

Under a cloudless pre-summer day with temperatures slated for the 90's the shimmer of a desert mirage hovers over a sea of police K9 cruisers as they idle in the parking lot, staged and ready for the opening ceremonies at Scottsdale Stadium. The muffled barks coming from inside the vehicles add to an almost tangible excitement that fills the air. Inside the stadium stand scores of uniformed police officers and anxious citizens alike. Bagpipes break the mid-morning silence and blare out an introduction of the Scottsdale Police Honor Guard and the Colors are presented. A courageous and talented young woman belts out a beautiful rendition of the National Anthem. As the round of patriotic applause subsides, the stadium announcer hits a button and base heavy music pumps out deep into center field. The exciting beat reaches its crescendo and like the start to a NASCAR race the deep voiced artist challenges every soul within earshot: "LETS GET READY TO RUMMMMMBLE!!!"



Attention is drawn to the pristinely manicured baseball field as a well muscled police dog launches from home plate out toward towards the pitcher's mound. What happens next would make any NFL linebacker take a knee in genuflexion. The 4-legged warrior delivers a ferocious body slam that can be felt 3-rows back of the first baseline as his jaws sink deep into the arm of Mr. Bitesuit. The crowd first gasps at the display and then roars with applause as the First Bite is thrown out at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Desert Dog K9 Trials in Scottsdale, Arizona.



This signature City Event draws law enforcement and security K9 teams from all around the Phoenix Metro area, outlying Arizona jurisdictions, neighboring states, Hospitals, and Federal installations as well. Originally conceived as a solution to the old Phoenix Area K9 Trials, the Desert Dog is now the forum for Southwest Regional canine teams to showcase the best of the best. Usually limited to about 60 teams in order to reduce down time between events, handlers and their dogs compete in Bomb and Drug Detection, Tactical Building Search, Tactical Challenge, Obedience, Area Search and Handler Protection events all vying for the coveted Top Dog - Grand Champion Trophy. Another highly sought after trophy goes to the top "Tough Dog" as judged by the award creators Lieutenant Dick VanLeenen and Sgt. Wim VanBochove of the Rotterdam, Holland Police. Awards are given for 1<sup>st</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> place performances and awards are given for best Agency Teams.

The Desert Dog is a spring event in Scottsdale that spans three days starting with a gathering of all the handlers for important training and networking via the Arizona Law Enforcement Canine Association meeting. This year's event hosted guest speaker and veteran canine handler/ Instructor Steve Sprouse of the Broward County Florida Sheriff's Office. Steve provided a no-nonsense approach to modern canine law enforcement focusing on his highly acclaimed "Transferring Training to Reality" lecture. The

class was designed to help handlers understand the behaviors and mechanics of canine operations and how context plays such a critical role in transferring what is experienced in training to the dangerous field of reality. While the Desert Dog K9 competition may start with highly valued training and friendly re-unions of law enforcement colleagues, make no mistake these canine teams are fierce competitors too. When the training is over the judges meet and are issued their clipboards and score sheets. Then it's time to get down and dirty and start shooting for that sought after grail... the Top Dog trophy.



Friday night the bombs are planted and things get rolling. This year there were 14 bomb detection teams from various city, county, state and military police agencies. When all was said and done, Mike Armentrout and his dog Harrie of the Chandler, AZ Police Department won first place. Drug dogs got their shot the next morning and had to brave an interior building search and a vehicle search as well. Scott Armstrong and his dog Dino of the Arizona Department of Public Safety handled this challenge in high fashion bringing home the top trophy in that event. As the weekend wore on it would soon be discovered that Scott and Dino had been doing their prep work getting ready for Desert Dog. A wise and renowned canine guru once said, "Obedience is the foundation of ALL canine training". Well apparently Scott and Dino were sitting at the guru's feet because they took home the gold in that event too. The Tactical Challenge, complete with annoying obstacles like a bite suit man adorned in empty Gatorade bottles, and a pickup truck with a bed filled with water that some bad guy in a bite suit thought was a mini-swimming pool, provided a crowd pleasing spectacle. Scott Armstrong had to move over for fellow DPS K9 team member Anthony Gerard and K9 Crowe who performed amazingly well and brought home another 1<sup>st</sup> place win for the Highway Patrol.

The Building Search was a bit of a tactical challenge as well, or should we call it a nightmare? Imagine having to search a vacant car dealership for an armed felon. That's bad, but not outside the scope of what happens any day in America for some K9 team somewhere. However, try doing it when there are nasty little tricks to throw your dog off like food hiding under a closed doorway. Or how about the overwhelmingly interesting smell of an odor soaked towel drenched in the beckoning perfume of a young Malinois lady who was feeling rather, uhmm, anxious for a male suitor? "Aha! Not to worry!" said Heather Kennedy and her dog Alice of the Scottsdale Health Care Canine Unit, as she braved the distractions and faced the live simmunition targets in order to bring home the top award in that event. This was quite an accomplishment for Heather and Alice but what a source of pride for Scottsdale Health Care who was this year's chief fund donator. In fact, without the donations from Scottsdale Health Care, Ray Allen Professional K9 Equipment and others, there would not have been an 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Desert Dog. Budgets are down all across the nation and finding funds to pull off an event like this one is a monumental feat, but Scottsdale Health Care came to the rescue and it was great to see them take home a 1<sup>st</sup> place trophy.



Sunday morning came bright and early and brought with it the Area Search. It took place out on the baseball field and what a challenge!



Three port-o-john's, a couple vehicles, some makeshift boxes all overlooking an infield littered with bite sleeves, toys, and food scent made this a challenging event. Scott Tracy and his dog Clint of the Casa Grande, AZ PD made short work out of it and won the competition looking like it was just another day at the office. Then the exciting break came between the Area Search and the climatic final event - Handler Protection. All eyes and lenses were focused center field as Phoenix PD landed a helicopter and deployed a dog from the chopper. Like a locked-on missile the dog sliced across center field and flat laid out an agitator with such power and skill that the roar of the stadium crowd drowned out the noisy helicopter blades.



Under the blaze of afternoon sun the Handler Protection event was a bite fest for the dogs; a target rich environment indeed. Handlers had to confront a passive bite suit man, send his dog past him and out to a runaway agitator that tosses a towel toward the inbound dog. Once on the bite the dog was called off for a re-direct toward the once passive - but now assaultive- bite suit man who is performing an attack on the handler. From there, right around the pitcher's mound, the handler had to launch his dog on an agitator clear out in center field but the dog must call off with no bite and return. Then, the dog and handler approached yet another bite suit man who feeds the dog a loose bite sleeve and runs away. The dogs that practice this don't need to be told to spit out the bite sleeve and go get the bad guy. It seems that Arizona DPS was ready for this little festival of jute too. Anthony Gerard and Scott Armstrong with their dogs Crowe and Dino both took home trophies in this event. Crowe aced the event and Dino took home 5<sup>th</sup>. Fellow team member Aaron Buckmister and K9 Brett finished 6<sup>th</sup> solidifying the later need for DPS to call an 18-wheeler to the awards banquet to help haul all their awards home.



At the end of the day as the sun started to set on yet another successful Desert Dog trial the top ten hardest biting dogs as determined by the agitator's bruises had one more challenge. Each of the ten teams assembled in a line formation in right field facing home plate. One by one they were launched on "bite" commands and rocketed their way toward Lt. VanLeenen and Sgt. VanBochove. In the end, the two distinguished trial judges met and conferred and nominated the 2010 Tough Dog candidate Bryan Cochran and his K9 Max from the Mesa, AZ PD K9 Unit as the hardest dog of the year. This esteemed victory earned Bryan and "Max" the traveling trophy that stays with them for a year. That will be a year filled with well deserved bragging rights because when Dick and Wim say you have a Tough Dog, you know...you have a TOUGH DOG.



The awards banquet was complete with a wonderful sit down dinner and honored guests from various police departments. When all the events were tallied AZ DPS K9 Officer Scott Armstrong and “Dino” received a standing ovation from their fellow competitors having achieved a landslide victory and winning the 2010 Desert Dog Top Dog award. AZ DPS won the Top patrol agency award and the top detection agency went to Casa Grande PD. As the night came to a close and a banquet room full of weary but proud canine handlers emptied out, thoughts turn toward 2011 as we all wonder who might be next year’s Top Desert Dog.

If you want to find out more information about the Desert Dog K9 Trial or to view more great photos from the event please visit the website at <http://www.desertdogk9trials.com/>

Photos and article submitted courtesy of Lt. J.R. Parrow, Scottsdale PD

Writer’s bio:

Lt. J.R. Parrow is a 25-year veteran of the Scottsdale Police Department having served as a canine handler, trainer, and the K9 Unit Sergeant before his promotion and assignment as Patrol Watch Commander in Scottsdale’s popular entertainment district.