Flee Attack Technique

By Thad Peterson

Throughout the time I have been involved with ringsport, no exercise has generated more discussion, and at times heartache, than the Flee Attack, or “Fuyant”. Decoys have been upended, dogs have been jammed and landed upon, and at times, events that happened during the execution of this exercise may have determined whether or not people decided to pursue the sport of French Ring.

Consequently, during my tenures as Director of Decoys, I have worked diligently at every opportunity to try to help decoys perform this exercise well and also to gain for myself the fullest possible understanding of its elements. I take great pride in saying that under my watch, many decoys have developed fantastic skills for the Flee, and during that time, I’m not aware of any dogs being seriously injured.

Still, this task of maximizing the abilities of NARA decoys to perform safe Flee attacks is not one that can be accomplished and then forgotten. To the contrary, it is an ongoing process of developing the capabilities of our current and up-and-coming decoys. My hope is that this article might give NARA’s decoys some pause for thought about how to effectively and safely execute the Flee, and might also provide some guidance in coaching others to achieve proficiency.

Last year's rules changes related to the Flee Attack have helped to minimize two of the biggest obstacles to completing an uneventful Flee Attack exercise. Those obstacles are VELOCITY, and VELOCITY DIFFERENTIAL. The improvement in the setup of the exercise is that the distances are now kept much shorter than the previous 50-70 meters at which the dog would bite.

Decoy demonstrating improper technique: looking back at the dog during the entry results in not leaning forward and a crash. If you fall, don't fall on the dog.

By “velocity”, I'm referring to the total velocity of the dog and decoy at the time the bite occurs. With a decoy running at maximum speed, maybe 13-15 miles per hour for the sake of illustration, it doesn't take a tremendous amount of force from the impact of the dog to cause a loss of footing, and make for a spectacular fall. The normal “good, medium sized dog” as I like to call them, can easily be traveling 10+ miles per hour faster than the decoy at the time of the impact. Often, they can impact the decoy with more than enough force, and the tumble following the impact is for the most part an uncontrolled event with the very real potential to injure the dog and/or the decoy.

Please notice for a second that in that last sentence I referred to injury of dog and decoy. There is a reason for that specific ordering, and the reason is that my first concern as a decoy is for the safety of the dog. I contend that all good decoys share that priority, and it is an important touchstone for the concerns that have caused me to invest so much effort over the years into doing safe Flee Attacks myself and helping others to do the same as well as I possibly can.

Keeping with that thought, I'll go back to the other term I mentioned above as an impediment that stands in the way of a decoy performing a quality Flee Attack, “velocity differential.” By velocity differential I mean the difference in the speeds of the decoy and dog at the time of the impact. As contrasted against the downfield attacks where the decoy faces the dog, and can therefore minimize the impact of the dog by stepping aside at the last second from the direct line of the dog's momentum, during the Flee Attack, velocity differential is a primary concern. If the velocity differential is too great, bad things are sure to happen.

Reflecting back to the 50-70 meter Flee Attacks of the past, velocity and velocity differential both worked against the safety of the exercise in general and therefore worked against the safety of the dog and decoy. Since the decoy was so far downfield, he or she had an opportunity to attain a high running speed. Similarly, and often to even greater effect, the dog had that same running distance plus 10 or more meters to attain a much greater speed. Total velocity was a serious problem with this configuration of the exercise. Fearing the massive crash that would often ensue at the end of the old Flee Attack exercise, many decoys took the reflexive, albeit completely wrong action, and slowed down before the bite.

Decoy looking under stick arm as dog enters results in correct forward body posture, allowing decoy to stay on his feet safely.

Unfortunately, the decoy slowing under these circumstances does little to diminish the overall velocity of the dog and decoy combination, and the really big problem is that the decoy slowing in front of a dog coming at top speed causes an extremely high velocity differential. The ringsport career of more than one dog

has surely been ruined by this course of events, and many of us still bear the emotional scars of watching a gut-wrenching crash of this type that happened about a decade ago in Massachusetts. It's not something you really need to witness to be motivated to avoid it, but when you've watched it happen, it's something you never want repeated.

Luckily, the new rules for the Flee are very specific, and seem tailor made to minimize the distance at which the bite occurs, minimizing total velocity and velocity differential, and thus minimizing the chance of injurious crashes that result from them. Under the new rules, the decoy is to begin the exercise 10 meters from the line of departure, and when the decoy has crossed the five-meter dashed line, the judge authorizes the handler to send the dog. The handler must send the dog directly without undue delay.

Clearly then, doing the exercise in this way should minimize the risk of unfortunate outcomes. Achieving that higher degree of safety requires a few essential elements of the decoy's performance, as follows:

1) The decoy must keep a very low running speed away from the starting point at the ten-meter line. I often describe this to decoys as a speed somewhere in between running in place, and a jog.

2) The decoy must maintain that slow running speed until the dog reaches a point that will vary in the exact distance from the decoy, but is approximately five meters behind him or her. When the dog reaches that "critical distance" point, the decoy must turn his or her shoulders fully toward the front, **LEAN FORWARD, and drive forward with explosively powerful acceleration steps**. Up to the point that the dog reaches the critical distance, the decoy may continue to look back at the dog.

3) Of supreme importance is that **the decoy must continue to accelerate explosively and with a forward posture up to and through the point that the dog is on the bite.** Ordinarily when this procedure is correctly executed by a skilled decoy, there are only a few steps of acceleration, but they are enough to do the job

Many people might be thinking at this point that the sequence of events I've just described doesn't sound like it would work very well. While I understand that thought, I can assure you that this method works very well, and was even implemented successfully with the old style Flee at much greater distances. Richard Bonilla and I have had many discussions about this throughout the years, as different styles of decoying and different body types worked better with varied techniques under the old rules. Under the new rules though, it seems that the options for successful decoying of the Flee Attack are fewer than they were.

The reasons that the sequence of events I described above works well relates to a few main factors:

1) Keeping the total distance of the exercise down to less than 25 meters minimizes the distance over which the dog can accelerate to top speed.

2) The decoy's slow speed downfield causes the dog not to accelerate as hard as it could, or to even begin to slow slightly in some cases just about the time the decoy starts to turn away from the dog and accelerate explosively.

3) The decoy's increasing speed at the time the dog enters the bite, with the possibly reduced speed of the dog caused by the decoy's apparently slow running speed, serves to minimize the velocity differential between the dog and decoy at the time of the impact.

Even if all of these measures are implemented perfectly, sometimes it is very difficult or impossible to keep your footing at the entry. Some things to think about to help you stay upright are:

1) Balance yourself in such a way that in addition to having a forward posture (upper body weight forward) when explosively accelerating at the last instant, you also have the ability to let the impact "take you for a ride." Sometimes in this way you can actually float a few extra feet through the air from the momentum the dog transfers into your body. It's kind of like an extra long stride, and if you can ride it out successfully, you can have some very smooth Flees.

Decoy accelerating and absorbing impact of entry without looking back at dog.

2) Drop your hips a little bit right before the impact. This is a little tidbit I got from the Schutzhund guys recently when I did a Helper selection. They advocate that as you take the bite on the escape bite (a bit like a Flee, but with your upper body turned slightly toward the dog to present the forearm) you should drop your hips just slightly to center your balance. In the case of the Schutzhund helpers, this can help them to not get pushed over forward from the momentum of the dog driving into the arm from behind, but it can also help with a dog that slings by and pulls the helper forward. For the Ringsport Decoy doing a Flee Attack, it kind of results in a slightly lowered center of gravity, along with a slightly rounded back (the opposite of an arched back).

Taken in combination with the paragraph above, this might seem like a bit of a contradiction, but if you keep these things in mind as you are doing your Flees in training, I think you might find that you can kind of fit them both into your skill set together. If you envision yourself accelerating strongly, shoulders faced forward and leaning forward, with hips dropped a bit, and prepared to be propelled on a long stride at the impact, I think you'll be shocked at what types of impacts you can ride out smoothly and safely.

Decoy showing correct forward posture and continued acceleration as dog enters the bite.

3) NEVER find yourself looking backward at the dog over your shoulder as it enters the bite. Two VERY SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS result from doing that:

First, it inevitably means that your upper body weight is behind the position that it should be. In some cases the shoulders are positioned above the hips during this maneuver, and many times I have seen them actually end up behind the centerline of the body extending upward from the hips. Having upper body weight tipped back like this is a recipe for disaster. It's now many people end up getting dumped backwards on the dog, in an uncontrolled crash that can be quite severe.

Second, having your shoulders twisted sideways as necessary to watch the dog enter the bite makes it impossible to accelerate forward with the necessary explosiveness and commitment. This means that the potential is high for injurious impacts from high velocity differentials and twisted-up footing.

One reason people have implemented this looking back over the shoulder technique in the past is that they intended to hit the dog with the stick at the very instant they dog entered the bite. I'm personally very dubious about that practice anyway, but with the new rules it's a moot point. As of last year when the new rules were implemented in France after the Coupe, the decoy MUST TAKE TWO STEPS WITH THE DOG ON THE BITE BEFORE DELIVERING THE FIRST STICK HIT.

4) If you really must watch the dog enter the bite though, several of our most experienced NARA decoys have recently mentioned to me that they sometimes watch the dog under their stick arm as it enters the bite. They have commented to me that this helps them to keep their upper body weight forward, but not twisted, at the same time as allowing them to watch the dog, and therefore able to respond somewhat better to manage the force of the impact. Within the context of what I've described in this article, this technique helps keep upper body weight forward, and also with a rounded back. I've tried it, and it worked out quite well for me. If you do feel like trying this technique, all I ask is that you get comfortable with it in training with a variety of dogs before trying it out in a trial!

No matter what you do, the Flee Attack is a very difficult exercise to execute perfectly. If you don't get it perfectly right, it's not the end of the world as long as you have followed the steps above that relate mainly to ensuring that you are accelerating explosively away from the dog with your upper body weight forward at the time of the impact.

When all else fails though, and you fall during a Flee, just make sure you fall safely. However, you have to keep your composure, don't fight falling so hard you make the situation worse, and above all else, be cognizant of the positioning of the dogs head, neck, and body. Sometimes it may be necessary to do something to help untwist the dog's neck, but more often it is critical to simply not do something that causes the dog's neck to get twisted worse. If you do that, usually they'll untwist themselves.

I hope this helps all of you who read it in some way like it has helped me to write it! If you should have any questions or comments, please contact me. I look forward to hearing from you, and above all, HAPPY TRAINING!!