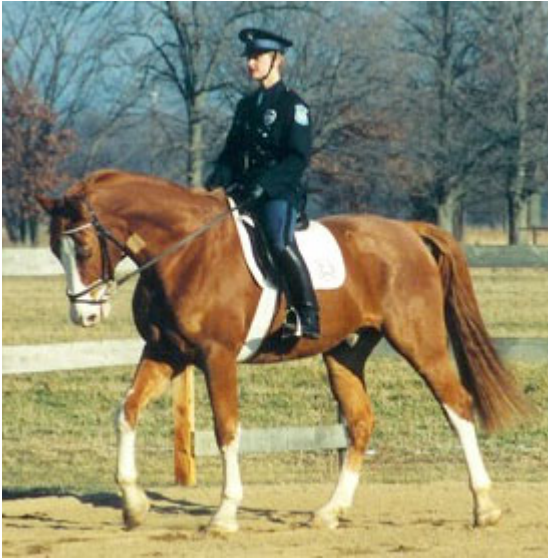


Sargeant Kennedy talks about training a horse for police work.

Interview by Tania Evans



Q: Give me some clues to the right temperament for a police horse.

There are two types: the quiet, do anything, virtuous, volunteer horse and the confident, bold, “alpha” horse. A lot of this depends on who I’m selecting the mount for... Age too.... is a factor. I rarely would consider a horse under the age of five years to train And a five-year old would have to be a very special horse. Of course, a a temperament can be seen earlier than five and if this temperament is nurtered with work in law enforcement, that’s a real advantage. Train them purposefully and without the “baggage” often brought with prior experiences. I mean other riders. Sometimes you get that phone call from a distressed owner with a rogue horse that has become unbearable to the owner. They want to get rid of it, they can't handle it. So you go and look at the horse. Often you find a horse with great potential for police work. Such a horse needs lots of sensory stimulation and is often bored to death with its current training regimen. Sometimes the horse is also burdened with a “noisy” rider ... or bored to death because it’s not being ridden or put to work at all. So you can re-train them with tremendous success for police work.

Q: What about the right physical type?

I had to do this many times, find the right type. So, first, I look for size - normally 16hands or more(although a smaller horse is not necessarily eliminated. It's also true that some departments have no size requirement. Also, color is a consideration – and sometimes a big one. For example, white is a difficult color for police work. However, if the temperament is right, then even a white horse will be considered.

Regarding conformation, in general, the most important conformation to consider is that the horse have straight legs, that it's upright in the neck and possesses three decent gaits. You can't accept any obvious faults that might lead to eventual lameness. For

example, the horse must have good hoofs. The angle and condition of the hoof is important. After all, no hoof is no horse. These animals will likely be on considerable amounts of pavement-hard surfaces so they must have hooves that can be shod and will hold a shoe.



For some departments looks is important. The horse should be attractive and be an athlete (these animals will represent your police department-the pride of the organization). Some retired show horses can be utilized for police work even with minor lameness issues as long as these can be mitigated. In the end, the age of a horse accepted will depend on the hours of service the horse will be used and type of police service expected.

You have a young horse now you've been working with for about 6 months or so. You said you planned on making it a dressage horse. What's been happening with her?

You're referring to Voglein. She's a 16 hands Thoroughbred cross. She is very petite in frame and elegant - but she's a smartypants. While I was working this three-year old -just light exercise - on a longe line (30 meter circle-no smaller at this age), a friend took a large Teddybear and threw the Teddybear out onto the track. Voglein trotted right up to it, "passaging" in trot stride. She grabbed it into her mouth off the ground and flung it out off the track-without missing a beat. This is the personality I look for, a horse you can take an umbrella and walk straight up to, which I did, flapping it open and closed. Most horses would run - or at least sidestep in reaction. Voglein trotted straight to the interesting looking object and put her nose straight away onto the fabric-and then she tried to take a nip. Perfect! I thought. And she did all of this without any type of training. She just trusted human companionship with her handler who is me and this trust is coupled with a bold character.

Q: What are some of the subtle signs that indicate a horse with police work potential.

Subtle signs..... that's interesting. Well, for example, I like a horse that may take its head and give you a push while you handle it. That tells me their trying to take charge, that they're willing to try.

The horse that I can drop a metal object to the floor nearby and simply looks at me from the cross ties or stall. So one that doesn't bolt forward or jump in it's skin. I can wave my hand around it's head and there is no "flinching." I can give it's rump a good solid pat and it's not jumping out of it's skin or raising it's neck in tension with wide eyes flashing - or kicking at me. And some absolute "no, no's" are the biter, kicker or the one that's being "mareish", the stall protector or the territorial animal. All are no, no, no. Many police horses are required to be stalled and viewed by the public and any of these behaviors don't send the right message....and can be difficult to monitor and are just not safe. The public is often uneducated about horses. A person might stick their fingers into stalls and put their faces right up to the horse. Another horse that's eliminated is one that fights with resistance on a rope. If you pull on the reins from the ground or pull on a lead rope and they become frantic in resistance. Because people will grab reins. People in a crowd will grab the horse's reins. In control situations the horse must tolerate this and listen to the rider. A horse can'te be "herd bound." The animal must listen to the rider and be able to be separated form the other mounts. Often it's easy to identify the herd bound horse if you just move a stablemate around or out of the barn for a moment, the tension is easily seen and this animal will never make a good police mount.

Tell me some of the thought processes that go into choosing one method over another. I imagine it's very horse-specific?

Be respectful and careful in all that you present as stimulus for "training" in desensitization. Some horses do not mind gunfire while others will look for the first exit-at top speed. Some horses don't mind plastic while others fear it tremendously. Some horses do not mind helicopters while others fear them. Some horses panic at the hot air balloons overhead...while others could care less.

Q: This is very interesting stuff. How do you go about making a horse immune to a wild, maybe threatening situation, one that is blowing up around him?

Desensitizing training can be very extensive and detailed. right down to blowing plastic bags, making loud annoying noises such as gun fire. You have to expose the horse to it all but you do it using good common sense. And then expose the horse in pair with another in the "crowd areas" and into traffic. Horse shows are a great place for this, wherever there are trucks, trailers, traffic-pedestrians and vehicular, scooters, golf-carts, bicycles, umbrellas, banners, tractors and farm machinery, loud speakers, loud music, portable walkie-talkies - just noise, noise, noise. Iindustrial parks or campuses are great, too, especially when there is not the busy activity of the day. Where quietly the horse can experience roadways, buildings, bridges, footpaths, parking lots with painted lines, sewer covers, manhole covers...any varying surface. Basically, your imagination is the limit for what you may encounter. Just go take a walk on a college campus or a busy park and see what you see. This is a good place to start when knowing what may be needed in the way of desensitizing a police horse for service.

Q: Is this done in isolation, just you and the horse?

Importantly take the best police horse you have and let junior “the new guy” tag along... start with trail riding and then, after desensitizing, expose the horse to areas like horse shows and campuses (off busy hours) and gradually build on the exposures. More is not better is the general rule here. Take these exposures on gradually and considerately. Nurture the relationship you are developing with the horse. Build the foundation of trust and you'll have success.

Q: I was wondering about the hoop of fire, I've seen horses jump through a ring made of fire simply because the rider asked them to do it. These were set up in arenas. I've had some pretty gutsy horses but I don't think any one of them would do that – it would appear to be crazy to them.

There are those horses companioned with a rider that share a relationship of confidence. Such a horse will “jump” through that hoop of fire... My point here... whether the horse is doing it out of domestication, human dominance, or a special relationship is SECONDARY to the most important issue which is to train with our horses to achieve that special relationship of respect and confidence. Set your sights on the hoop of fire with that in mind. Never reduce your horse to a domesticated, automated, human-dominated element of your life. At that point, you've lost respect for your horse and your training will reflect that mentality.

Q: Tell us some things about your own police horses.

The horses that I have had the honor of being partnered with - Sarge, Carpe Diem, Henry, Winzig, Francis, Madagascar, and Gigi - all of them could have accomplished the task of jumping through the hoop of fire. It would be more easily achieved with Sarge, Carpe Diem, Winzig, Francis, and Madagascar. Now Henry and Gigi - if they knew from my body language that “this is important” then they would jump but not readily otherwise. Horses know when it's important.

Sarge and Henry knew when it was a football Saturday at Michigan State University. Sarge liked all the carrots he got from his “fans.” He readily trotted up the road for work. On the other hand, Henry was nervous and showed a bit of natural piaffe in the parking lot while I stepped aboard for duty. Until he got there and then he was fine. Madagascar just liked to parade around and have people marvel at his beauty. He was such a character. He was a pretty horse indeed. Winzig was like a “line backer” on the football team. He wanted to knock people down. Winzig thought that was such a great idea! When Winzig went through crowd control training he was rather surprised when I allowed him to “push” on humans and move them around. This was fun to him! He was a big 17.1 hand Thoroughbred-Percheron cross. He looked like an elegant warmblood - but he never missed a carrot either!

One of the best police horses I ever had was also an absolute bully. This was Sarge. He was arrogant and stubborn but he feared nothing. He wouldn't tolerate an inexperienced rider on his back – and look out if you put one there! He knew in an instant and that rider

was going to get dumped. But in a crowd situation he led the troops like a true warrior. You had to command this horse not only from the saddle but also on the ground. If you handed his lead to an inexperienced handler, Sarge would just as soon start dragging them down the road until he intimidated them enough to let loose. Then he could run off and get some grass. He was smart and could be a bully to take advantage of the situation. You needed a light chain over Sarge's nose to handle him from the ground for he learned with crowd control training that he could "push" people around... and so he did! He did unless he "respected" you as well as the chain. You didn't have to use the chain, just remind him it was there and that a person was in control. He needed a lot of reminding of that! - :) but he was my best partner! What a formidable presence he made with his neck and head held high as if to say, "What are you looking at? Give me your best...it won't be enough." Most people do not realize that these animals have very unique personalities like people. They're very much individuals and the chemistry between them and their partner must be good and they must have confidence in each other.

**Training horses for police work,
an interview with Michigan Sargeant Maureen Kennedy**
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