

**Top dogs**

# Police dogs earn honors at international event

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Staff Reporter

Like most dogs, Digger has some favorite toys and games.

But unlike other dogs, Digger's toys train him in tracking and attacking.

Constable Wayne Jackson and his partner of four years Police Service Dog Digger spend a minimum two days a week training and exercising.

Digger leaps hurdles in a single bound, itches to sniff out a set of the officer's keys (now bent out of shape) thrown into a field of tall grass, and yearns to wrestle with a leather and burlap training sleeve.

All these activities are carried out on a single command from Jackson, and it is the rapport between the two constant companions and Digger's skill at following orders that gave the partners an edge at an international police dog competition last month.

Jackson and Digger placed first overall, with a score of 682 out of a possible 700 points, in the canine field trials hosted by Metro Police in Scarborough in which 26 teams from Canada and the United States competed and were certified.

The York Region team tied for first in obedience and took third place in both criminal apprehension and article search and fourth in area search.

When paired with a handler and dog from Philadelphia, the local team took top spot, while another York Region pair, Const. Patrick Hester and police dog Major came in second when teamed up with an officer and dog from Detroit.

Major brought home a first in obedience, a second in area search and fourth in agility to capture at second place at the international trials.

First-time competitor Zack, the newest addition to the unit at less than two-years-old, and his trainer York Region Const. Steven Seabrooke placed fourth overall in the novice division.

The York Region canine unit is comprised of five dogs and handlers who work out of the field services unit in Aurora. A new training centre is underway thanks to Tetrapak, an Aurora company that is donating space and equipment to the canine unit.

If the police force budget was not so tight the number of dogs would be doubled. Currently the unit has only two canine cruisers fitted with cages in the back seat and a remote-controlled car door the officer can open to free the dog.

For the most part the dogs are trained to track human scent, specifically the scent of fear and panic, Jackson said.

Digger, a German shepherd bred in western Canada, was voted police service dog of the year in York Region in 1992 for his part in sniffing out a missing Markham man. Jackson recalled how officers searched in vain for a man with Alzheimer's who had wandered from home.

Jackson let Digger off his lead and within 15 minutes the dog located the man who was tangled in a fence in the Victoria Square area.

With over 80 arrests credited to Digger it's hard to choose the dog's finest moments, but Jackson recalled the time last year when four suspects robbed a taxi driver near Ninth Line and 16 Ave. then tried to escape through a field.

"I could see their silhouettes in the distance," Jackson said.

He and Digger tracked the men over a few miles, nabbed three but a fourth kept running. After a few warnings to stop, Jackson sent the dog to apprehend the man who ending up punching the officer in the face.



PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

York Region police dog Digger clears training hurdles under the watchful eye of partner Const. Wayne Jackson. Digger and Jackson teamed up to take top honors at a recent international police dog competition.

Digger immediately carried out his duty to protect the safety of the officer and attacked.

But the dogs never strike to harm, they grab to hold, although the bite pressure is 800 pounds-per-square-inch which causes a couple of bruises and puncture marks. This does less damage to a suspect than being hit by a baton, Jackson said.

With the sharp teeth and viscous bark, the dogs are surprisingly well-tempered. They roam freely through the field services building and are rarely caged. The canine unit is a common sight in schools where children pat the dogs and grab handfuls of fur without fear.

"They don't have a savage attitude," Jackson said, explaining that moments after attacking and gripping a man's arm in his mouth, "in another command the dog will be the guy's best friend."

Digger is not yet six-years-old, and Jackson estimates he has another four years with his partner until Digger is retired.

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Digger takes a bite out of Const. Steven Seabrooke during a training session. The dog's bite pressure is 800 pounds-per-square-inch.

## Tickle time

Brent Turner, centre, is the victim of a tickling attack from his sister Allie, left and Sharie Heise. The trio was cruising through Stouffville on their rollerblades.



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