

Common Mistakes in Detection Certification Trials

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Hey folks,

I was asked to write an article discussing common errors or issues I have seen while judging detection trials. Some of these can cause a team to fail certifications. We all know that each judge is different and scores vary a bit. This article is just *my* opinion of what I think might benefit some of you in trials.

Remember this: as much as you are learning to read your dog, your dog is learning to read you. Eye contact, body posture, breathing, leash control-our dogs learn it all. You are speaking to your dog every second he/she is with you, whether you know it or not.

Queuing the False Alert

A lot of what we see is the handler “queuing” the dog on a false alert. Let’s face it, trials are extremely stressful and the stress causes us to do stupid things, like looking for scratch marks from the previous dogs. This, in and of itself, has caused handlers to fail a find because the previous dog alerted where the *handler* told him to, yet there were no drugs.

When we start basic training, what do we typically say or do to queue a dog to do the behavior we want?

-For an active/aggressive alert dog, when we see the change in behavior (pause, deep breath, etc.) we typically say; “Whatcha got, get it out of there”. This is to get the dog fired up to scratch and most handlers also stop to encourage the scratch behavior. This, however, is a known hide in training. What has the dog learned by our behavior? When we stop walking and say; “Whacha got,” they better scratch to get that reward. So, along with teaching the dog the scratch behavior, we have taught the dog to respond to *our* queues, *our* behavior change.

Let’s put this to work in trials. As we are detailing around a car or in a room and we see a behavior change in our dog, what do we automatically do? We stop. What did that tell the dog? Hey, dummy is stopping, so if I sniff some more maybe I can get a toy. So he sniffs harder, we stand and stare, queuing him again by our non-movement. And/or we say; “Whacha got?”-- boom full blown alert. The problem is this. The dog smelled something interesting (dog slobber, dog scent, a hamburger, Twinkies) and we took that

as an indication on a target odor. If we had kept moving he most likely would have kept moving with us and we would not have created the false alert.

-Passive dogs, I have worked both. In training, once the dog is in odor we stop, relax the leash, and say sit and then reward. Again, what did the dog learn by our behavior? When we stop and relax the leash he needs to sit and stare to get his reward. What do we see in trials or for that matter on the street? When there is a change in behavior in the dog, we stop and relax the leash. By doing that, we have told the dog to sit and stare; boom-false alert.

Just last week I observed a passive working dog checking packages. This dog is not in our region, and I have never worked with the team. At every package, while the dog was sniffing, the handler stopped and relaxed the leash. The dog immediately sat and was rewarded at every package. They did not put any control packages out, so I could not see how the dog worked on controls; but from what I saw he would have sat no matter what, because he was reading his handler's "change in behavior".

Over Working a Dog Off Lead

Most handlers start their dog off lead in the rooms. This is a great technique if done properly. Send your dog in to do a quick olfactory cursory sniff. If he hasn't hit odor quickly, then detail the room. Don't waste time trying to show us how great your dog is, you are being judged as a team.

Rewarding the Dog in Trials

This will be short and sweet. I am adamantly against rewarding in trials or on the street. Plain and simple, when you are working 5 cars and your dog alerts on the first car and you reward, then the second car and reward, then the 3rd and 4th and 5th, you have an obvious problem. Now you have rewarded your dog five times (believe it or not sometimes more) but there are only two hides. You have just confused the heck out of your dog and the judges. You have just rewarded your dog for an alert you no doubt created (see above). Instead, praise your dog off, go back and detail the cars and hopefully you will eliminate the false alerts. Later set out a known hide and reward him on that find.

If You Choose to Reward

If you feel you must reward in trials, then use a clean (non-scented) toy that you can reward directly in the dog's mouth. Don't throw something that is going to bounce all over the venue to distract your dog and the judges.

Failing to Detail

We often see handlers work their dogs around cars or in rooms and when the dog shows a change in behavior the handler queues an alert (see above). However, this time maybe

the dog was in odor, just not at source. This is especially a problem with passive teams. Easy fix: “properly” detail your dog in rooms or around cars. Understand how odor travels. Work the dog both directions so he has the best chance of getting to source. Be consistent in your search pattern. This is for your benefit; if you always search the same way then you are less likely to miss something.

Watch Your Dog

ALWAYS watch your dog. I can’t tell you how many times we have watched a dog in odor being pulled off odor by its handler because the handler wasn’t paying attention to the dog.

Attitude Goes Down the Leash

One of the many things my mentor (the almighty Joe Clingan) taught me early on was that your attitude flows down the leash to your dog. If you are pumped your dog is pumped, if you are happy your dog is happy, if you are ticked off your dog is scared to death. Even if your dog is not having a good day you can salvage trials. Be happy, be encouraging and let your dog know you are in the game with him. If you come down hard on your dog because you are having a bad day or your dog is having a bad day you will shut him down. I know this from personal experience. Dogs have bad days-deal with it.

Praise Your Dog, Now Shut Up!

Don’t forget to praise your dog; you are a team. But shut up and let him work. Here’s the deal, your dog needs to know you’re in the game with him, so an occasional “good boy” is good, if he’s working. When you give your “find dope” command, if he’s working, then shut up. We constantly hear; “find the dope, find the dope, find the dope, find the dope.....” All he needs is one or two commands. Once he’s working be quiet; if he stops working, then give a command; he knows what he’s doing. Don’t over think it.

Trust Your Dog

Trust your dog, don’t rely on scratches. If you train “properly” and work trials like you train, then you won’t have to look for the scratches on the cars. Folks, it is more than obvious to us when you are forcing an alert out of your dog because you see the scratches from previous dogs (you will lose points for this). The problem here is obvious: those scratches may or may not be due to an alert on a hide. Remember the false alert problem in the first section? Once a dog false alerts and scratches what do you think the next team does? Yes, they see the scratches and queue an alert and their dog scratches. Trust your dog, not the scratches.

Miscellaneous Issues

- Bring poker chips or something to mark the alerts so you don't forget
- If your dog does something wrong, it's your fault
- Bring clean rewards
- If your dog does something wrong, it's your fault
- There are 5 cars, not 4 not 3 but 5
- If your dog does something wrong, it's your fault
- Be positive and have fun
- If your dog does something wrong, it's your fault
- Break your dog before you do the sniff
- If your dog does something wrong, it's your fault

We are here to certify and have fun. If you have questions or need advice, you can ask anyone at trials. This is certification only, not a competition. Whatever! Let's face it, we are cops and dog handlers, everything is a competition. However, this is a friendly fun trial and any competition is just that, FUN! We are all here to help each other. I look forward to seeing all of you in April. I want you to remember one thing:

If your dog does something wrong, it's YOUR fault!