

Sheriff Juan M. Perez with new K-9 Corps, from left: Michael Negron and Samson, Wilbert Negron and Drago, Joseph Barone and Tahoe, Iliana Diaz and Colin.

By Karen Zautyk
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There are only four of them, but when they finish their exhaustive training, they will be vital members of the office of Hudson County Sheriff Juan M. Perez. All four came here from Czechoslovakia, but there do not appear to be any language problems, and they do have their passports. (Truly. They do.) When they com-

plete their classes and graduate, they will be issued their badges and their bullet-proof vests. But no guns. Paws are not made to grip firearms.

Say hello to Drago, Tahoe, Samson and Colin, a quartet of German shepherds who comprise the first K-9 unit in the history of the sheriff's department. Their human partners are, respectively, Sheriff's Officers Wilbert Negron, Joseph Barone, Michael Negron and Iliana Diaz.

The dogs and their handlers are currently undergoing training with the Holmdel Police Department, which is known statewide for its expertise in these programs. Overall, there are 26 weeks of classes. These dogs will be used for bomb detection and for patrol duty, deployed as needed to communities throughout Hudson County. Eventually, you'll probably see one, for example, on patrol in West Hudson Park in Kearny.

We had a chance to see them in action last week at a training session held in the former Our Lady of the Assumption School in Bayonne. The empty classrooms and hallways and gym and auditorium were the setting for the bomb-detection exercises conducted by trainer Detective Ed Martinez of the Holmdel PD. And most impressive it was.

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For example, nine backpacks, two of them containing trace amounts of explosives such as Semtex, favored by terrorists everywhere, are placed in a row on the floor. Likewise, a dozen or so paint cans, just one of them containing the residue, form a large circle around the room. The handler and the dog walk through the course, the dog using its incredibly sensitive sniffer on each item. When it smells the tainted backpack or can, it sits in front of it to indicate a find. The dogs had 100% accuracy rate the day we observed them.

More complicated was the search through the classrooms and hallways. Some of the rooms were "hot;" some were not. We watched as Tahoe

went hunting with Officer Barone. The pooch correctly detected all the places where trace explosives were hidden: in a desk drawer, in a cabinet high off the floor, and in the one envelope among several on some bookshelves. Amazingly, Tahoe was even able to detect a trace that had been put on a poster in the hall. "Who would think of looking there?" was the question posed.

Sheriff Perez, who was observing the Bayonne session, explained that he saw a need for the canines after responding to several bomb scares in his jurisdiction. A call went out to other law enforcement departments with bomb-detection dogs, and they responded in force, but it naturally took time for them to arrive. "We don't want to wait," Perez said. And when the sheriff's canine unit is

ready for deployment, it will

be on call to help where needed. "We have a good rapport with all our municipalities and with all the police chiefs," the sheriff noted.

The dogs, purchased from a breeder in Czechoslovakia, are 11 to 16-months old and cost up to \$5,200 each. But they didn't cost Hudson County a penny; all the funding is federal, from the Department of Homeland Security.

The dogs are being trained in a wide variety of scenarios and environments. They have already been out in boats and up in helicopters. And their reward for a job well done, aside from getting to ride in boats and helicopters, is being able to play with a

joy. This is part of the vital bonding process between officer and dog, explained Det. Martinez. "It's all a game for the dog," he said with a smile. "The hard part is teaching the officers how to play."

The officers also are taught how "to read" their dog, to detect changes in its demeanor and breathing patterns, indicators that the animal believes it might have found something. Another interesting tidbit: Bomb-sniffing dogs and drug-sniffing dogs cannot be cross-trained. Whereas the bomb-sniffer just sits when it makes a "find," the drug-sniffer that locates a package of narcotics is liable to tear the thing apart with its teeth. You do not want

which to transport them. So there's no danger of the dogs suffering heat-related problems in the summer: when an officer is away from the vehicle, an alarm alerts him if the interior temperature reaches a set number, and he, via remote, will crack open the windows and turn on a fan.

The dogs all live with their handlers and, when eventually ready for retirement — after about seven years — they usually remain with those human partners, for, as Perez noted, "they become part of the family."

Soon, they will also be a most welcome part of the law enforcement family in Hudson County.

By the way, even if they



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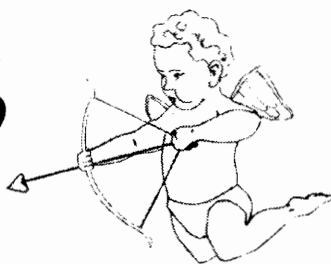
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rolled-up towel. After every correct find, the handler tosses the towel to the pup, who goes chew-crazy with

dogs tearing apart explosives. Along with the dogs, the sheriff's office has acquired kennel-equipped SUVs in

aren't issued a gun at the graduation ceremonies, Perez assured us they will be able to make a speech.
