MEASURING WORKING DOG PERFORMANCE

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If we are to select and breed for optimal working ability, it is vital that we have meaningful and reliable measures of performance.

For any working dog role, there are multiple dimensions to performance and the literature abounds with different, often arbitrary, ways of measuring or rating these. Using arms and explosives search dogs as an example, we have taken a systematic and evidence-based approach to derive methods to quantify working ability.

Firstly derivation of a meaningful vocabulary can be achieved through systematic workshops, interviews and using psychosocial techniques to prioritise the most important attributes of performance. Standardised testing sessions can be useful tools to measure multiple aspects of performance, providing they represent the range of roles the dog is required to perform. Whilst well designed test outcomes correlate well to trainer's assessments they are less prone to rater error (e.g. "halo" effects), and hence discriminant validity is improved.

However, to truly measure working performance, one needs to monitor dogs in their daily work and training. This needs to be done by handlers and trainers, although there is variability in rating ability with the former sometimes showing leniency towards their own dogs. However, interactive training in the use of scales and benchmarking of scales can improve this ability, and is therefore a vital component of any monitoring scheme. It is only through the derivation of honest, well-validated performance measures that we can ensure maintenance and improvement of working dogs' performance.