
THE NEW RECRUITS | PART II

‘JUST LIKE THAT. BANG! YOU’RE DEAD’

Six months inside the
St. Petersburg police academy

STORY BY LANE DeGREGORY | PHOTOS BY JOHN PENDYGRAFT | *Times Staff*

The story so far

After six weeks, the former private investigator is becoming more assertive and a crack shot. The ex-NFL player is crushing the physical training. The mother is starting to engage with strangers. Class 219 has lost six of its 30 cadets. Every day, those who are left encounter more obstacles.

Week 12: *The Shoot House*

Some guy is blaring music in his apartment, so a neighbor calls the cops. You gotta go out there, assess the situation, think fast! a coach tells the cadets. “Action beats reaction every time.”

It’s a chilly Tuesday in December, and the recruits are carrying radios, wearing gun belts. They are lined up across from St. Petersburg College’s Law Enforcement Academy, outside the shoot house.

Where anything can happen.

The upstairs of this two-story building is set up like a shabby apartment: old couch, bookshelf, fake flowers.

Downstairs is an abandoned office complex, or warehouse, or whatever the coaches want it to be.

Today, for the first time, the cadets will pretend they are officers sent to a scene. It’s called “role-based training.”

The scenarios are from actual calls, acted out by coaches and classmates.

You don’t have to arrest someone, the coach says. And remember to keep your guard up.

“Warn the person to turn down their music. If you have to come back, write a ticket. Check halls and bedrooms. Don’t do your business in the kitchen. There are bad weapons there. Find your exit points. Know how to get out of the house if something happens.”

You never know what’s coming at you in the shoot house. Armed with flashlights and practice pistols, Hannah Anhalt, 25, and the other cadets try to clear a dark building. Coaches told them someone had broken in, but they don’t know if anyone is still inside.

“Try to disarm them. But if they threaten you, shoot for center mass. We don’t train to wound. Keep shooting until the threat stops. That’s why you see suspects shot seven times, if they’re still coming at you.”

Police academy coach Paul Roach



“Action beats reaction every time,” coach Paul Roach, left, tells the cadets. An Army veteran and former cop, he has been teaching recruits for 20 years. He tries to grab cadets’ pistols from their holsters, showing them how quickly situations can escalate.

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There’s no way to prepare rookie cops for every situation they will face. So instructors throw all sorts of possibilities at the recruits. Some scenarios they might not confront for years, or ever. The goal is to help them think through ways to react, consider what-ifs, develop physical memories. Learn to be decisive, act quickly.

They teach them that 911 calls aren’t always what they seem. A disorderly complaint can lead to an abused child. Someone loitering can turn into a K-9 chase. Suicides become homicides.

Sometimes, it’s shoot or get shot.

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Metal music is throbbing inside “the apartment,” so Hannah Anhalt knocks loudly. “Police!” she says. “We want to talk to you real quickly!”

The music gets softer. From inside, someone calls, “Come on in!”

Anhalt and her partner have silver handcuffs and orange plastic weapons. They look at each other, unsure what to do. “We’d rather you come out here in the hall and talk to us,” says her partner. “Step outside, sir.”

He won’t. From across the hall, a neighbor confronts the cadets. “What’s going on?”

The door opens slightly. “I don’t really want to go outside,” the man says. He must be hiding something, Anhalt’s partner decides. So she shoulders the door open and shoves the man back.

While her partner is making “contact,” Anhalt should be “covering,” watching the hall. Instead, she follows her partner inside, leaving the door open. As her partner tries to wrestle the man into handcuffs, the neighbor strides into the room and grabs Anhalt’s gun.

He wraps his left arm around her neck, presses the barrel to her temple. Says, “You’re my hostage now.”

Anhalt’s partner freezes. “I don’t know what to do.”

“That went horribly,” Anhalt says. But she realizes her mistake. “I should’ve grabbed you and stopped you from coming into the apartment,” she tells the coach. “I got distracted and

had tunnel vision.”

“One hundred percent,” says the coach, letting her go. “You should have made the suspect talk to you in his apartment, instead of in the hall, where neighbors can get involved. You should’ve warned me that if I came into that apartment, you would arrest me for obstruction. You should’ve been more assertive. Tell me, ‘Sit your ass down now!’”

Have a plan with your partner, the coach says. “If you say her first name, she’ll take a shot. She might hit you in the shoulder, but at least you’ll be alive.”

Anhalt nods. “Did you feel me pull your gun?” asks the coach.

Anhalt shakes her head. “Not at all.”

“Yeah, just like that,” the coach says. “Bang! You’re dead.”

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Halfway through the academy, the recruits have learned to collect evidence, photograph injuries, check suspects’ waistbands for weapons. They figured out how to load a gun in six seconds, then do it with their eyes closed. They saw how blood pools and settles in a body.

Battery, they now know, is any form of striking. If someone loses a tooth, that’s a felony battery. If the suspect has a weapon — or the victim is pregnant — it’s an aggravated battery, which means more time in jail.

The 24 cadets have spent days at the rifle range shooting with both hands, learning how to hit a moving target and fire while they’re running. They’re judged on the speed of their reactions, how well they use cover, the accuracy of their shots. They’re not expected to become marksmen during the academy and are encouraged to keep practicing and get more training.

They’ve been taught how to counsel someone contemplating suicide, how to subdue subjects on their stomachs. “Put your knee on their back,” a coach said. “Not on the neck. Never on the neck. With George Floyd, that was never a tactic. That guy just screwed up.”

They rehearsed knocking hard and announcing, “Police!” — so whoever is inside will know. “In the Breonna Taylor case, that was the whole problem,” a coach said. “They didn’t announce.”

After three months, they’ve learned about each other.

Anhalt is a great shot, especially at moving targets.



Inside the shoot house, cadets break into small groups and take turns clearing buildings, facing shooters and arresting coaches playing “bad guys.”



Anhalt tries to figure out how to respond to a suicidal man with a gun.

KeVonn Mabon started calling her “Jane Wick,” after the movie action hero. She loves that and can’t wait to take her fiancé shooting to show off her skills.

Mabon is “The Rabbit,” Anhalt said. “He keeps us all chasing him, but no one can keep up.” In drills, would-be suspects can never run fast enough to escape his tackles.

Brittany “Mama” Moody is fierce in the mat room, especially good at “gift-wrapping” — taking suspects to the floor.

She has become more suspicious of strangers.

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A coach is on the couch in the next scenario, leaving through magazines on an old coffee table. He told cadets he called 911, then hung up. So they had to check on him.

When Mabon knocks loudly, the coach calls, “Come in!”

Mabon scans the room, keeping his right hand on his holster. His partner checks the hall, then follows, closing the

apartment door.

Before either recruit says a word, the coach yells: “What took you so long? I lost my job. My wife left me. And now I can’t find my dog.”

“Can you stand up for me?” asks Mabon’s partner. He’s not sure why.

“No! I don’t want to do that!” screams the coach. “This is my f-king house! And I can’t find my dog.”

“What kind of dog?” asks Mabon’s partner, watching the coach’s face. Mabon is fixed on



Brittany Moody, 31, clears a dark building during scenario training at the police academy. When the cadets chose teams, many want to be on hers.

his hands. When he sees him slowly reach for the magazines, Mabon whips out his gun, points it at the coach's chest, and says, "Bam!"

His partner, stunned, stares. He never saw the gun beneath the *Elle Decor*.

"I didn't want to tell you he had a gun, or let him know I knew," Mabon says. "We could have a code word for that, I guess?"

"Code words are good," says the coach. "We used red for weapons. I pulled you over at the red light..."

"You were going to shoot me, weren't you?" Mabon asks the coach. "I broke leather as soon as I saw you move for your gun."

"Okay, yes. Even if a gun is on the table, it's a threat."

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State curriculum calls for 56 hours of training on interviewing and report writing, 35 hours on "fundamentals of patrol," 80 hours of defensive tactics. Individual academies can't deviate from those mandates, but coach Joe Saponare added "role-based training" in every block.

After the first one, the cadets know they'll never get enough.

Being in the room with a would-be suspect, figuring out what to do and when, trying to talk to someone who's screaming at you, worrying that he has a gun — or might grab yours ...

"It's not like just reading it in the book," Anhalt said.

The coaches agree. Six months isn't nearly long enough to get someone ready to be a police officer. Becoming a lawyer takes a college degree plus three years; a doctor needs at least four more. And those jobs aren't nearly as dangerous.

"The more you train, the better off you'll be," the coach tells the cadets. "You have to keep working, stay sharp."

Don't get lazy, the coach says. "Lazy breeds complacency. And complacency breeds death."

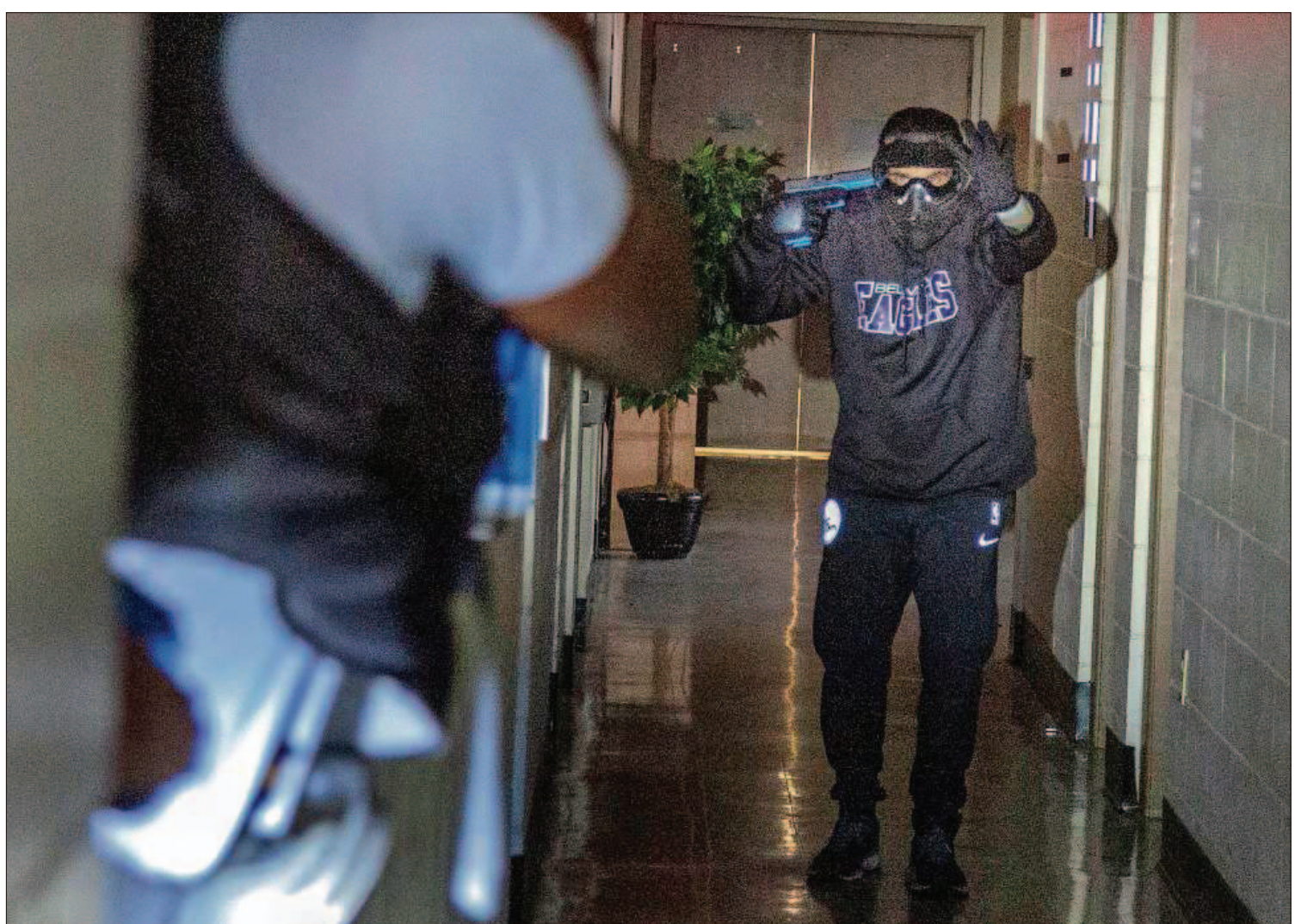
Work on your communication skills, he tells them. Practice having conversations, even if it's just talking to yourself.



"Bad guys" can hide anywhere. When Moody doesn't search behind a door, a coach shoots her with pink paintballs.



At the academy, recruits use training pistols and paint pellets when they respond to scenarios they might face on the streets. A coach warns them: Even simulated bullets hurt.



Coach Joe Saponare loves playing the "perp," trying to teach cadets how to react in would-be deadly scenarios, shooting them when they screw up.

800,000

Law enforcement officers in the U.S.

369

Officers killed across the country in 2020

17

Those killed in Florida that year

1,021

People shot and killed by police in 2020

Sources: National Police Foundation, Officer Down Memorial Page, Florida Attorney General's Office and Washington Post

You'll be surprised how much you can do with words.

Be kind but cautious, the coach says.

Hold true to your ethics. Do what you know is right, he says, no matter what others are doing around you. "Your destiny rests with you."

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At a warehouse, an alarm goes off. You get there and see the side door is open, Coach Sap explains. You have to figure out what's happened, see if anyone's inside, clear the building.

Form groups of three, he tells the cadets. Pick a leader. Knock and announce. When you have a suspect in custody, cuff them. Communicate with the subject and each other.

On this second day of scenarios, the recruits are carrying blue guns that shoot pink paintballs.

"Has anyone here been hit by simulated bullets?" asks a coach. "They hurt, so try not to get shot. Identify your target. Know where the threat is coming from. I've seen partners shoot partners."

No matter what, he says, don't give up. "Your scenario isn't over just because you got shot."

Moody leads the first group. She stops at the doorway and steps to the side, using the wall as a barrier. She doesn't knock or announce. When she leans out to look down the hall, she points her gun to the ground.

"Never hold your gun down!" calls a coach. "Never peek out the door without pointing your gun there."

She nods, and proceeds down the dark hall, two recruits following. "Not close enough!" calls the coach. "Butt to gut!"

With a flashlight in her left hand, the gun in her right, she searches a storeroom. "Clear!" A bathroom. "Clear!" A cluttered classroom. "Pinellas County sheriff!" she shouts. "If you're in here, come out with your hands up!"

No one does. She shines a flashlight around the walls, then moves on to another bathroom, which one of her partners is checking. "I got your back! I got your back!" Moody calls, watching the hall.

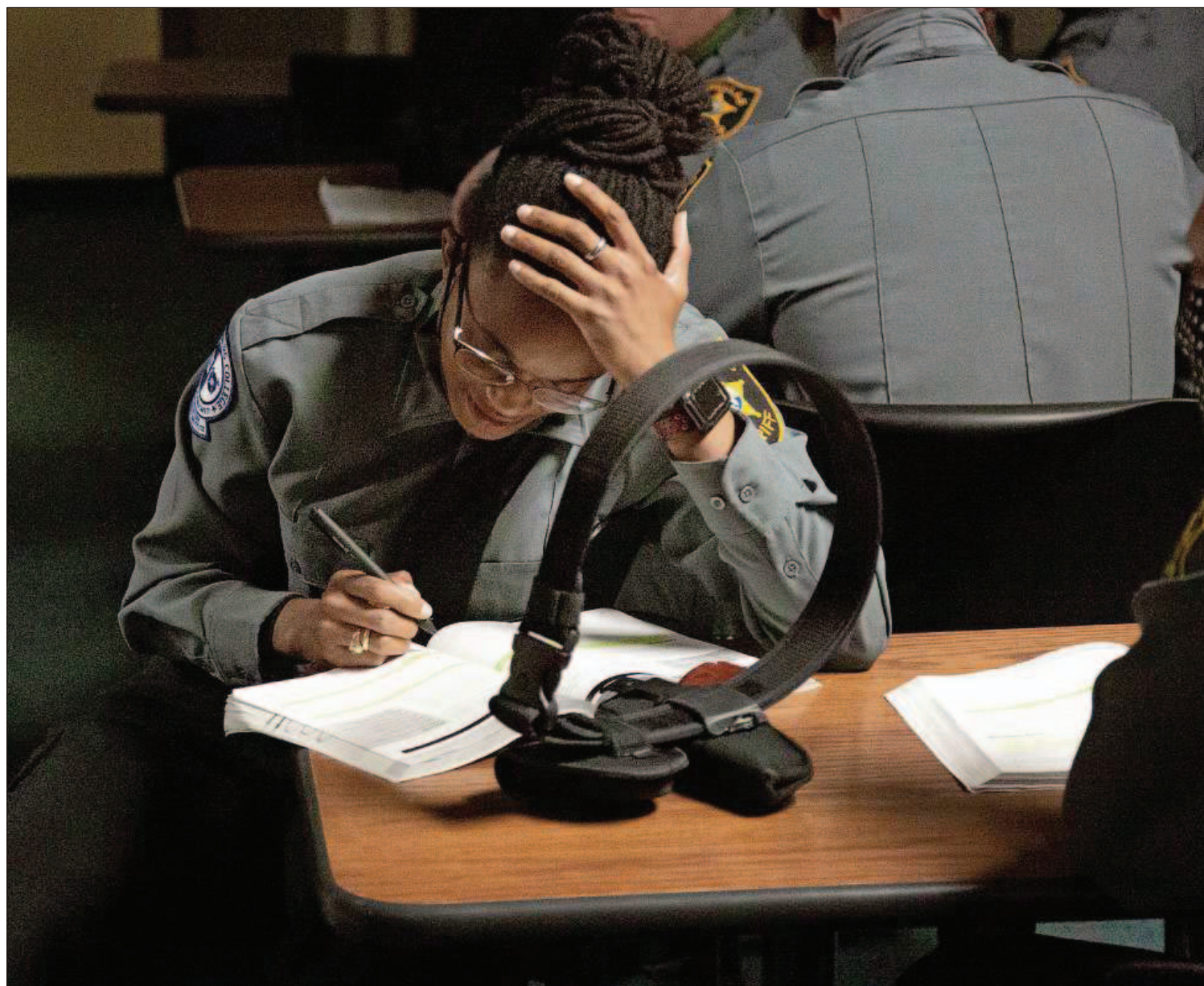
Coach Sap had been hiding behind the door in that classroom. He jumps out and points his gun at Moody, shoots her six times.

Pink splats stain her shirt. Her partners stand beside her, mouths open.

"What are you going to do? What do you do now?" asks Coach Sap.

One of the male cadets stutters, "Uhh, mmm, maybe try to leave?"

"Okay," says Coach Sap, smiling. "Show me how you're going to leave."



Moody always has her textbook and highlighters so she can get in extra study time while waiting to be called into the next scenario.



Coach Sap tells cadets he has an evil twin. He can be their best friend or worst enemy.

"We're not going to leave," says Moody. "We can call for backup. But we're not going to leave."

"I'd watch my back and call the SWAT team," a coach agrees.

Two of you kept your backs to the door, Coach Sap says. No one called, "Shots fired!"

"You guys have to communicate better. You can't be afraid," he tells them. "I was ready to

light you up some more."

In the next scenario, Coach Sap holds a gun to his head, cries that his wife is cheating on him, again.

"Sir, we can help you. Put the gun down," Moody says calmly, shining a flashlight on Coach Sap.

"I can't see. Take that light out of my face," he yells, walking toward her.

"Stop walking, sir," says

Moody. "Put the gun down."

The other recruits stay frozen and silent. When Moody sees Coach Sap tip his gun toward her, she fires. But he keeps coming. The next time she shoots, he falls face down.

"Somebody else needs to know what to do," Coach Sap says from the floor. "It can't always be Moody."

She kneels beside him and opens her handcuffs. She was better at these scenarios than she thought she would be. She gained confidence and now, all of her classmates want to be on her team.

Next up though, practicing car chases on the driving range, everyone will be on their own.

Week 14: Cop Cars

This is supposed to be the fun part: Screaming sirens, strobing lights, steering cars through quick turns.

But orange cones are everywhere. "Bad guys" are getting away. Coaches are yelling, stressing out the recruits.

The cadets are beside the vast driving range at the academy, alternating through the "pursuit" course: Four-point turns in tight intersections, racing through gravel, then along wet pavement, backing up through cones at 35 mph, screeching to sudden stops.

A coach rides with each

recruit, watching their maneuvers, offering advice — and angry criticism. "What are you thinking? If you do that out there, you'll die!"

It's a crisp December morning. A second recruit had to drop out after catching COVID-19 during Thanksgiving break, so now there are 23. Everyone is tired, distracted, anxious.

"Take a deep breath," says a coach. "Talk to yourself. Remind yourself what you've learned. Tap your brakes going into those turns."

If you hit a cone — or start crying — you're done.

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They only have one week to practice in the white, unmarked cars. They've been getting used to the powerful engines that leap off the line, the loud motors, tight steering, quick brakes. Most of them have been driving Tauruses. A few were assigned classic Crown Vics.

This afternoon, they're competing to be the "Top Driver," an honor given to whoever finishes the course fastest.

You get an award at graduation. You get to sign the orange cone that gets handed down from class to class.

"Okay, you're going to go straight into the intersection, we'll shout at you where to stop. Make sure you stop correctly, no skids," cautions



KeVonn Mabon, 27, who loves being in a cop car, has already broken the academy record for the 300-meter dash. Will the driving range be next?



Instructors keep the pace fast and the pressure high on the driving range.

a coach, pointing out corners of the course. “Make the 90-degree turn. Serpentine through the six-pack. Don’t run over the pole.

“This is a timed event. Line up in alphabetical order.

“Oh, and today, everybody’s driving the Crown Vics.”

The cadets start complaining. Why those old cars? That’s not fair. Why teach us on Tauruses, then switch now?

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First up, Anhalt, one of the smallest recruits. She climbs behind the wheel. The seat is so much lower than in the Taurus, the dashboard so much higher. When she stretches to see through the windshield, her feet barely brush the pedals.

No time to adjust the seat.

Or mirrors.

As soon as she straps on her seat belt, the coach beside her barks, “Go!” and starts his stopwatch.

“You got this!” classmates yell.

She knows she doesn’t. When she presses the gas, the Crown Vic lurches forward, and she brakes. “Go!” yells the coach. “Go! You’re being timed!”

On the rifle range, she learned to tune everything out, keep her cool, focus. She scored 47 out of 48 on the exam. “More Jane Wick stuff,” Mabon teased her.

That’s been her favorite part of the academy so far. For Hanukkah, she asked her fiancé for a gun, so she wouldn’t have to keep borrow-

ing his. She’d wanted to take him shooting over the break, but she has to do ride-alongs with the Clearwater police.

Over Thanksgiving, she helped arrest an elderly homeless man defecating on a loading dock, responded to a domestic violence call where a man had a concealed weapon permit and gone to a park to settle a dispute between two women arguing over a dog collar. Every night, her brother texts her: “Did you die today?”

A cadet had asked her classmates: Have you ever felt like you were going to die? One woman had panicked while rock climbing. Anhalt had talked about waking up in her fiancé’s car, while it was spinning, just before they crashed.

Here on the driving range,

she tries to block that out. But she can’t concentrate with all the obstacles she has to skirt, with coaches screaming and everyone watching. “C’mon Anhalt!” someone shouts. “Hurry!”

Gripping the wheel, white-knuckled, she steers into the first turn. Beside her, the coach clicks on the stereo. *Deck the Halls* blasts across the driving range.

Anhalt, grimacing, plows over the first cone. “Out!”

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During the first couple of years on the force, cops spend most of their time in their cars, on patrol or answering calls.

You have to get used to sitting there for 10, 12, 15 hours, a coach told them. Practice paying attention. You can’t doze off.

Make yourself get up and move.

And just because you’re ensconced in a cop car doesn’t mean you’re safe. Chases can be as dangerous as responding to shots fired.

One coach echoed a persistent message: Treat everyone as if they want to kill you.

The cadets who are former military have mastered that mindset. But it’s a shift for those who are used to trusting strangers.

“That guy you pull over for rolling through a stop sign might have a gun — and use it.”

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The next two cadets bowl over cones and get disqualified. Then a beefy guy speeds to the finish line and makes a clean stop.

“That’s how it’s done!” shouts a coach. “1:07. That’s the

time to beat.”

The recruit beams and fist-bumps the air. Most of his classmates cheer.

But the youngest cadet crosses his arms and says: “That’s not fair. He’s been driving the Crown Vic all week.”

When it’s Mabon’s turn, he’s grinning. He loves being in a cop car, speeding through the obstacles.

He tears into the straight-away, *Jingle Bells* blasting through the open windows. He stops without skidding, races into the turn, pumps his brakes. He slaloms through the six-pack, avoids the pole, tears into the final stretch.

“Coming in hot! I like that!” calls a coach. “Love the aggression.”

Mabon already broke the academy record for the 300-meter dash and got to write his name on the mat room wall. He wants to buy himself \$220 Air Jordans for Christmas but worries about spending that much. On the NFL practice squad, he made \$18,000 a month. As a cop in training, he makes \$3,000.

“Go! Go! You got it!” calls a coach, as Mabon’s classmates cluster at the edge of the asphalt, watching.

Mabon takes the last turn too quickly — and knocks over a cone.

Everyone groans, even the coaches. Mabon climbs out of the car, smiling, and shrugs.

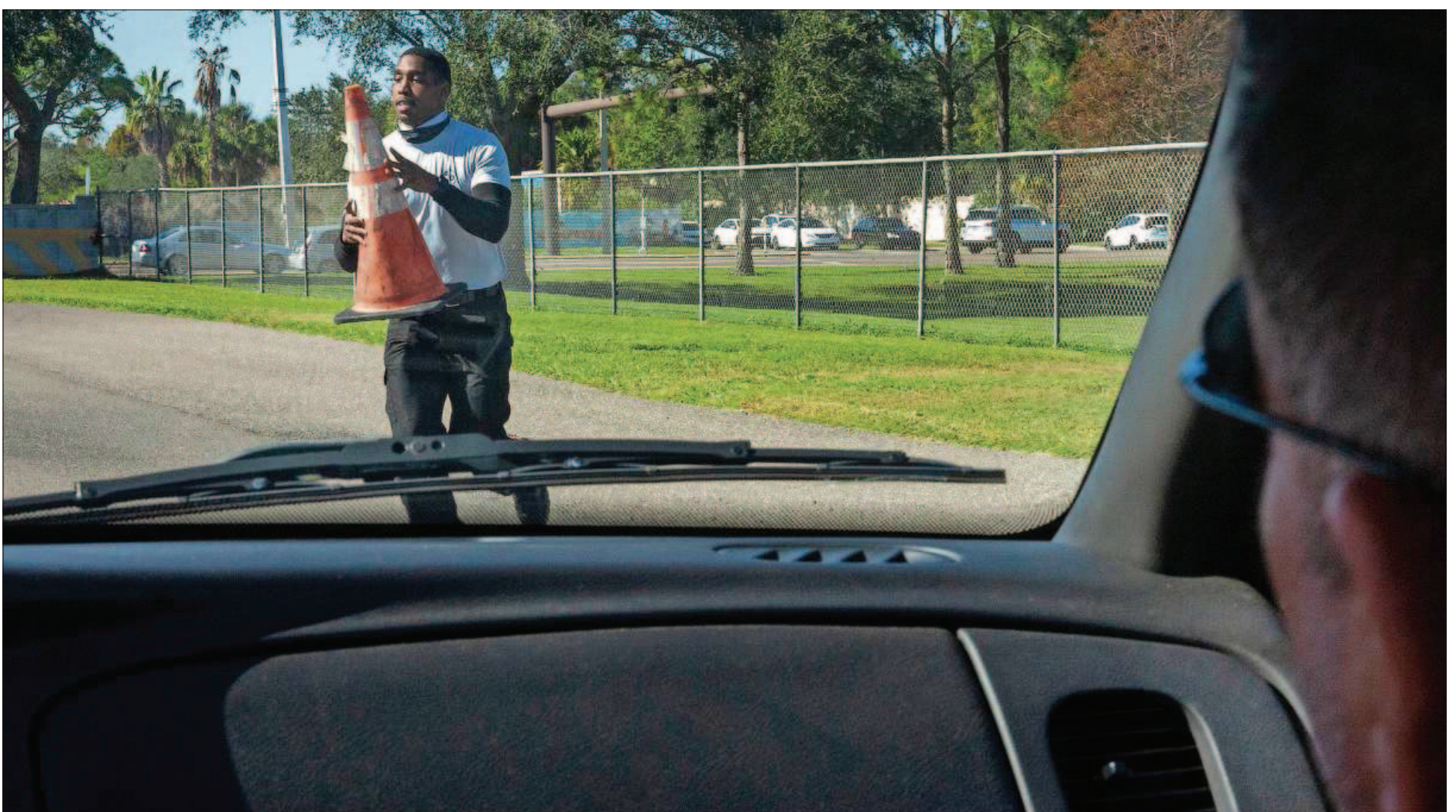
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When it’s Moody’s turn, she walks across the asphalt confidently. She’s 5-foot-9, drives a Tacoma pickup. Fast. She’s ready.

“Get in there, Moody!” a classmate calls. “You go!”



Coach Rick Tapia lectures Anhalt before her final driving examination.



Mabon hustles after the cone that he hit, which ended his final run on the driving range.



Moody slams the car door after toppling a cone and being disqualified from the driving competition.

shouts another.

She nods at them, then folds into the driver's seat. Before she even straps on her belt, the coach beside her turns up the radio, roaring *Sleigh Ride*.

She's dreading the holidays. Her son Bryan keeps asking for Nerf guns, but she won't buy them. She doesn't want him to think guns are toys. And what does she want? Ammo. It's getting so expensive and hard to find.

On the driving range, Moody takes off quickly, stops well, then races into the turn. Too fast. Her left front tire topples a cone.

She slams on the brakes, throws open the door and stomps out, scowling.

During the long walk across the pavement, she balls her hands into fists, keeps her head down.

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After a dark-haired recruit wins Top Driver and signs the cone with a Sharpie, the cadets start moving toward the academy. But a coach calls them back.

"When you get distracted, look at all the mistakes you make. Just do it as the coaches told you to do it," he says.

"And quit complaining." He switches to a whiny voice: "This car sucks. This gas pedal is too close to the brakes."

"Be a chameleon," he shouts. "Just do your job. Don't make excuses. When you screw up, own it."

Back in the classroom, they have to take a written driving test: 50 questions in an hour. Mabon finishes first, in 10 minutes, scores 96.

When Anhalt gets a perfect score, a coach tells her, "Well, you're doing better than most. Most women don't know

which way to turn the wheel."

She tells this to a female recruit, who says: "Yeah. He told me I was going to be a sucky deputy."

The cadets end the day listening to two young cops tell war stories: Trying to calm a schizophrenic woman robbing a bank with a bomb — that turned out to be a sandwich; tending to someone stabbed at a church; smelling a body

that had been decomposing for days.

The hardest call, one tells the class, was for a 28-year-old veteran who killed himself. "I had to tell his mother," the cop says. He closes his eyes. "That night, when I went home, I shed a few tears." He pauses. "I'm a vet, too."

Silence swallows the room. These recruits are about to face so many tragedies. They

look at each other, then at their laps.

"But don't get me wrong," the officer tells them. "This really is the best job in the world."

In the back of the room, Coach Sap laughs and says, "Like getting a ticket to the greatest show on earth!"

He tells them to have a good break. "Enjoy yourselves, but stay focused."

When they come back in January, they all have to take the Cooper Test, an assessment of physical fitness. If they don't pass, they'll get kicked out.

Most of them are confident. Everyone is excited to see if Mabon will beat his own record for the run.

Contact Lane DeGregory at ldgregory@tampabay.com. Follow @LaneDeGregory.

Coming Sunday
 Week 18: *The Run*,
 Week 18: *Bloody Friday*, and
 Week 23: *End of Watch*

Online
 Read the complete series at tampabay.com/newrecruits.



Mabon volunteered to be the "bad guy" while recruits rehearse pulling over drivers.



Anhalt, right, and the other cadets had to practice driving and making traffic stops in daylight and in the dark.