Lessons no walk in the park for trainer, police dogs

By MEGAN WOOLHOUSE
Acadiana bureau

BROUSSARD — Jack Robicheaux heaps praise on his dog, Castor.

The Belgian Malinois with a bronze coat and a dark snout won the national championship in early December at the National Police Canine Association competition in Alexandria.

“His name is Castor and he works really well,” said Robicheaux. “I think he had his day that day, and I was fortunate to have his services.”

Standing in his backyard in Broussard, Robicheaux, 48, may be modest when it comes to his role in his dog’s performance.

To teach a dog to sniff out bales of drugs well hidden in gas tanks, bundles of drugs wrapped in duct tape tucked in car seats or boxes of drugs in secret compartments, is no easy task. As a professional police dog trainer, however, Robicheaux sends many dogs like Castor to law enforcement agencies across the country every year.

In competition, it took Castor 4.3 minutes to find the drugs hidden in the interiors of eight vehicles, for which he took first place. It took him four minutes to find the drugs from outside the cars, which placed him third and made the dog a national champ out of all 30 dog-and-handler teams competing from across the country.

Robicheaux, a volunteer police officer with the Broussard Police Department and a reserve officer for the Iberia Parish Sheriff’s Department, said he started training dogs because people in police work are underpaid and often need to work on the side to supplement their income.

He and his wife started K-9 Concepts Inc. in Broussard several years ago. In their kennels, which are on sugar cane fields, they keep about 22 dogs at a time. In one cage there’s Arno, who will go to do police work in Texas; Rocky, who will become a patrol dog in Caddo Parish; Robbie, an edgy dog, the kind police in Detroit are looking for, and many others.

Most of the dogs are of the Belgian Malinois breed. They’re high strung, “like pogo sticks,” he said, with a strong drive to work. Robicheaux imports the dogs from breeders in Belgium and Holland.

Not all dogs are chosen for police work, and some must be sent back. Robicheaux conducts tests that tell him about a dog’s sociability, drive and stamina. Of every 100 dogs he tests, about 15 to 20 make it, he said. Police departments will then pay Robicheaux $7,000 to $8,000 to train the dog and the handler.

Training usually takes three months, he said. The final three weeks of the training period are spent with their new police handlers who come to Robicheaux’s facility.

Last week, Joseph Jenkins of the Cedartown Police Department in Georgia had just finished his training with a Belgian Malinois named Mike.

“With me it was horrible because the dog didn’t bond with me that well,” Jenkins said. “Then, about the second week, we started to gel.”

Training isn’t easy for the dogs, either. They’re exposed to tear gas and gunfire in mock police raids. In drills, the dogs learn how to track drugs in a field of abandoned cars in Robicheaux’s back yard. They learn to attack on commands, usually in other languages.

One of the most important things they learn is to protect their handler at all costs, he said.

“A lot of people think police dogs are mean,” Robicheaux said. “But they’re not. They’re either in work mode or non-work mode.”

The dogs must also have good dispositions so police handlers can bring them home and around children. A police dog’s passive side also helps out in the courtroom, if a Police Department is sued by someone bitten by a police dog in the course of duty.

“You have to have a dog that’s stable, the kind a judge and jury can pet,” Robicheaux said. “I can make a dog bite you and then turn around and you can pet him.”

Robicheaux used to care for his father’s beagles and started working with dogs with a professional trainer after high school. He later met a Lafayette police officer who got him involved in police dog training. Now he trains narcotics dogs for the U.S. Customs Agency.

Five-year-old Castor will be able to compete until he is 12 or 13 years old. Because they live so long, he said, dogs like Castor working in police departments put in a lot of good years of service. Despite the inception of machines created to detect drugs in cars, Robicheaux doesn’t think technology can replace the popularity of dogs among police departments.

“They’re kind of the ‘in’ thing across the U.S.,” he said. “They’ll never get rid of dogs. There’s too much they can do.”