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Police dogs are put through their paces

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WORCESTER — Sutton Police Officer Christopher C. Cowan shouted out commands to his partner, Titan, a Belgian Malinois, and quickly the dog took off. A few yards away stood a “suspect” running from the officer and the canine.

Within seconds Titan had his jaws clamped around the arm of the man.

Titan was one of more than 40 dogs from Massachusetts, New York, New Hampshire and Connecticut attending a certification and competition at Green Hill Park over the past couple of days as part of certification from the United States Police Canine Association.

The dog has been working with Officer Cowan for a few years and recently helped locate a bank robbery suspect in Grafton.

After taking Titan through an agility test at Green Hill Park Tuesday, Officer Cowan and Titan took part in the criminal apprehension test yesterday.

“Most of the stuff we do is narcotics or tracking for missing people,” Officer Cowan said. “We had a rash of breaking and enterings and we used the dog to track for that. It is definitely a team effort between the two of us.”

Giving his dog a gentle rub on the head, Officer Cowan said Titan is a sharp dog with drive and workability. During the criminal apprehension test, one judge remarked, “like a bullet” when Titan leaped fast toward the man. The man running from the police dogs during the test wore a heavy protective suit.

The dogs taking part in the criminal apprehension test have to obey several commands and are watched by a group of judges who have rigid rules. Once the certification course is complete, awards are given to dogs that scored the highest in individual tests and for overall best scores. Departments that send a team of dogs also receive awards.

James Matarese, a retired member of the United States Park Police in Washington, D.C., is the national president of the USPCA and worked as the chief judge for certification. The certification is held in different cities and this was the first time in Worcester.

As officers walked their dogs through an obedience course, where the officers have to show command of their canine, Mr. Matarese said certification helps officers when they are brought into court, whether it be for testimony or other reasons.

“This shows that you have control of your dog under certain circumstances,” he said.

Worcester Police Officer Stephen C. Cortis, vice president of USPCA's Region 4, said dogs have to pass the obedience test before moving on to the other events. The dogs must receive a certain score to receive certification.

After obedience tests, the dogs were taken to the agility test, where they were asked — on command — to jump walls, crawl and maneuver over a wall that is 6 feet tall.

Officers could be heard yelling commands in English, German or other languages to their dogs because many of them are bred overseas and imported specially for law enforcement.

Officer Cortis' canine, Brie, conducts narcotics searches for the department and is a Belgian Malinois, a breed that tends to have a high drive.

The breed is becoming more common as a dog used by law enforcement. The Dutch shepherd is also being used more.

“Ten years ago 90 percent of the dogs were German shepherds,” he said.

“That number has gone down.”

Boston Police Officer Troy Caisey, who has trained police dogs for 18 years and runs a regional academy, said the majority of his department's dogs are German shepherds.

Retired Suffolk County, N.Y., police officer Arthur J. Rescigno, a judge for the criminal apprehension test, said German shepherds tend to be good at several different fields, while the Belgian Malinois and Dutch shepherd tend to be “high-drive” dogs that need a little more attention.

Boston has dogs that are also trained to detect explosives and guns.

Officer Cortis said specialty dogs, such as narcotics searching, cadaver and explosive detection dogs, undergo a different certification.

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