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K-9 Dog Academy Takes its Training to the Mine Field

The Journal senior editor Margaret Busé sits down with dog trainer Malinda Julien to discuss the K-9 Dog Academy and the future—and present—of mine detecting dogs.

By Margaret S. Busé, Editor

Margaret Busé (MB): Can you tell me the history of Thunderstorm Canine and the K-9 Academy?

Malinda Julien (MJ): The academy is actually a small part of what we do. Thunderstorm Canine is undergoing a lot of change. The kennels were originally designed to work search and rescue. In our search and rescue work we came across the law enforcement folks who kept telling me that they could really use some good canine units. We decided to go into explosives, cadavers, narcotics, evidence search, along with search and rescue. Now we are planning to go into mine dogs. Living here in the United States and not traveling abroad very much it never really dawned on me on how severe the problem really is. When I went to the conference (Mine Detecting Dog Conference, San Antonio, Texas) and got to meet the people involved and found out more about that situation, I realized that there are not enough sufficient dog suppliers.

MB: What is the basic training needed by all working dogs before they can be deployed into a specific situation?

MJ: In our view it starts even before the dog is born—the genetics. For example, the litter we dropped in January is specifically urged for explosives and MDDs. They will be scent imprinted. This is something that I do with all of my litters. Some of the old-timers think it doesn't work, but we are convinced that it does work. The pups themselves are actually raised with certain scenes that they will have to find later. What we are trying to do is cut down on handler error. The handler is our number one problem. When pups are scent imprinted they will seek rather than be taught. The handler will be trained using a specific scent like TNT, or other types of materials that will be found in mines. After that they go through an extensive off lead program where they are heavily conditioned to do as they are told. People refer to that as obedience. We refer to it as tactical obedience. These dogs must be able to stop on a dime. They must have the ability to do anything we ask them to do without being forced by head or choke. Therefore, the dog is compliant. At that point the dog is 12 weeks old and the training starts immediately. We put them with more experienced dogs, dogs that are already detection dogs, usually their parent. The dogs work with their mom and do what their mom says. It gives us a more stable dog.

MB: You mentioned that they seek scent rather than being taught the scent. What does that mean?

MJ: The training world has not budged much from 1950. Most of the people who are in this field are using the methods from (the 1950s). We are looking at it from a fresh perspective. We want the dog not to have to be taught by humans. First, we don't speak their language. Second, we can't possibly understand what it is that they think. This is why many scent programs fail because the handler is teaching them to find the wrong thing. They may be thinking that they are teaching them to find the desired scent, but they are teaching them to find something that they tap on or that is in a particular container. What we have done is based on studies that came out of the 1960s on the training and socialization of dogs. It was established in the scientific community that you could imprint anything onto an animal while it is being raised. We are teaching a dog to want to find a particular smell. The smell is incorporated into everything that is good—food, warmth, affection all the things that the mother supplies. It is like when we have a grandmother who chewed peppermints—everytime we smell that we think of him. Dogs in turn seek that smell which they associate with what is good. We have taken out about six months of the conventional training program in which we is one year old, he has gone through all of his training. He has spent six months with a handler and is ready to go out in the field. If we set up a program, unless he finds 10 mines in three different areas 10 times each under all terrain and different weather conditions reliably, the dog would be put back into the program. Many of the current programs out there allow for 70 percent accuracy. That is not good enough. In our academy only the professionals work with the dogs through the entire training process. The dogs are not handed down to assistants. We may not produce a lot, but the quality and assuredness of that dog is much higher than the dog that is mass-produced.

MB: I know you work predominantly with purebreds, but as the conference revealed, some organizations do not have that luxury. They are working with stray or abandoned dogs.

MJ: We work with pure breeds for a number of reasons. In the United States, we are a very visual society and people expect to see the German Shepherds in police work. However, we have a program that works with re-homed dogs, dogs that may be strays, abandoned, not wanted for whatever reason. In the MDD field, I feel it may work better if we used indigenous dogs. Dogs that are already there are climatized and they can have their talents capitalized. There may be some that wouldn't work but there will be many that can. Purebreds usually have more genetic problems than mixed breeds. So I don't have anything against these and would use dogs that are already in place in an area and breed on characteristics that would be desirable.

MB: What advice could you give to organizations that are working with indigenous dogs so that they don't have a high washout rate?

MJ: The biggest problem in using indigenous dogs is we are taking a dog that has no socialization skills with humans. Unless we can breed them from the indigenous dogs that exist we are going to be missing the mark. Strays have very little positive socialization with humans. We need dogs that look at us as providers. Most strays have been providing for themselves for some time. Also, some dogs may have too strong a herding instinct and we need a hunter training school. Julien sits on top of the truck. c/o Malinda Julien
The biggest problem that we have with handlers is that we don’t speak the same language. We see things from a human point of view and dogs see things from a dog’s point of view. As long as the human reads the dog through his own interpretation, they are always going to be wrong. A handler must know something about canine or social animal behaviors. Most dogs have been taught correction or praise or a combination of both, and usually it is incorrect. It sets the dogs up to fail. It is the number one problem of all canine handlers. However, if we give handlers some education, we set the dog up to win by having a handler that is better equipped and we set the handler up for more successes. I often hear I can’t get the dog to do the work. The problem is they don’t understand how to make them work. We sometimes expect the handler to do much in a short amount of time. The handlers need to be our number one priority and they must know how to read the dog.

“Work within the parameters of the behavior and social structure of the animals. When we stop throwing on big, nasty chains, choking them to death and...heavy punishments out of our own frustrations, then the dog will work better for us.” — Malinda Julien

qualities that are needed in a good dog handler?

MJ: They need to be patient. No ego running around out there. They must have a true desire to work with the animal. It is probably not one of the most respected jobs to say that you work with an animal all day so they must have strength from within. They must enjoy what they do and be good at it. You must have confidence in your animal. If the dog says it’s there you have got to believe the dog. These are qualities that can not be taught, they must be present within the handler. Slow and steady as she goes, that’s the handler that we want.

MB: You have mentioned about the handler playing such a crucial role. Can you tell me more about the crucial role the handler plays with the dogs?

time that a dog from another source is already mature. That dog may prove that it works and we can proceed from there. It really depends on your situation. How fast is this dog needed? What do we have available? Some times your kennel is full and other times you have to depend on outside sources. That is why we plan to dedicate this upcoming littor to MDDs.

MB: Your academy is very integrated. You do a lot of different aspects of canine training, from search and rescue to narcotics. Do you think dog training academies should be multi-faceted or single use facilities?

MJ: We really only do one thing. We use dogs as a scent detection tool. Whether we are looking for explosives, mines, narcotics, fiticides or live people is really not the issue. It is the fact that a dog is being used as a detection item. These are the things we have specialized in: the ability to utilize the dog to find a certain scent.

MB: MDD is a small, but strong field. Do you think canine academies may begin filling the niche for MDDs?

MJ: I don’t think so. It is a real hard sell probably. Here in the United States people will think that you are sending dogs to be killed. I don’t think that the average working dog training facility will be able to train the parameters that are needed for a successful mine dog. This is not like finding narcotics or a piece of evidence. This is very serious and lives are involved. I think it is probably cheaper for them to turn out overpower police dogs.

MB: You mentioned briefly about public outrage. Have you had problems with animal rights groups?

MJ: Yes, because they are misinformed and they think we are using the dog without any regard to well being. I do not mess with them. I just ask them to leave my facility. I have run into a lot of people who have gotten their hackles up when MDD’s are mentioned because they think we are going to send Fifi into the mine field to blow up a bomb.

MB: You have often mentioned how little the training methods have changed since the 1950’s. Why is that so?

MJ: Just because they have been doing it for 20 years doesn’t make it right. There is always evolution, there is always something new, but the people in this industry really are very adversarial. They see and view everyone as heavy competition. None of these changes will take place immediately, I guarantee you, but we are willing to take the drags and arrows in order to go out and attempt to do this. One of the goals in formulating our academy is to allow the newer people that are coming into the industry to have a broader view. The oldtimers have been doing it a long time, but it has saturated and they just continue to do what they think works.

MB: Can you give me a specific as to how your training methods are different from this “old-style 1950’s training”?

MJ: Our training methods are very different because they are based on an entirely different view. The old phrase used to be “I am the master of my dog,” and that’s typically how it was looked at. It was never looked at as a partner, as an entity unto itself. The dog was something that we told what to do and if it didn’t do it I will make it do it. As we have become more involved and more educated we have definitely found out that your grandpa was right, you can catch a lot more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. We work within the parameters of the behavioral and social structure of the animals. Most dogs that we train never see a leash for the first five to six months of their lives because stupid guy goes down the leash and it goes right into the dog. The dogs do not want what you want, it does not understand. The dog understands one thing: survival. If being a part of our pack means food, warmth, security and survival, the dog will do anything that is necessary for it to do. So, we look at it from an almost completely 100 degree difference from the rest of the world. There are a lot of technological advancements such as electronic collars that make us more precise. There are a lot of things we can do rather than tie the dog to us and choke the air out of it every time it doesn’t do what we want. All of these is that the bond between the handler and the animal and makes the animal more reluctant to work for the
with a lot of animals, but there comes that special one that you just have this unique bond with. Not only do you have a unique bond, but they go the extra mile for you. MJ: It is absolutely incredible and once you have that, it opens the way to have others. I had a Doberman that was with me in the Oklahoma disaster and he has since gone on to be in the Per Hall of Fame. He is now retired and lives with a friend of mine in Colorado; however, this dog again was a stray, a nothing. He was a beautiful Doberman, but he was extremely mean and had been abused. I took the dog for God knows what reason and I trained this dog and it would do anything I asked it to. I asked this dog to jump out of the back of a fire truck while we were in Oklahoma. I said, "I need you right now!" You know how big a firetruck is? The dog jumps right out, it pops his jaw on the concrete, gets up, shakes his head and keeps right on coming. He wasn't an above average dog and he met his fate not in the disaster areas of Oklahoma, but with a rattlesnake and became severely impaired mentally from too many bites to the head and thus was retired. If we can ever put dogs like that into the hands of these handlers, that dog is special. They are there they do exist.

Handlers that can recognize those qualities do exist. It is our job to find them. It is our job to seek them out and to show them that they have them, as handlers, and to find the gifted dogs that are out there. You can walk through any shelter and one dog in that shelter will look at you with eyes that say "Take me out of here. I promise I'm good, I know I can do this, if you just tell me what it is." We've had many of those dogs. Many of these dogs are very successful in our police program. We have put them out with units that could not afford the over-inflated $10,000 (U.S.) fee. These dogs are doing amazing, and they came from everywhere, but it was the right dog and it was the right handler. I firmly believe that those dogs know you saved their lives. Their bond with you is much stronger than that with the dog that simply came along and bided for. If you can get those dogs, they will work and work and work until they drop. That's what we're looking for. That's what we want. That loyalty, that bond between animal and human, that is only in certain people and only in certain dogs and can only be done if a person is there to help facilitate the process. That's what we want to accomplish.

MB: What is in store for you for the upcoming year? MJ: Hopefully, I will finish all of these shows and various pills I'm taking to go over to Croatia and Mozambique. I need to go over and see what's going on and find out who is looking for better ways to use dogs, what companies are willing to look at a more educated way of dealing with a very difficult and timely problem. I'm looking at spending a lot of time overseas. I'm looking at getting this program up and running, and seeing what we can do.

I think that 2001 will probably be one of our most exciting rewarding years and I think we can definitely make a change and a mark in this industry that will enable us to clearly those fields, which is our goal. If we can do that, I will certainly consider 2001 a tremendous year, that's for sure.

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