

What's It Like

## FACING HIS FEARS

### Reporter looks into the jaws of a police dog and survives

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*This is the last story in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.*

FREMONT — Terror, thy name is Spike.

You're a 48-pound Belgian Malinois and, quite frankly, you scare me.

Maybe that's because you're drooling at the prospect of biting me. Maybe it's because you've got a running start. Maybe it's because I'm dressed up like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man and there's no chance I'm going to get away.

Actually, that's the point.

I'm at Lynnwoods Kennels in Fremont, where they've trained more than 365 police dogs stationed throughout the United States since 1991. This is where the dogs come to learn to search for things, sniff for drugs, and apprehend bad guys.

Today, I'm the bad guy.

You should know that I'm not a huge fan of dogs, especially the big, tough, and growl-y kinds. Right or not, I always have that uneasy feeling that they might bite me.

So imagine my trepidation when I arrived at Lynnwoods and was greeted by a German shepherd barking and lunging at me like crazy. It was chained in the front yard, which was comforting — until I realized that I needed to go right by him to get to the front door.

#### MULTIMEDIA

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Wearing an arm guard, Blade reporter Ryan E. Smith, right, is bitten by a K-9 police dog named Spike, handled by Bryon Deeter, left, of the Findlay Police Department, and Brian Woods, center, a trainer at Lynnwoods Kennels in Fremont, where training sessions are held. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

I tried to play it cool and slowly slink past the dog, which continued to bark fiercely within easy reach of me. Too bad it was all for naught. Nobody answered the door; they were all out back.

That's where I met up with senior instructor Brian Woods. This 48-year-old ex-cop from Fremont has been working with police dogs for more than 15 years.

He explained to me the process of teaching dogs to bite. The point is not to make a dog vicious. That wouldn't be safe.

Instead, he turns apprehending criminals into a game. It starts with some innocent tug-of-war and — with the help of arm sleeves and bite suits and positive re-enforcement— ends with a highly trained beast who will bite on command.

Which brings us to Spike.

Once I'm in the bite suit — 65 pounds of protective padding covering my arms, torso, and legs — I waddle outside to face the dog and my fears.

It's about at this point that I start to sweat, thinking: No helmet? Really? Nothing at all to protect my head?

I'm told that a helmet is not necessary because the dog is trained to go after whatever part of the body is flailing, like the shoulder or arm. To that end, I'm advised to flail my shoulder or arm.

I'm also told that Spike actually is only about 60 to 70 percent trained at this point.

This is not reassuring, and I'm pretty scared, though not as terrified as some who have worn this bite suit. Mr. Woods tells of those who have literally turned white with fear, like the fiancé of one of his daughters.

"We had to initiate him into the family," Mr. Woods says.

I start to wonder how Mr. Woods will treat his future grandchildren.

"Come on, my victim," he calls.

For beginners, Spike is brought to within maybe 10 feet of me by his handler, Bryon Deeter, of the Findlay police department. (His previous dog, Flip, was tragically shot and killed last month by a neighbor.)

I turn my back to the dog, look over my shoulder, and start flailing. Spike takes a couple of lightning steps toward me before launching himself high onto my back and shoulder, like a pee-wee linebacker who tackles with his mouth.

Once I recover from the jolt of impact, I realize I've got a dog attached to my shoulder. I keep flailing, but he won't let go. I run around the yard. He still won't let go.

It makes me wonder how terrible it must be to be a criminal who makes the mistake of messing with a police dog.

It would be terrifying. These animals are fast and strong and they have a bite like a vise. Everything about them is intimidating.

Mr. Woods says that when he was a police officer in Fremont, he only saw one person really battle back against a dog, even giving it a sucker punch in the head at one point. He didn't win.

Eventually, Spike's handler gives him a command and his jaws unclench, but just for a second. It takes a couple of tries for me to escape.

Then we try it again. And again. Each time giving Spike a bit more room to run before he can attack me.

For the finale, we play peek-a-boo. I run behind a building — in slow motion, thanks to my hefty suit — then circle back so Spike can see me, then run back behind the building.

They let the dog go and seconds later — wham! — Spike slams his little body onto me. It's still not enough to knock me down, but I'm pretty tired by this point and I've still got this dog hanging from my arm.

At least it's not scary anymore. It's exhausting, but there's enough padding that it doesn't hurt. It's almost fun. Like a game for both of us.

Then they bring out a bigger dog, and I wonder if I should keep playing.

His name is Caikli, probably Hungarian for "Bonecrusher" or "Maneater," but nobody here knows for sure.

He is an 85-pound German Shepherd who works for the Hancock County Sheriff's Department.

We run through the exercises again, except this time there's a bigger wallop every time the dog crashes into me. I look out at a nearby field and know that if there was enough room between us, Caikli could easily knock me to the ground with his momentum. I'm happy they keep us relatively close together.

After it's all over, my body aches, but there are no sore feelings between us. When they're not stimulated by evil-doers, Spike and Caikli are actually quite friendly and charming, as Mr. Woods explains.



Caikli, a police dog, bites Blade reporter Ryan E. Smith, wearing a bite suit. (BLADE PHOTOS/AMY E. VOIGT)

To prove it, I pet each of them on my way out, though I'm admittedly tentative.

What if they remember me from the bite suit? What if my petting is too much like flailing?

Mr. Woods reads my mind instantly and chides me for doubting their training.

"You didn't learn anything!" he shouts good-naturedly. "You're still flinching."

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