

# K-9 corps put through paces

By JEAN LEVINE  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

It was hardly an every-day experience when Transit Police Officer John Woodall was "wrapped" and "hit" by Sam, Staten Island Rapid Transit Officer Scott Johnston's partner.

Sam, you see, is a police dog in partnership with Johnston, a West Brighton resident who doubles as Sam's handler and best friend.

And, he "hit" (bit) Woodall, until given the command to stop, during training to sharpen the dog's skills as a law-enforcement partner.

Woodall was wearing a protective leather sleeve used during the monthly in-service training sessions given by the city Transit Police's K-9 Corps on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Disability Service Office grounds in Willowbrook.

"We have two 16-week training classes in September and March with between six and 12 dogs and an equal number of handlers," said Lt. John R. Carlo of Castleton Corners, the K-9 Corps' commanding officer.

"Since 1982, we've trained most of the police dogs in the city for a wide variety of agencies with no similar programs of their own."

Some of the agencies whose dogs have received training are the New York City Police Department, SIRTQA, the U.S. Parks Department Police, the Port Authority, the Atlantic City Police Department, and the Jersey City Police Transit Authority.

Sgt. John Benintendo, the K-9 unit's director, said the program was started eight years ago after three TA officers lost their lives in the line of duty within one year.

"Since the inception of the program, not one Transit canine officer has been seriously injured or killed in the line of duty," Benintendo said.

"This is why we started this unit. It was part of a joint pilot police dog training program created at the request of Mayor Koch and the MTA board. A dozen Transit officers went down to the Philadelphia Police Department Canine Training Center to learn the skills of canine police work. In turn, we helped the New York City Police Department start their own unit two years later," he explained.

"A dog can pick up a scent and follow it where humans can't. Our canines have tracked violent crime suspects to their very door. They can outrun a police officer who normally is weighed down with 28 pounds of equipment. If there's a situation where an armed suspect has barricaded himself inside an apartment, building, or subway tunnel, the canine is capable of flushing him out without exposing several officers to extra danger."

The K-9 Unit program is also seen as an alternative to the use of deadly physical force where weapons are used, according to Benintendo. He contends that, un-

like a bullet going the wrong way, a properly trained dog can be recalled.

"Unlike the so-called 'attack dogs' used by some civilian guard services, ours are trained to be defensive," the sergeant said. "Our key to training is obedience. The dogs are taught to obey their handler and listen to every command. Unlike attack dogs, who don't know when to let go, they learn to tolerate more."

The hundreds of dogs donated annually to the K-9 Corps come from many sources, most frequently the city's ASPCA and private individuals. The animals are a "German Shepherd" type — either purebred or a mixed breed and preferably male and under three years of age, Benintendo added.

"We've discovered that males are invariably heavier and more temperamentally suited to this sort of work," he said.

"To be acceptable, a dog must weigh between 70 and 100 pounds. Some females approach that, but

it's rare. And the animal must not be gun shy, afraid of people, or phased by loud noises and traffic. A dog raised in the suburbs couldn't adjust properly."

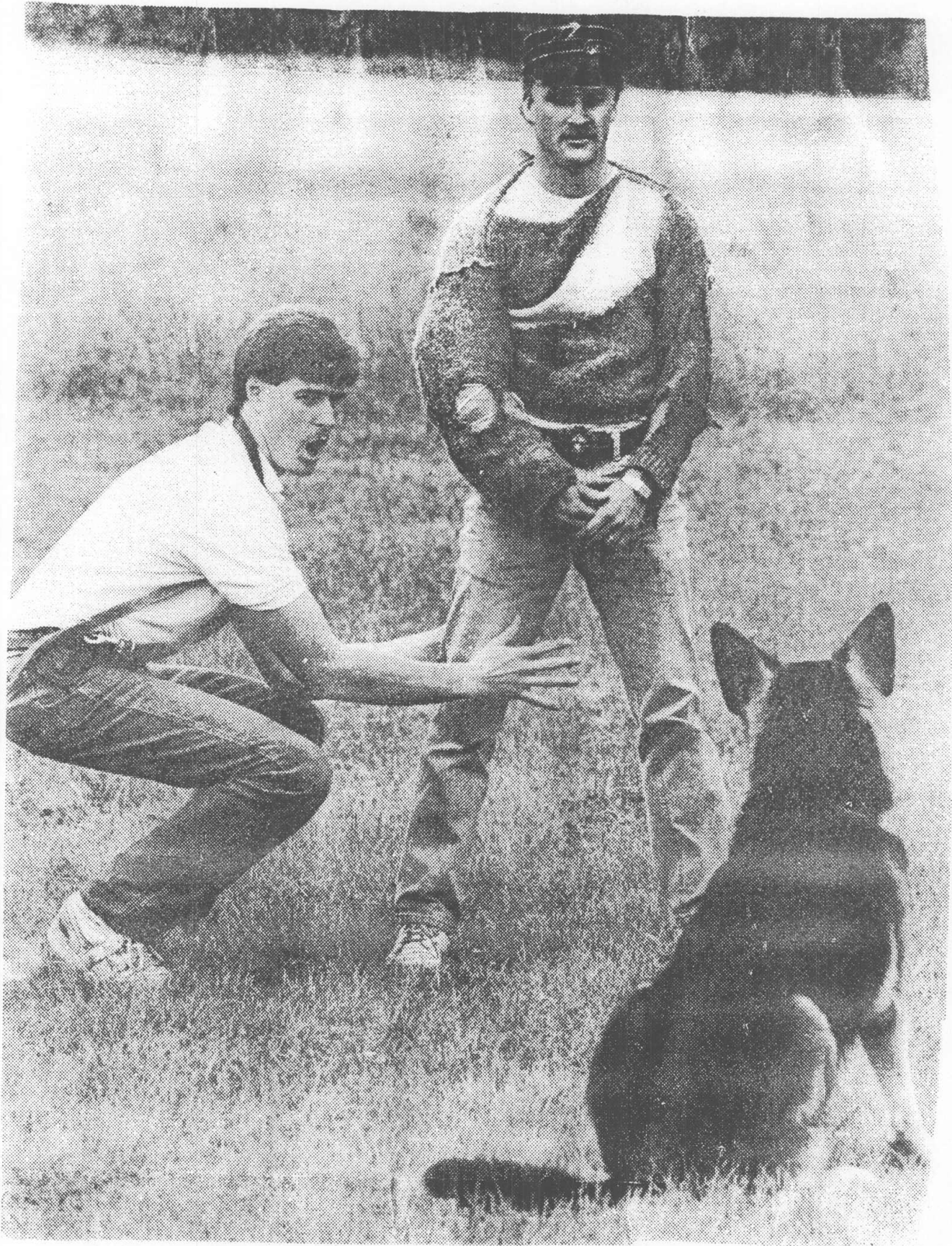
Benintendo said only one out of every three dogs given to the K-9 Corps makes the grade. "The dogs we can't use we find homes for," he said.

"Not only does a dog need to be healthy, but he must have a good temperament and listen to commands. We don't accept vicious dogs because they can never be properly trained," he added. "Like people, each animal has its own individual attitude, mood and pace of learning."

During training classes and at monthly refresher courses, the dogs and their handlers are put through their paces at locations throughout the city. Besides the most frequently used SIDDSO grounds, other sites are Fort Wadsworth, the Seaview Hospital grounds in Seaview, Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, and subway stations.

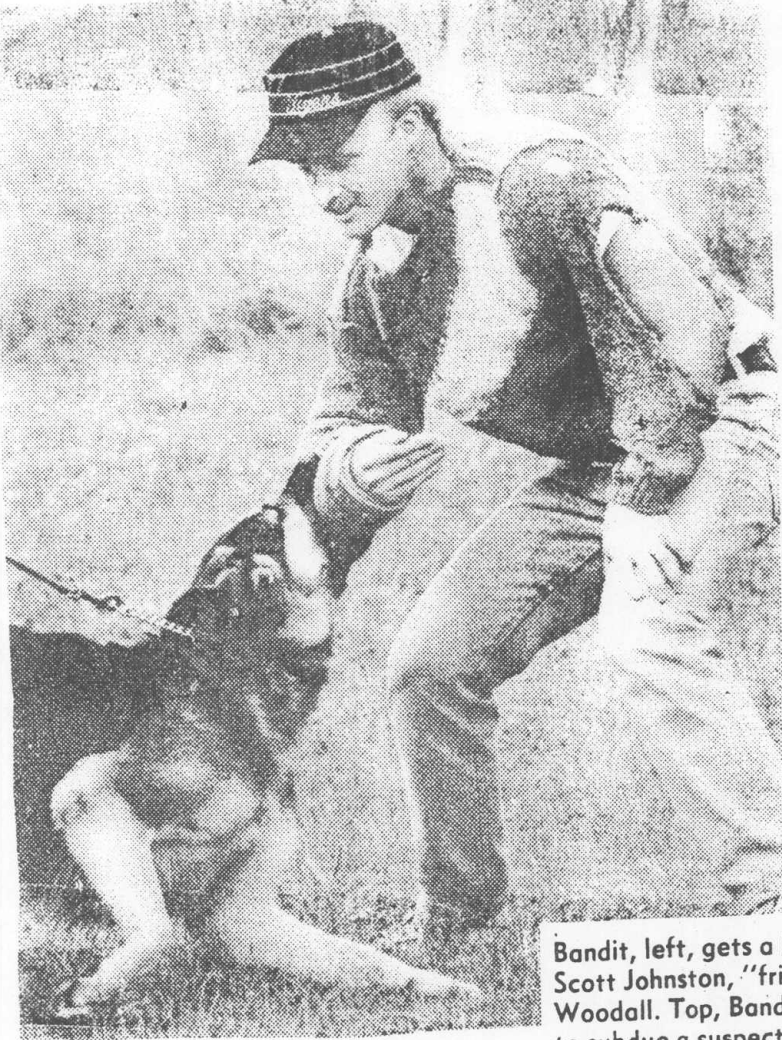
## in Willowbrook

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Bandit, left, gets a lesson in standing guard, while his partner, Scott Johnston, "frisks" fellow Transit Police Officer John Woodall. Top, Bandit "collars" Woodall during a lesson in how to subdue a suspect.

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The K-9 Corps' headquarters are housed at the Brooklyn Army Terminal in that borough's Sunset Park section.

More than 640 hours are needed to teach a dog how to track a missing person or fleeing suspect and to help his human partner apprehend a felon and stand guard while the officer conducts a weapons search. To date, 135 dogs have graduated from the program.

"The course involves classroom instruction, obedience and agility training for starters," said Benintendo. "A large portion of it also offers a combination of olfactory-building field training along with article (evidence recovery) search, and criminal apprehension.

"One of the most difficult exercises is the recall lesson where a dog is trained to stop his pursuit at the sound of a command and quickly return to his handler. It's a dog's natural instinct to pursue and catch his quarry. It can take as long as six weeks to train him

to learn otherwise."

Dogs are taught to go for the suspect's arm first because it is the least likely area of the body to have serious injuries inflicted upon it.

"Disabling the arm will prevent the use of a weapon. The object is to avoid serious injury wherever possible," said Benintendo, sporting several fang marks along his right arm and hand.

"I'm one of five trainers and we teach the dogs to hate us and to love their handlers. Even the protective wraps we wear on our arms don't always shield us from some surface wounds, but they do prevent more severe problems."

After a dog has been accepted into the K-9 program, it is built up nutritionally, or if need be, slimmed down. The animals are kenneled at the K-9 Training Center until they are assigned to a handler.

During the seventh week of training, the dog is bonded (paired) with his handler with whom he goes home to live. It is

no accident that man (or in some cases, woman) and dog become inseparable.

"I love Bandit; we're always together," said Mark Cain, 26, of Annadale, a New York state Mental Hygiene police officer assigned to the SIDSSO grounds. "We're on call 24 hours a day, regardless of whether we're needed in Staten Island or elsewhere in the state."

Cain is one of three police officers on Staten Island with a canine partner. It was his four-year-old dog who helped locate the body of an 11-year-old Boy Scout who drowned in a tragic swimming accident at Pouch Camp last month.

"Bandit picked up the boy's scent. He kept repeatedly circling around the woods in that area before he led us to the water. We were then able to narrow down the spot where the child was last seen," Cain recalled.

"Several hours later, the Police Scuba unit found him at the bottom of the pond."