Lisa Higgins and her dog, 'Frosty,' conduct a search-and-rescue drill as part of the Corrections Canine Association's training sessions this week at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

Canine group hosts police dog training, competition

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — Members of the Corrections Canine Association here are aiming to shatter a stereotype — the image of a police dog as a barking, snarling animal prone to attack without provocation.

The non-profit, volunteer group is hosting about 30 police dog handlers from four states for training and competition this week at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

The public is invited to watch the 10 a.m. field trials at the Angola rodeo arena Saturday. Admission is free.

"We're not out here just to bite somebody," said the CCA president, Capt. Bobby Oliveaux. "All dogs are capable of biting, but we're not out here to show that."

The dogs accompanying their handlers to Angola include those trained to attack on command, but also those used in searches and rescues, narcotics detection, criminal apprehension and routine police patrol work.

One of the most unusual dogs on hand this week is Florida Game and Freshwater Fish enforcement agent John Snow's yellow Labrador retriever, trained to sniff out illegal game kills.

The dog can differentiate between live and dead game. Snow uses his dog to find illegally killed ducks, alligators and deer hidden in airboats, hunting camps and vehicles, even if the game has been field-dressed.

Snow worked with Angie Messina and Lisa Higgins Thursday morning, training them and their golden retrievers in the finer points of following trails.

Messina and Higgins are volunteer members of a St. Tammany Parish-based search and rescue unit.

Higgins' retriever is trained to find drowning victims' bodies under water.

"Heavy praise" is the reward Messina gives her dog when it successfully finds a missing person or the object of a practice search. Snow said he rewards his dog's good work by throwing him a ball.

"But you can throw a 12-gauge shotgun and he'll bring it back," Snow said.

The seminar, which began Wednesday, pairs the officer and his dog in most training sessions, but not always.

Oliveaux walked into a thickly wooded area to lay a trail for a group studying tracking techniques, but the officers who followed him left their dogs in their vehicles.

"We try to train the officer to track a human without a dog," Oliveaux explained when he emerged from the woods. "Then they both know how to track somebody, they'll do a better job."

In nearby Camp I, canine training officer Harold Blappert Jr. of the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office ran groups of Angola tactical team members — without dogs — through the abandoned camp's dining hall to search for two "escaped convicts" holding a hostage.

Oliveaux said dogs are widely used to search for suspects hiding up in buildings, but Thursday's training was designed to show an officer "how to protect himself."

Concussion and smoke grenades, blank cartridges and paint-splattering bullets were used to add realism to the scenario.

Perched high on a shelf above and behind a storeroom door, Lt. Ray Vittorio was claiming multiple "kills" in his role as an escapee.

"A guy kicks in a door, and he's thinking, 'behind the door' or 'behind the other wall.' He doesn't think about looking up," Vittorio said.

Angola employees formed the Corrections Canine Association about eight years ago to promote Angola's canine corps, but has expanded its scope to promote drug abuse education in West Feliciana Parish and Woodville, Miss., schools, said CCA secretary Kathy Setliff.

The group will offer horseback-riding activities this summer to the children who live at the isolated prison, she said.

Many area merchants support the organization, and members participate in many fund-raising activities.

"We put the money right back into the community," said Setliff. "We're functional before we're sociable."

Saturday's trials will be judged in the areas of obedience, agility and criminal apprehension.

The training sessions are the reason for the annual event, and "the competition at the end is more or less the icing on the cake," Setliff said.