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## Perfect match: Merrimack officer and his new police dog

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Staff photo by DON HIMSEL Merrimack Police officer Greg Walters, right, moves in to work with Gunny after he was released to subdue trainer Francis Holder, who's wearing protective gear during a training exercise.

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Staff photo by DON HENSEL After being released by officer Greg Walters, Gunny races to subdue a trainer wearing protective gear.

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dog on agility course.

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Gunny shows good form by watching Walters' eyes.



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the dog had was a trusty nose.

Staff photo by Don Himsel Gunny and

Walters gave him the search command and waited for the telltale sign that his dog picked up the human scent: a head snap, hunched shoulders, a

[Enlarge](#) tracing the ground.

familiar, lightless industrial park somewhere in Massachusetts, and honestly, the pair had no

partner had by that point been training hard for eight weeks at a boot camp, of sorts, for new  
working on control, obedience, agility, evidence searches, bringing down bad guys and, of  
were doing in the industrial park that night.

ler had laid down their track, unlike the start of training, when Walters laid his own. There  
een footprints, Walters wouldn't really know where to look.

? – in the darkness somewhere, all Walters had to read was a black, 30-foot leash. And all



dy. The tension on the leash was tight, telling Walters his dog was onto the scent. A plenty of cars and people had mingled earlier in the day, making it easy to confuse scents. fast and even when he's on track, less so when he's off. Walters can feel slack in the leash, officer. The dog's nose worked some more, and rediscovered the scent. and they were off again. his way right to the decoy. It was a milestone moment in their training. Walters showered his to trust the dog," Walters said in describing that search. "Even though I'm more intelligent than he is, sometimes I wonder. ... He's definitely a partner, and he's also a buddy.

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"So far, he hasn't let me down on anything."



t out a call for canine handlers, Walters jumped at the chance. ent needed," said Walters, a five-year veteran of the department. "And I go by the theory that oblem." uilding during a search or finding someone who has been lost. d temper, local address and projected dedication to the training and partnership, which is a lot ay, and we felt he'd be a great fit for it," Milligan said. lters read up on police dogs and chatted up other local K-9 officers. at to Massachusetts to pick the dog, which had been with Compatible Canine Dog Training in owner, said a good police dog will have stamina; obedience skills; a good "prey drive," which is a desire to chase; and a good "fight drive," described as the aggression and courage to face down and apprehend a threat.

[Enlarge](#)



mpic athletes of German shepherds, a popular breed for the job because of these skills and  
n to handlers who enroll in the certification program. He presented Walters one K-9, and  
layfully pronounced with a fancy French accent.)

uth African-bred shepherd with classic brown and tan coloring, deep sable eyes, perked ears  
ld jump high, that he showed courage and that he was “happy-go-lucky,” Walters said.  
ere “both eager to do the job, but at the same time, calm about it.”

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Walters took D-O-G home and introduced him to his wife and two young children.



g wasn't spooked by his new surroundings or his new pack.

ommands or exercises with the dog. It was strictly bonding time: feed him, walk him, brush  
f his crate, Walters would leash him and pet him, and they'd head out for a swing around the  
or in the woods.

large pen in Walters' yard, fitted with a concrete pad. He ate a healthy diet of raw chicken.

D-G.

Walters toyed with some options. He wanted a name kids would like, but nothing along the lines of “Fluffy.”

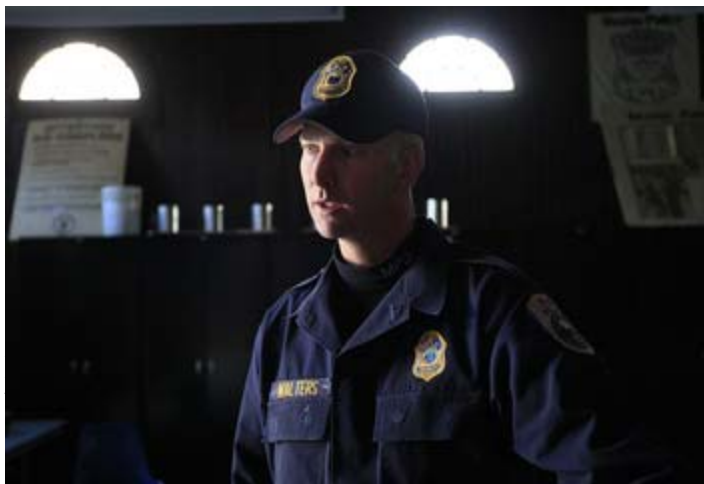
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He thought about “Mack,” for Merrimack, but then a colleague who knew of Walters' military background as a gunnery sergeant in the Marines suggested the nickname for that position: “Gunny.”

The colleague, who also had a military background, recalled his own gunny sergeant had been two particular things: loved and feared.

In that case, for Walters' police dog, it seemed a perfect fit.

‘Like the military’



in the Boston area in September.

and specially outfitted for the dog. Aluminum grids cover the windows. The back seats have on and insulation. An automatic cooling system kicks in when the interior gets hot, tripping

ed in an oversized black bin, along with Walters' protective training gear. The handler keeps and needs to unleash his partner.

ne class traveled to farm fields, industrial parks, schools and manufacturing plants in ington, Mass., along with a 90-acre estate loaned to the Boston Police in Jamaica Plain for

ne hierarchy. Walters is Gunny's first and only boss – ever.

This distinction is important for safety, and also why, for the time being, Walters limits Gunny's socialization with his family and keeps the dog on a routine.

Some departments allow handlers to keep the dogs on as family pets when they aren't on the road, Walters said, but it can confuse the dog's focus.

"He's a working dog," Walters said. "I have to be clear about what's expected. I'd love to have him with me watching TV or reading, but I know it will make him a less effective police dog."

Training, at first, is always a bit rough, Caisey said.

"The first two weeks, I can't stand it," he said, only half joking. "The handlers don't know what's going on. The dogs almost bite me."

Obedience, for example, was "a wrestling match" at first, Walters said. As he learned the commands and signals – given in traditional German and Czech – Gunny went in opposite directions or didn't pay attention.

During article searches – when dogs sniff out specific objects – Gunny, for some reason, refused to pick up anything made of metal.

It also took the entire class more than two hours to complete the agility course.

But by week four or five, Caisey said, the teams begin to come along.

"It's kind of like the military," Caisey said. "We break you down, then build you back up."

Handlers serve as decoys for one another, Caisey said, to teach officers what a future perpetrator may experience.

For the dogs, the entire training program is about repetition and reward, Caisey said. The main idea is that with every successful track, find and apprehension, the handler praises the dog profusely. The dog always wins. And a team always tries to end an activity after a successful run, which the dog will remember the next time he's at work.

All of these strategies build confidence, Caisey said, "to boost the dog so it will go in the dark alleys and tight places where we can't go."

Good work rewarded

On the morning of a training day during week 12, Walters fiddled in the back of the SUV, looking for the appropriate gear. Gunny sat up in the back, ears poised, tail wagging, eyes expectant.

"He knows something's coming," Walters said.

This was going to be a day of fundamentals for all the handlers and K-9s.

Walters and Gunny headed to a nearby field on the Jamaica Plain estate for some quick tracking.

In his first weeks of training, Gunny learned to follow human scent on Walters' command. Walters would dig deep footprints into the ground and drop a nickel-size piece of hot dog in each print – which caused Gunny to associate the human scent with treats. With each step Gunny tracked, he would be rewarded.

As Gunny practiced, Walters began extending the tracks, making less deliberate prints and spacing out the hot dogs. And then the tracks got longer, winding, crossing stretches of pavement or leading into wooded areas.

Sometimes, at the end, there was a treat, such as a toy. In later weeks, the prize was a decoy, posing as a wanted person.

When the team is successful – which is now very frequent – Walters "gives him a parade" at the end: bombarding Gunny with "good boy!" praise and lots of head scratching.

"All this is play," Walters said.

Essentially, catching a tennis ball is just as pleasing as tracking a bad guy, because it's all associated with positive encouragement. Gunny is smart, Walters said, but he can't tell if a situation is urgent or dangerous.

As Walters puts it, Gunny "doesn't know if it's bad guy or Nana."

Later in the afternoon, the teams practiced apprehension work, which is about dealing with uncooperative or highly threatening people.

It would make anyone have second thoughts about robbing a bank, because it involves unleashing a dog for a bite to bring the robber down.

A police dog's bite isn't to be messed with, as a K-9 can register up to 450 pounds of force with a single sinking of the teeth.



Gunny, for instance, crushes chicken bones up like they're potato chips.

"I stress control," Caisey said. "You can't have a misbehaving dog as a police dog."

During apprehension training exercises, the dogs are revved up into fight mode, barking ferociously and lunging like prizefighters at a decoy positioned about 40 yards away as their handler hollers the standard greeting.

For Walters, it would be, "Merrimack Police K-9! Come out with your hands up!"

Gunny leaped wildly, excited for the bite – which to him is a reward in this situation. When unleashed, Gunny flew across the field and dove at Francis Holder – an experienced handler from Compatible Canine – clamping onto the man's upper chest.

Gunny's body swung easily around as Holder cushioned the blow to save Gunny from blunt impact. Walters trotted behind, praised his dog and encouraged him to keep his hold – reinforcement of the team effort.

"The dog has to know I'm there, praising him, while beating the bad guy at the same time," Walters said.

Holder, the unfortunate victim of every apprehension that day, called Gunny's performance "awesome" and an "impressive" improvement from two weeks before.

Gunny had what the trainers consider a "good bite." The dogs are trained to bite with a full mouth, so that the result is four bite marks and a bruise in the center. The idea is not to shred the perpetrator, but to bite once, solidly, and hold until the handler gets there.

Caisey pointed out that the majority of police dog work is in building searches, tracking, narcotics investigation and evidence recovery. Apprehension, or the biting, makes up about 5 percent of any working dog's load.

"Most people give up with the barking," Caisey said.

Ready for debut

With two weeks of training to go, Walters and Gunny were preparing for certification testing at the end of December. If all goes well, they'll hit the road in Merrimack on Saturday.

Gunny had gotten over his issue with metal objects and could pick up flashlights, weapons – anything he finds during article searches.

On the agility course, he bounded over a series of short walls, leaped through a hole resembling a window, treaded up and down wooded slats shaped like giant letter A's, climbed across chain-link fences and finally, hopped through a junky car door. It took him about four minutes.

After wrapping up for the day, Walters and Gunny loaded into the SUV and headed for home, Gunny resting quietly in the back.

"His breath isn't the best, but he has a great nose," Walters said of his partner.

On a typical night, they would return home, maybe go for a quick walk and then get ready for dinner – which isn't served on a silver platter.

Walters often takes Gunny to the backyard or a nearby park, lays a track and works Gunny on the trail. Chow time is the prize, along with Gunny's favorite: tug-of-war with a chew toy.

Someday, when Gunny retires, he can live the good life, Walters said. That will include couch time and vigorous affection from anyone who crosses his path.

Oh, yes. And table scraps.

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