On a recent Wednesday afternoon, a group of dogs and their owners gathered on the edge of a grassy patch. One at a time the dogs took their turn, running, fetching and following the commands of their owners. It could easily be a doggie obedience class at a regular park, with dogs and owners frolicking in the late afternoon sun, playing fetch. The similarities end when, with the sound of gunshots in the background, one of the dogs lunges at a nearby person’s arm, sinking its teeth into the arm and holding on tight, and then is praised by its owner. Not to worry, the dog is doing exactly as it has been trained. Welcome to the Spokane Police Department’s K-9 unit’s Wednesday night training session.

The park in which the dogs are frolicking is not a real park, but is a grassy area on the campus of the Spokane Police Academy, and the gunshots are not the sound of a shootout, but of officers practicing at the firing range, a safe distance away on the campus.

“Tracking is probably one of the most dangerous things we do as police officers,” says Hamilton. “Thankfully, they’re trying to get away, rather than kill us.” One reason tracking is so dangerous is because officers never know what they are up against. Is the individual running, or are they hiding in wait? Is the officer risking running into a more dangerous situation in an attempt to catch the perpetrator?

Successful tracking is rewarding for both the officers and the dogs. “You can find people with the dogs in a way a foot patrol couldn’t,” says Spokane Police Department Officer Jake Jensen, who has worked for three and a half years with Duke, a seven year old German Shepherd. He understands the importance of having Duke by his side. “There was a home invasion that was in progress. The guy didn’t take the advice of giving himself up, and he ran with a gun. That’s when I had to stop and think ‘is it safer to go after him with three cops or with my 35-mile per hour tracker?’ These dogs are huge assets for safety.

Sgt. Troy Teigens and Rico

OFC. Dan Lesser and Ray

OFC. Paul Gorman and Max

OFC. Jake Jensen and Duke

OFC. Dan Waters and JJ

OFC. Craig Hamilton and Leo

OFC. Keith Cler and Angel

OFC. Shawn Kendall and Stryder

K-9 units that train; an assortment of law enforcement K-9 units, including units from Kootenai County Sheriff, Coeur d’Alene Tribal Police, and law enforcement groups from Montana, gather to train their dogs.

K-9 units’ primary purpose is their sense of smell and tracking abilities. Many of the K-9 trained dogs have a sense of smell that is one million times stronger than a human’s sense of smell. This means they are particularly well suited for detecting criminals after they have committed a crime.

“How’s it all play, it’s not done out of aggression or defense,” similar to how most dogs are trained to run after and retrieve a tennis ball or Frisbee, so too are these dogs trained; however, rather than simply fetching, they are trained to go after an individual, bite and hold. It’s the same drive, you just channel it in a different direction,” says Hamilton.

Before the dogs can bite a criminal, they must track one down.
You wouldn’t want to put an officer in an atic or corner, not knowing what is there to meet them. You have to treat the dogs as a tool, which is hard when you’re a handler and you have to put them in a dangerous situation, but it is better to put a dog in there than a person,” says Jensen.

For most people, the thought of putting their pet in harm’s way ranks right up there with putting their children in a dangerous situation: it is unthinkable. “You can’t think of it that way when you deploy your dog,” says Kootenai County Sheriff Deputy Jason Shaw, who has been a K-9 handler since 2002, and works with Bavi, a Dutch Shepherd from Holland. “You have to know that this could be the last time. They are your best friend, but they are also a tool and a resource.”

As difficult as that may be to swallow, in reality, it is a state of mind all law enforcement must put into place everyday. “It’s easier for us to think that way because that is what we have to do with our best friends, everyday,” says Spokane Police Department Sergeant Troy Teigen, who works with Rico, a five year old Belgian Malinois from the Netherlands, who is a former military dog and was also trained in explosive detection by the US Navy SEAL’S. Teigen knows everyday a police officer goes to work, they are putting their lives and the lives of their co-workers at risk in order to defend and protect us. The K-9’s are in the same boat.

“We won’t send them in on a suicide mission, though,” says Hamilton, who has worked with Leo (Leonidus) for two and a half years, after being partnered with another dog for the previous five years. Leo is a four-year-old German Shepard from the Czech Republic who has been working with the Spokane Police Department since he was 16 months old.

For a K-9 unit dog, whenever the handler is working, they are working, too. For the most part, K-9 units work the night shift, defending our community from 7:00 p.m. until 3:30 a.m. “In the summer, we can’t work them in this heat, and there is a lot of community from 7:00 p.m. until 3:30 a.m. “In the summer, we can’t work them in this heat, and there is a lot more going on. I like to walk them, or go trainings. “It’s a 9 to 5 job for them, though. When you’re a handler and you have to put them in a dangerous situation, it is better to put a dog in there than a person,” says Jensen.

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