Use of improper or lackadaisical techniques when handling items in a training exercise can have disastrous effects on your canine’s real world performance. If your targets are tainted with a different target odor, a distinct non-target odor (e.g., that sandwich you had for lunch), or a unique human odor, your canine can be inadvertently conditioned to respond to that contaminating odor instead of the actual target odor. As a result, they may perform superbly in your training only to miss actual threats in real searches. Fortunately, the problems associated with contamination and extraneous odors can be minimized when personnel are mindful of the issue and appropriate practices are employed.
The strict use of disposable gloves, such as polyethylene food service gloves, is essential for reducing contamination. Wear clean, new gloves every time a target is handled; even one occasion of mishandling can ruin an aid. Don gloves and use them quickly; if you put on new gloves, but then get distracted (e.g., answer your phone or make a note in your log book), replace those gloves before touching the target. When you are done handling the target odor, immediately discard that pair of gloves. Also, think critically about the handling of unused gloves — store them in a suitable container, never co-locate them with targets or distracters, and do not transport them in your pocket because they too are subject to being contaminated.

As another precaution, keep target and non-target (e.g., distracter) materials isolated from one another when establishing training exercises. Separate work areas/stations should exist for these two general categories of training articles. Furthermore, if multiple targets are to be used in the same exercise, take measures to ensure that the designated target work area does not contribute to cross-contamination. Do not open two containers of different target odors next to each other; also, if a surface is used in the preparation of target odors, cover it with clean barrier paper before target preparation and replace the paper before a new target is prepared.

Incorporating these suggestions and others that you identify on your own (the key is to always think critically about your handling, set-up, and storage protocols) into your routine training will ensure your canine maintains the real world, real threat detection capability you require to be successful.

Look for Topic 3 in the next issue.