Veteran officer breaks ground in K-9 Division
BR woman is first ever in unit's 30-year history

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The Baton Rouge Police Department’s K-9 Division has been an alien world to women for the past 30 years, but Officer Laurice Teague is now going where no woman has gone before.

The division has been around for 30 years, and that’s how long it’s been since a woman was assigned there.

But on Jan. 1, Teague broke new ground as the first woman ever in the city police K-9 Division.

She’d been trying unsuccessfully for the past 14 months to get transferred into the division, but former Police Chief Wayne Rogillio told Teague he couldn’t spare her from her job in the Uniformed Patrol Division. He told the officer he’d transfer her when he could, but Rogillio never got around to granting her wish.

Teague’s wish finally came true Christmas Eve when hers was one of the first transfers approved by new Police Chief Greg Phares.

Phares said he has no qualms about putting the first woman into the K-9 Division.

“It wasn’t that I went out trying to do something revolutionary,” he said. “She’s a good, competent officer who wanted a chance at K-9. And because of her excellent work record, I decided to give her a chance. I think she’ll do well.”

Teague’s assignment to the K-9 Division is a first for Baton Rouge. Another female officer — Marjorie Groth — is assigned to the Uniformed Patrol Division and is the trainer of a drug-sniffing dog. However, women in K-9 units aren’t unusual for other cities. There are female K-9 officers all over the country, officials say.

So why did it take so long for Baton Rouge to get its first woman in K-9?

In the old days, Teague said, some men in the department didn’t think a woman could even be a police officer, much less in K-9. They weren’t strong enough, weren’t big enough, weren’t brave enough.

K-9 officer Laurice Teague takes her police dog, Shaungay, through an exercise on the K-9 obstacle course.
"Maybe that was the mentality that kept me out," she said. But the people who know the 32-year-old Tulsa, Okla., native know the stereotype doesn’t apply.

In fact, there are plenty of men in the department who wish they could boast of Teague’s accomplishments. She was named outstanding police officer of the year in 1988 after answering 427 criminal and traffic complaints and making 100 arrests (17 of which were narcotics arrests).

In 1990, while investigating gunshots on Terrace Street, Teague and Officer Vicky Smith chased down two men and confiscated $300 in cash, a large amount of jewelry and a stolen gun.

But last year, Teague said she began to grow tired of the streets. After all, she had spent all of her eight years on the force in one place — the Highland Road Precinct.

"It got to the point where you went to the same calls with different faces," Teague said. She was ready for a change, a new challenge.

Then one day, Teague was sitting on a bench waiting for a court appearance when a fellow officer suggested K-9 might be the cure for her blues. "It kind of stunned me," she said. "The wheels started turning. Actually, I think it started out as a joke."

But as the months went by and her transfer never materialized, Teague began to think the joke was on her. "I almost gave up and put a letter in to go to the detective office," she said. At one point, rumor had it Rogilillo didn’t think she could handle a police dog.

Not true, Rogilillo said, adding that what he did think was the department couldn’t afford to lose a good officer from the streets. Generally, he said, K-9 officers work nights, and that’s when the department needs all the uniformed patrol officers it can get, the former chief said.

In fact, Rogilillo said he’s expecting a woman to apply for a spot in the motorcycle division, which he said is about the only division in the department currently without a female officer.

Although Teague has been training in the K-9 Division for only one month, she says she already misses her friends back at the Highland Road station. Teague says she’s fast becoming fond of her new partner — Shaungay the police dog.

"Me and the dog are getting along better and better every day. I’m loving every minute of it. I think he’s got good potential. I feel we’ve really come a long way in just a month’s time. When I got him, all he could do was sit."

Now, the dog is making strides in agility, aggression, obedience and tracking, four phases of the training she and the dog must pass.

After less than a month of training, Shaungay now follows Teague’s commands quickly, jumping easily over hurdles and doing his best to climb ladders.

On the aggression test, Shaungay turns from a docile 3-year-old German Shepherd to a tenacious dog who won’t give up his bite until hearing the order "Out!" from Teague.

In a recent training period, Shaungay grabbed the leather sleeve around a training officer’s arm, growling and snarling until Teague called him off. After the officer removed the training sleeve, Teague patted Shaungay, who immediately became friends with the training officer.

The others in the K-9 Division are eager for Teague and Shaungay to do well, according to Sgt. Lester David, supervisor of K-9 training.

"I’m sure the guys are curious to see if I’ll make it," Teague said. "I know there are people who said I couldn’t."

But Teague said the other six officers in the division are pulling for her.

"They sit me down and give me pep talks," she said. "They do everything they can to help me. They want me to succeed. They treat me really good."

"I’ve been pushing it trying to get her in here," David said. Teague is a good worker and reliable, he said, and, "If they’re good workers and reliable, I want them in here."

"She doesn’t have anything to prove in this division as far as police work," David said. "She’s shown she can do police work. She knows her job. She could almost name where she wanted to go. She’s that good of a cop."

Despite her work ethic and positive attitude, Teague is physically not as strong as the men who train and handle 90-pound police dogs.

But David said that can be overcome. In fact, her size (she’s 5-foot-6) "will play no part at all" after her 14-week training course is complete, David said.

January’s rainy weather has slowed progress in Teague’s and Shaungay’s training, but both are doing "as well if not better" than most new teams, David said.

Teague has already painted her dog’s name on the side of her police car and plans to take Shaungay to live at her home soon. She currently lives in an apartment but will move into a house next month. Most police dogs live at the residences of their police officer trainers.

Neither Teague nor Shaungay are getting any breaks as they go through the 14 weeks of training, David said. "If she was given special treatment, she wouldn’t appreciate it."

There is also no resentment from the others in K-9. "None of that stuff," David said. "There’s room for women in K-9, believe me."

The other K-9 officers haven’t played any of the typical rookie pranks on her yet, but Teague said, "I have a feeling something’s coming."

Meanwhile, Teague said others may think there’s pressure on her to succeed because she’s the first woman in K-9, but she’s not about to put any more pressure on herself.

"I don’t feel any pressure because I’m a female," she said. "I came out here because I want to learn and I want to do the job. There’s enough pressure already. It’s more stressful because not only do I have to watch what I do, I have to watch what the dog does."

Asked how the public is likely to react to a 5-foot-6 woman with 90 pounds of mean dog at the end of a lead, Teague said she isn’t sure how people will react.

She’ll find out in late March or early April, when the 400 hours of training are over and she and Shaungay hit the streets.