are always others to help out, handlers get the benefits of observing different K9 teams, and mission specific training scenario's can be practiced and observed by all. If you do not have a group to train with, we would highly recommend you find one in your area. If you are an independent team, training on your own is difficult and you may be missing out on the guidance of seasoned handlers who could help you improve.

Monthly K9 training should have a goal. You may need to work on basic foundation skills or proofing exercises. Whatever your goal is for that day, set up your trails so both you and the dog learn something. If you are working with a group that always does the same type of training trails with no goal in mind for improving the team, then you may want to consider taking a more active role in how your training trails are being set up. Don't be afraid to speak up and let your track layers know what you need. If you are working with a good trainer, they should be setting trails that help you and your dog advance and improve or troubleshoot problems, while at the same time, making sure inexperienced teams don't get to far ahead of themselves.

Spending line time behind other teams and observing their training is one of the best ways to pick up on valuable training tips. It allows handlers to relax and listen rather than trying to concentrate on their own issues like staying on feet in difficult terrain. You may even come to realize that most handlers are having the same frustrating problems as your are. Run with as many teams as possible during your training day.

Maintenance training should include these components

1. Foundational training exercises:

Environmental exposure, marked track training, proper line control practices and line drills, corner training, exercises that teach you to read your dogs body language, practicing with scent items, foot-track starts, distraction training, starting routines, surface transitions, accessible and inaccessible subjects, backtracking exercises, aged trails, water crossings, training at night, hard surface work or HITT, training with tactical teams and exposure to aircraft transportation if available.

2. Advanced proofing exercises:

- Blind trails (trails that are unknown to the handler)
- Trails marked by GPS. (GPS is only referred to when assistance is required.)
- Negative tracks (exposing the dog to areas where there is no trail available).
- Split and cross trails, scent discrimination exercises, and contaminated trails.
- Mission specific scenario's
- Performance assessments and certifications:
- Blinds trails for evaluating the dogs performance in urban or wilderness environments.
- Annual certification testing.

Proper training challenges the dog team and encourages the handler to improve skills and think objectively. If you have been training with your dog for a while and find yourself stuck in the same routine, working the same types of training trails and, you are not improving or challenging yourself or your K9, then think about adding some of the components we have suggested here.

Training a trailing dog is a huge challenge that requires support from your agency, other K9 teams members and, lots of time behind your dog. It is perhaps, the most difficult K9 discipline to practice and master so be sure to check your egos at the door, keep an open mind, practice to improve your skills and, remember there are no perfect dogs out there.

Resources:
K9fleck.org
swgdog.org