



PAWS ON PATROL

BY EMILY MCINTYRE | PHOTOS BY SARAH WILLIAMS

When things get “ruff,” local police officers and their K-9s work to keep people safe.

It isn't the handguns, Taser guns or other weapons used by police that are most effective in taking down a criminal or suspect. It's a jet-black, wet nose.

Don't be fooled by its cuteness — that animal is here to work. Since the Athens Police Department's K-9 unit became defunct in August 2014, Athens County has integrated canines into two local police units to create the safest community possible.

A dog's powerful sense of smell is what makes it the bread and butter of law enforcement, especially when it comes to narcotics and bomb detection.

Writer Peter Tyson with NOVA scienceNOW, a division of pbs.org, says that dogs have about 300 million olfactory receptors in their noses, and humans only have about 6 million. Furthermore, the portion of the canine brain that's dedicated to examining scents is 40 times larger than that of a human.

"We just smell the overall smell of what we've known as pizza growing up," Athens County Sheriff Deputy John Kulchar explains. "A dog smells dough, it smells pepper, it smells oregano, it smells the sauce, the cheese [and] the pepperoni. It smells every individual thing."

MEET DEPUTY KULCHAR

When Kulchar was attending the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy, he was provided with some contacts for a chance to connect with the Athens City Police Department. One night he tagged along with APD K-9 handler Kryshea Osborne and her K-9 Jersey.

"I don't know how she didn't kick me out of her car, because all I was doing was just asking questions," Kulchar says. "Finally by the end of the night, she was like, 'Do you want to come to training and see how it works?' And I was like, 'Yeah!'"

Both Osborne and Jersey retired from the force in the summer of 2014, and Kulchar is now the Athens County Sheriff's Office's only K-9 handler. The stocky, yet muscular officer worked with his first K-9, a Belgian Malinois named Ryder, for almost two years. Tragically, he lost Ryder and a young puppy, Bane, in a fire that destroyed his home last April. Though it was not an easy transition for Kulchar, he began to visit Storm Dog Tactical, a K-9 training center in Columbus a few times a week just to be around dogs. In July, Kulchar was assigned his most recent K-9 partner, a Dutch Shepherd named Ijo, after completing six weeks of training with the dog.

On March 25, the Athens Messenger reported that Ijo will no longer be allowed to work in Athens County after he bit an inmate at Southeastern Ohio Regional Jail during a drug search. According to Athens County Sheriff Rodney Smith, the bite was unprovoked and Kulchar did not instruct Ijo to bite the inmate. The incident was under investigation at the time this issue of *Backdrop* was published.

Ijo was the only dual-purpose dog in Athens County, which means his main purpose was narcotics detection, and his second purpose was in the realm of street patrol. Kulchar and Ijo spent a lot of time at home practicing narcotics, tracking and other drills using scent detection boxes, buried substances and other items.

"The training company I'm with, we've rose to the point where we're going to U.S. Army bases and teaching them how to train their dogs," he says. "If you want to get better and rise above and stay on a certain level, you have to train on that level."

THE BOMB SQUAD

About three years ago, the Ohio University Police Department discussed bringing a K-9 explosion-detection program to campus as part of its overall effort to increase campus safety. Thanks to a grant from Ohio Homeland Security, that became a reality. Officer Tim Woodyard, who has been with OUPD for 15 years, wanted to take advantage of the opportunity that presented a different experience from his regular office work. Once he was hired, he started training on Aug. 4, 2014, with his new

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four-legged partner — a rescued Labrador retriever mix named Alex.

“There was a lot into it more than just dog handling. You kind of want to know what people would be looking for when they’re going to hide an explosive,” Woodyard says.

OUPD also brought in a second bomb detection K-9, a Belgian Malinois named Brody, and his handler Officer Adam Hoffman during late fall of 2014. Both dogs are solely trained on odor detection to sniff out explosives, which consist of substances such as C4, dynamite and other powders; it is up to their handler to guide them and make sure that they are covering every area to the extent that they need to.

Despite the fact that they were assigned separate dogs, Woodyard and Hoffman had to complete the same 10-week training program. In their training, the two OUPD officers learned about dogs, explosives, bombs and placements.

“A lot of departments only have one dog. There’s several that have two, but the benefit in having two dogs is enormous, because we get to train together like this every day, where some departments only have one dog and have to train by themselves,” Hoffman says.

Woodyard and Hoffman intentionally overlap their shifts for two hours each day. That allows them to take turns hiding explosives and they offer each other insight on what they’re doing well or poor on, which is extremely important when they frequently collaborate on duty.

Three-year-old Alex and 2-year-old Brody often team up with other bomb-sniffing dogs from Athens and Columbus for particularly large events, such as football games at Peden Stadium or community functions such as Red, White & BOOM! on the Fourth of July in Columbus. One or two dogs usually aren’t enough to provide adequate security, so the more wet noses, the better.

On a sunny afternoon at Bob Wren Stadium, Brody pulls Hoffman into the men’s bathroom. As the audible sound of his heavy sniffing fills the air, Brody weaves in and out of every single stall while Woodyard observes from afar.

“Usually what we do when we come into a room is we let the dog sniff whatever he wants to sniff,” Hoffman explains. He snaps his fingers, tapping each bathroom sink and soap dispenser before Brody leaps to investigate.

“[The dog’s] not going to understand that this suitcase needs better checked than say, something you can see into. ... It is a team effort; if the dog was on his own, he would be done with the room real quick and not check it thoroughly enough,” Woodyard adds.

FURRY FOREIGNERS

Woodyard says that as far as he knows, Alex is the only rescue K-9 used in southeast Ohio by a police agency.

Ijo, Ryder and Brody all came from overseas, the reason being that their drive to work — even as a puppy —

comes straight from their native bloodline, because just about every dog in their family tree is bred to work.

Since Ijo and Ryder were both born in France, they learned their basic commands in French. It’s ultimately up to the handler to decide whether to keep or change the language for specialized commands. In a situation like Kulchar’s where he already knew French commands from working with Ryder, he chose to build upon the repertoire that Ijo had already learned.

Sticking to the dog’s native language has its advantages, such as the criminal or suspect having difficulty replicating the foreign commands. The dog recognizes the handler’s voice, much like someone would recognize his or her mother’s or father’s voice.

On the other hand, Brody comes from the Netherlands and his commands are in German. Ohio Homeland Security has a contract with a private trainer who traveled to Holland. After screening a number of Belgian Malinois dogs, he picked his top five, brought them back to the U.S., and trained them on the odors and basic commands. After five weeks of that, Hoffman and Brody trained as handler and K-9 for another five weeks before they officially started with OUPD.

“We make it look easy, but we’ve been doing it for a while,” Hoffman says as he smiles down at Brody.

KNOW YOUR DOG

Although training is crucial, the handler and dog must have a rock-solid relationship. Just as no two individuals are alike, dogs also have their fair share of differences that extend beyond breed, size and color.

“[If] Adam takes Alex, they’re no longer a certified team. If I take Brody, we’re no longer a certified team,” Woodyard explains. “Just because of the amount of time you spend with that dog, the idea is you’re gonna know when he’s sick, you’re gonna know when he’s too hot to keep going, [and] you’re gonna know when his behavior changes.”

Kulchar notes that Ryder had a distinct alert response when something or someone has been detected.

“Dogs can’t talk, but they can talk with their body language. If I was doing like an area search or building search with Ryder, he had a little quirk where ... he would get like two body shakes, and then he’d lock up, and then he’d start barking,” Kulchar says.

Unlike Ryder, Alex and Brody will sit and stare at an explosive when they detect it. Each dog also has his own personality. For example, Hoffman says that Alex gets a little nervous when the cannon is fired at the home football games, while Brody doesn’t mind it at all. Alex is a little slower and gentler than Brody, who tends to be quicker and more aggressive in searching.

Of course, no successful find goes without an immediate reward. Brody is a toy reward dog, and Alex is a food reward dog. In the K-9 mind, the job is perceived to be more of a game than work. Surprisingly, those toys aren’t what you would expect to see.

“It’s just a PVC pipe wrapped in a water supply line; they’re just homemade. You can see how chewed up it is. So he’ll go through one once every couple months, and I’ll just make a new one,” Hoffman says.

Alex’s praise comes in the form of a handful of kibble. Because the 95-pound lab can get a tad slobbery, Woodyard points to the brown hand towel he keeps on his police belt and laughs.

RISKY WORK = REWARD

Aside from the group training that the K-9 units do regionally and locally, the handlers find a lot of their own reward in the things they do with the community. Woodyard and Hoffman educate others on bomb detection and essentially what they do by holding programs and discussions on campus and off campus. Kulchar often visits schools in the area, such as the Alexander Township district where he used to take Ryder.

Two days after the house fire killed the officer’s canine comrades, a little boy pointed Kulchar out in the Wal-Mart checkout line to his parents.

“Mind you, I’ve not shaved, I had no clothes other than the ones I was wearing the day of the fire. And this kid looks at me like, ‘I know you!’ ... The kid’s like, ‘He’s got Ryder!’” Kulchar recalls, his blue-gray eyes shimmering in the light from his computer screen.

Kulchar explains that it’s those kinds of moments that inspire him the most, knowing his K-9 team “had that impact on kids.”

After training at Peden for a while, Woodyard lets go of Alex’s leash, but Alex doesn’t stray from his side. The handler slightly crouches down and softly says, “Hey Alex, you wanna show me where it is?”

Alex takes off running through the student section tunnel, then sits and pants heavily in front of a trashcan, where he has found a “hide.” With a grin on his face wider than the whole football field, Woodyard praises Alex, who is hyped up and jumping for joy.

The bond created between handler and K-9 is immeasurable and invaluable. It’s clear that the officers love what they do. To them, their work doesn’t feel like work with a wagging tail by their side.

“I like when we go to these trainings, and I see him becoming a mature dog,” Woodyard says. “You feel like, ‘Wow, I don’t know when we turned a corner, but we’ve turned a corner.’”

“I’ll say that everybody loves the bomb dogs. It’s cool to interact with people and be friendly and let people see that police dogs and police officers can be friendly,” Hoffman adds.

After working with dogs since the age of 18, Kulchar can’t deny the canine connection he’s experienced either.

“I’m like a fat kid with a chocolate cupcake every day I get to come to work,” Kulchar says with a laugh. “It’s an absolute blast.”