



THE NEW RECRUITS | PART III

'THE ONLY ESCAPE IS TO FIGHT HARDER'

Six months inside
St. Petersburg College's police academy

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

The story so far

By the winter break, cadets at St. Petersburg College's police academy have finished more than half of their training. Another classmate dropped out, due to COVID-19. The 23 recruits who are left still have to pass a fitness test, learn to tie a tourniquet and face the dangers and downfalls of the job. Their coach, a retired cop, has to deal with shifting perceptions of his profession and worries about this new crop of officers.

Week 18: *The Run*

You're having a bad day. You've gotten punched, you've gone down, and some bad guy, much bigger than you, is sitting on your stomach, grabbing for your gun.

"What do you do?" a coach asks the cadets. "What?"

They're working in pairs today, the first day after winter break, spread around the mat room practicing defensive tactics. One recruit plays the officer, the other the suspect. They take turns with the roles, as coaches call out commands and questions.

"Pull them in with your legs, don't keep your knees tight, so you've got room to punch. Don't panic. Don't gas yourself."

Go with what the guy gives you, the coach says.

"If you can still reach your mic, call for backup. When he goes for your gun, that's when you go for it. He's got to let go of something. As soon as he reaches, that's when you escape."

"Posture up. Play with it. Ready? Go!"

The cadets look like they're waging an aggressive game of Twister, everyone climbing on each other, pushing and shoving, trying not to fall, fighting to gain control.

The biggest guy in the class tackles KeVonn Mabon. He's on top of the former football player, pushing his head into the blue mat. "He's going to break your wrist!" shouts the coach. "He's going to crush your trachea. He's going to crack your jaw."

Mabon is struggling, sweating. "Try the excavator, Mabon! Use your legs!"

Mabon grimaces. "He's very energetic, sir!"

Police cadets have to master 28 defensive tactics. KeVonn Mabon, 27, struggles to escape a classmate who took him to the mat. Instructors paired the grappling partners by size, so the former NFL player had to wrestle one of the biggest recruits.



During a training scenario in the mat room, Brittany Moody gets instructions on how to escape an attacker.

At St. Petersburg College's police academy, recruits learn defensive tactics based on jiu-jitsu, moves they have to master and demonstrate during an exam. They learn how to "hip out" and "shrimp out" of a take-down; how to cup a suspect's chin so they can't turn their head; how to drive their shoulders into someone's face.

"The only escape is to fight harder," the coach shouts. "What are they on? Drugs and alcohol. They'll start tapping out, and when they do, don't disengage. De-escalate. That's the only way to control that. You have an audience. They're watching you. Be professional. Don't just go for your gun. That's what officers do when they panic."

"Use this," the coach says, tapping his head. "And this," he taps his mouth.

Mabon is still on his back, rolling from side to side, trying to force a space below one of the big guy's elbows. But the guy keeps pushing back.

"Man, hey, you're choking me!" Mabon gasps.

The coach stands over them. "Disengage!"

He stops the other recruits in their scenarios. "What's going on with the neck there?" he asks Mabon's partner. Silence. He shouts across the room, "What's in the news now? C'mon!"

"Your arm is not around their neck. It's between the side and shoulder. Don't squeeze. It will look like a chokehold."

Florida's police academy curriculum includes a chokehold. But the St. Petersburg school had stopped teaching that tactic long before a Minneapolis cop killed George

Floyd. The coach tells the recruits, "We don't do that here."

"If they're coming at you with deadly force, you're allowed to choke. You can do anything at all," the coach says. "But that's always the last resort."

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Over the holidays, the recruits didn't get much of a break. Agencies sponsoring them made them keep working.

Hannah Anhalt, who loves dogs, worked with K-9 handlers from the Clearwater Police Department, hiding in the rafters of a house until a dog found her. She learned that it's harder for dogs to find people who escape on concrete than it is if they run through a field. Grass holds the smell of sweat and fear.

Mabon and Brittany "Mama" Moody reported to the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, where they worked out every day. Mabon loved it.

At the academy, he had started leading drills during the lunch break, pushing classmates to do more situps, squats, side-straddle hops. Faster. Trying to prepare them to pass the physical assessment. Pumping them up with his positivity.

"Slow down, hotshot," called coach Joe Saponare, who works out with the recruits half his age. "No one can keep up with you!"

The academy walls are filled with framed photos of officers riding horses, steering boats, charging with SWAT shields.

Recently, someone hung a new one in the hall by the cafeteria: Mabon running past



Mabon prepares to handcuff a "suspect" during the defensive tactics exam.

the parking lot, far ahead of his classmates.

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"A Greek god." That's what Coach Sap calls Mabon: 6-foot-2, 223 pounds, broad shoulders, bulging biceps, sculpted calves. He's lost weight since the pandemic canceled his professional football career, but that only made him faster. "He'll be great in the community," Coach Sap said, "connecting with other athletes and African Americans, inspiring kids. He'll get out there in the trenches, break down the barriers, help change perceptions."

Mabon grew up in St. Louis, just him and his mom. Dad "wasn't really in the pic-

ture much," he said. His mom worked double shifts at a casino, bowling alley, jail. Sometimes, his uncle came around.

That uncle, Keith Brown, played for the New York Giants, then became a cop in a "super dangerous area" of St. Louis.

Mabon started playing pee-wee football at 6; his coach became his mentor. "He's always been the team captain, a great leader, very driven," said Reggie Crume, who now coaches at Calvary Christian High School in Clearwater. "Whatever he put his mind to, he was going to not only achieve it, but be one of the best."

When Mabon was 14, he moved in with his uncle — and

a private school gave him a scholarship to play football. He was one of only 25 Black kids in the school with 1,000 students. "I had to drive through a nice neighborhood to get there, and I got pulled over at least 10 times," he said. Three of those times, cops made him get out and searched his car.

"So many people," he said, "the only experience they have with law enforcement is negative."

Mabon played every position on the field in high school, moved in with coach Crume his senior year. Seven colleges recruited him, and he chose Ball State, where he majored in criminal justice and psychology — and never missed a game.

His sights always were on the NFL. After football, he thought he might work for the FBI. He sees himself as a sort of Derek Morgan, the dashing agent from his favorite TV show, *Criminal Minds*.

Three minutes after the NFL draft, in 2017, the Tennessee Titans called to offer him a free agent contract. Mabon played wide receiver in the preseason, then got picked up by the Indianapolis Colts.

After the NFL, he played a year for a German team. He was working out with a Canadian team last year when COVID-19 canceled sports. He thought he had a few years left to play pro football and was hoping to record recent game films to get back to the NFL.

But by June 2020, sports were still shut down, so he moved to Florida to live with coach Crume, his wife and two small kids.

Crume introduced Mabon to a friend from the Sheriff's Office, where a recruiter told him: We need more young men like you.

Mabon's mom didn't want him to give up his dream. For days, he agonized over the decision. How long could the pandemic last? What if professional sports came back, and he had committed to another job?

What if they didn't, and he was still unemployed?



In the locker room, Mabon jokes with fellow cadets. He's always pumping up his classmates and giving high-fives.

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A week after the mat training, cadets jog past the flagpole, take one last swig from their Camelbacks and line up by the obstacle course.

To graduate from the academy, they have to pass the Cooper Test.

The fitness exam standards vary depending on age and gender, but men under 30 have to do at least 33 situps in a minute, pump out 22 pushups in a minute, run 1.5 miles in under 17:04, sprint 300 meters in less than 66 seconds.

This morning, everyone passed the sit-ups and push-ups — the youngest recruit just barely.

Now, they have to do the runs.

They're on the edge of the road, stretching, jogging in place. The long run is first — the only part Mabon dreads. "You'll never run 1.5 miles for football," he says.

When they take off, he and Moody lead the pack. Anhalt is near the rear. By the second lap, Moody has fallen into the middle of the group, and Mabon is walking, clutching his back. As he crosses the finish line, a coach with a stopwatch calls, "11:35!"

Mabon shakes his head. "Terrible," he says. "I had to stop four times because of a stitch in my side."

As each classmate crosses the finish line behind him, he slaps their hand.

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When he started at the academy, Mabon said he was "as single as single gets."

But just before the holidays, when he moved out of the coach's house and into his own apartment, a female classmate came to help. Strong and statuesque, a Bosnian refugee who grew up in Germany, she knows the town where Mabon had played — and started bringing him Gatorade after workouts.

As she sorted through boxes that Saturday, he unpacked memories: trophies, magazine clippings, fan mail from kids. His high school helmet, a glass plaque for Ball State's 2016 MVP, gloves from his first NFL catch.

"That's my whole dream there," he told her. "I did it."

He still FaceTimes with former teammates but doesn't watch much pro ball anymore. Too painful. "I should still be playing football."

Once he committed to the Sheriff's Office, he tried not to look back. He cut off his long braids, shaved his goatee and started trying to imagine life as a deputy.

But he can't picture himself, a Black rookie cop, out at protests, trying to control people who might see him as the enemy. "To me, that would be more stressful than being sent to an active shooter call," he said.

Over the break, the German football team called, asking to hire Mabon back. "Football was a lot less stressful, a lot less dangerous and a lot more money than being a cop,"

he told his classmate. "But I signed a two-year contract with the Sheriff's Office, sooo," he paused.

"If after two years I don't like it, I told Germany I'd be available. Of course, they can't hold my spot. ..."

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The cadets have to leave their phones in their lockers at the academy, so on Jan. 6, they didn't get the news until later.

Mabon and Anhalt read it on their phones during a break. Moody saw it on TV in the lobby while she and three other cadets were heading out to take down the flag.

That night, they all watched footage of a U.S. Capitol police officer being crushed by the crowd, between riot shields.

Coaches seldom address current events, trying to avoid anything political, leaving the cadets to talk about the news, if they want.

The next day, a recruit did a presentation about bear spray used during the riot.

"Buckle in, guys," says a coach. "You're going to have a wild ride."

The siege scared Anhalt. It made Mabon mad.

"It was just stupid," he said. "The officers were outnumbered 45 to 1."

Moody tries to ignore classmates who think Joe Biden is going to defund the police and the coach who talks about QAnon. But later, she said the Capitol Police seemed complicit.

"They didn't take the same precautions because these protesters were Trump supporters, not Black Lives Matter," she said. "They should've sprayed them with gas and treated them like they treated all the other protesters."

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From the shoot house to the rifle range, recruits rim the road. They're sprinting in groups of six while a coach clicks a stopwatch and notes their times.

Mabon is shadow boxing in his sneakers. When you're the fastest runner and help your team break the obstacle course record, a lot is riding on your run. He enjoys that; expectations fuel him.

Today, he wants to break his own record for the 300-meter dash: 35 seconds.

That means running faster than 19 mph.

"Let's go, Mabon!" classmates call from the grass. They're watching, clapping.

He crouches slightly, elbows back, chin out, and leaps off the line. His long strides propel him past the pack and quickly, he's yards ahead. He digs in, pumps his arms, gains speed.

Then, more than halfway through the sprint, he stops and doubles over, clutching his sides, his head almost touching the pavement.

"Finish it, Mabon! You've worked too hard!" someone shouts. If he can't complete the course, he'll get kicked out of the academy.

His face is contorted in pain. A classmate races to his side,



Mabon unpacks his NFL jersey as he moves into a new apartment.



When a classmate showed videos of Mabon's college football highlights, Mabon recounted every play before it happened.



At Ball State, Mabon was honored as the school's all-time leading receiver.

bends close and says sternly: "Finish! You can do this."

He offers Mabon his arm, helps him stand. Slowly, still holding his hips, Mabon limps across the finish. And falls face-first on the asphalt.

"Get him to the grass!" calls a coach.

But he can't get up. When another recruit tries to

help, Mabon shakes him off. One cadet puts his hand on Mabon's back. Another gets his water bottle. He can't even lift his head to drink.

"You okay?" asks the woman who helped him move in. She reaches for him. He slides up to his knees and tries to crawl but collapses.

For more than five minutes,

he lies there, curled by the curb.

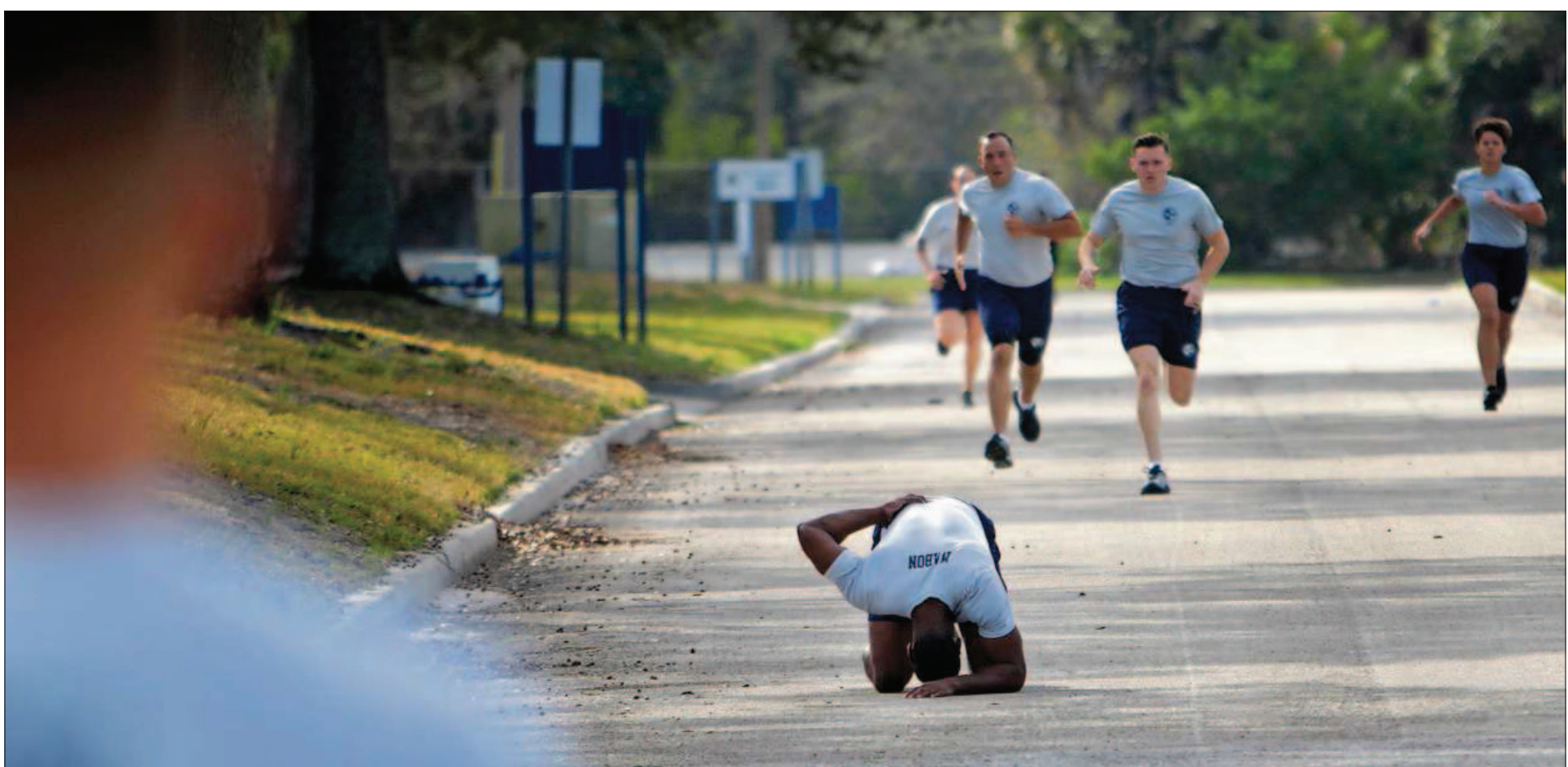
"He was on track to beat his own record," says a coach.

"At least he finished," says another.

Mabon had fractured his back playing football, and sometimes, the injury flares up, pinching a nerve.

While a coach gets a golf cart to drive him back to the academy, and Mabon struggles to stand, over and over, his classmates watch, helpless, not sure what to do.

The next week, they start learning first aid.



Mabon falls to the pavement while trying to break his own academy record in the 300-meter dash.



During a first-aid training, Coach Joe Saponare plays an officer who was attacked by a dog.

Week 18: Bloody Friday

In a gravelly patch of grass behind the shoot house, Coach Sap is sprawled on his side, wearing a Bud Light T-shirt. His eyes are closed. A rubber tube is wrapped around his left arm, which stretches above his head. In his right hand, there's an empty syringe.

"Is he dead?" a cadet asks. "You don't know," says another coach. "A passerby in a car called in a suspicious person beside a building, looks like he might be drunk or on drugs. That's all they told dispatch."

The recruits are in teams of three. On this January morning, Moody takes the lead. She kicks the syringe out of Coach Sap's reach, then kneels by his head. Mabon pulls on blue gloves from his medic bag. Anhalt stands over him and says, "I'd call EMS right away." "Yes!" shouts another coach. "There's no Narcan for you guys. But EMS has it. Watch out, though. When you hit 'em with Narcan, they go from coma to freak out. As soon as they're alert, they might want to stab you with that needle."

Anhalt kneels by Coach Sap and starts doing chest compressions. Moody leans over his face and pretends to blow air into his mouth. Mabon



Courtesy of JOE SAPONARE

Saponare, left, as a rookie cop in Camden, N.J., in 1994. His great-grandfather and dad also were police officers.

fake calls for emergency medical assistance. Another coach hands him a dummy with red and yellow wires streaming from two flat panels: a training model of a defibrillator.

"Prepare to shock!" shouts that coach. "It's like jumping a car battery."

Coach Sap pops up from the ground.

"You guys did awesome!" says one coach. "Good team dynamic."

But Coach Sap has a few corrections. They didn't secure the scene. Someone could have been in that alley, out to get the guy who overdosed — or them. One of them should have been

a lookout.

And they should have put the syringe in a plastic bag. That's evidence.

"After we make sure you're okay, do we arrest you?" Mabon asks.

Coach Sap laughs. "Not unless I have a kilo on me."

He loves these scenarios, seeing how the recruits will respond.

For months, they've been focused on saving themselves. This week, they're learning how to save others.

Police are often first on the scene, so they have to know basic lifesaving skills and when to call an ambulance.

They carry bandages, gauze, a wool blanket.

They practiced dislodging an object from a baby's throat, checking for someone's pulse, giving CPR: 30 chest compressions, two breaths. Coach Sap taught them to count to the rhythm of *Stayin' Alive*. But the cadets didn't know that song from the '70s.

This afternoon is "Bloody Friday."

Coach Sap is about to get caught on a fence, stabbed in the leg, shot in the arm. ...

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Saponare is 49, in better shape now than when he was on the force. He's proud that he can keep up with the cadets and feels lucky that he gets to wear gym shorts to the office. He slicks back his dark hair, walks fast and talks quickly, with a slight Jersey accent often punctuated by a laugh.

"In this job," Coach Sap tells recruits, "you got to remember to laugh."

At the academy, he runs four law enforcement classes, an average of 120 students per year. He tells them he has an evil twin. One minute, he's offering advice and encouragement. The next, he's "smoking" them for not shining their shoes, making them write an essay or run an extra mile. His mission is to push the meek ones to be more forceful, dial back the military guys' gusto.

As the public safety depart-

ment coordinator, he also oversees training for corrections officers and cops from other states who want to work in Florida. He orders equipment for the gym, mat room, rifle range, interviews new cadets, tracks their test scores and supervises the instructors.

Coach Sap's first-floor office is obsessively neat: stacks of papers all perfectly squared. Taped around his desk are quotes like: "Embrace the Suck," and "Be Polite. Be Professional. But Have a Plan to Kill Everybody You Meet."

There's a life-size poster of Chase Utley, his favorite Phillies player; a plaque from when his SWAT team won unit of the year; three flags, gifted to him by his three favorite classes.

His most prized possession hangs by the door: A framed newspaper article featuring photos of four generations of his family under the headline: *True Blue: Why Police Tradition Runs in Families*.

"My great-grandfather came over from Italy, became a Camden cop. He was so good he could retrieve a fingerprint from an orange," said Coach Sap. "He always told my dad, 'Everyone struggled during the Depression, but I had a job.' My grandfather was a firefighter. Dad also was a cop, for 43 years. He'd take me to the station, to the shooting range, on inspections. I thought that was cool. I loved *Starsky & Hutch*."



Mabon, Moody and Hannah Anhalt practice chest compressions on a dummy. Police have to learn first-aid because they often arrive at incidents before an ambulance.



Coach Sap leads the recruits through their last workout before winter break. He loves working out with them and making them sweat.

In high school, he played football and hockey, hoped to go pro in baseball. “I was good,” he said. “But not good enough.”

His dad made him go to college: Rutgers, political science. Afterward, inevitably, he enrolled in the police academy. Back then, coaches didn’t run scenarios. Training lasted 16 weeks — six weeks fewer than his cadets get now. Few women applied.

He met his wife while he was a patrolman, “working eight-hour shifts and you’re done,” he said. He’s not sure she knew what she was getting into but says she never complained. “At least not to me,” he said. “Maybe she’d vent to other cops’ wives, but she always stood by me.” Even though he worked 6 p.m. until 4 a.m. and almost never was home to put their two daughters to bed, even when they were at parties and he’d have to leave, even when they’d go looking at Christmas lights and he’d be so distracted, waiting for a call, that he wouldn’t remember their drive.

For 12 years, he carried a shield for the SWAT team, the Special Weapons and Tactics Unit. He says it stands for: Sit, wait and talk. He loved the trenches, the camaraderie, the action. “Bringing people to safety,” he said. “You can’t beat that.”

He watched a couple of friends get stabbed and shot. But he never really got hurt, never thought about quitting, always enjoyed the rush of showing up at a scene.

In 2011-2012, he was inspector of Camden police, overseeing 300 uniformed officers, when the city set a record for murders: 67. Citizens complained about the crime rate, open-air drug markets, police corruption. Lawsuits alleged that officers planted evidence, fabricated reports, lied.

“There were officers infamous for pinning drugs and guns on people,” he said. “One whole squad, six of them went rogue, and went to jail. But not my guys. We were the good guys. We got thank-you notes. One woman baked me a sweet potato pie.”

He was never accused of wrongdoing, instead honored for his service. But by the next year, public outcry had convinced officials to obliterate the entire department — the largest city to date to have done that.

The county took over policing, hired half of the city officers and asked Saponare to help retrain them. “We broke the barrier with the community, got out of our cars and went back to walking beats, riding bikes,” he said. “We put ‘eye in the sky’ cameras all over, so the community could help watch the streets, help us police. ... We started to turn the public support around.”



Coaches are hands-on at the academy. Coach Sap corrects a cadet’s position during a defensive tactics class.



Coach Sap answers a question for Anhalt, who strives to get top grades on her exams.

Officers went from having a “warrior mind-set,” he said, to thinking of themselves as “guardians of the city.” Crime rates declined.

“You can’t just defund the police,” he said. Instead, officers need more training and tools, recruits need to learn how to engage with people. He makes cadets give daily presentations on some aspect of law enforcement, so they’ll get more comfortable with public speaking.

In 2013, he worked for the county. The next year, he’d put in 20 years, so he retired.

He taught at a vocational school, did security for a while, hated both jobs. When his wife wanted to move to Florida, he called a friend who worked at the St. Petersburg police academy. When that friend retired in 2018, he became Coach Sap.

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He is nostalgic for the days when cops got more respect. But he knows police have long struggled with public perception.

In 1829, almost two centuries before last summer’s protests, a British officer named Sir Robert Peel became known as the “Father of Modern Policing.” His vision for law enforcement foreshadows the recent demands for reform and influenced the changes in Camden, N.J.

The goal of law enforcement, Peel said, should be to prevent crime, not catch criminals. “An effective police department doesn’t have high arrests,” he wrote. “Its community has low crime rates.”

He recognized that, for police to do their jobs, the public has to trust them. “Winning public approval requires hard work to build reputation: enforcing the laws impartially, hiring officers who represent and understand the community, and using force only as a last resort.”

For Coach Sap, the biggest shift in public opinion came in 1991, after Los Angeles officers beat Rodney King, someone recorded it, and the world watched. Now that everyone has a cellphone, he tells cadets,

everything you do could be captured on video.

And the current class will be among the first whose agencies require them to wear body cameras — which could protect them from false accusations, or record them incriminating themselves. “They hold police accountable, which is good,” Coach Sap said. “But videos the public sees only show snippets of what happened. If you’re going to judge on that, you have to see the whole scene unraveling.”

He worries that new officers will hesitate, afraid to be judged or accused.

“In my time, you didn’t resist police,” he said. “If you did, there was a set course of action. Now, instead of forcing them into handcuffs, you have to talk them into letting you put them on.”

When he was on SWAT, he helped set perimeters before storming into an active shooting scene. Now, someone on the team runs in right away — “rapid deployment” — to minimize lives lost.

“In my day, if you had to shoot someone, you went right back to your job,” he said. “Now you get 72 hours and have to go see a psychologist.”

Some agencies now have a no-strike rule, meant to avoid physical contact. Some give officers pepper spray, Tasers or batons, so they can reach for something other than a gun.

The biggest improvement in training, Coach Sap said, has been running recruits through the scenarios. This is also the first class that gets to practice in virtual reality.

A state grant helped the academy purchase a \$250,000 VirTra — which immerses recruits in 300-degrees of 3D, IMAX-like action. Using a laptop, coaches can simulate 300 situations the cadets might face and make them happen in real time.

A recruit stands in the middle of five towering screens, gun holstered. Soon, a virtual homeless woman charges with a knife. In other scenarios, a man with an automatic weapon storms a state capitol and bleeding students race through a school library, screaming for help.

When the cadets draw their guns and fire just right, the “bad guy” on the screen crumples to the ground. If they miss, he keeps coming. Sometimes, they get shot — a zap from their gun belt that leaves a red welt on their hip.

Only one other academy in Florida has the technology, which was made for military training. “We can expose them to so much more,” Coach Sap said.

His oldest daughter is 22, the same age as some of his recruits. But he would never want his kids to become cops. Especially now. “The perception of law enforcement is so negative now. It’s more dangerous,” he said, shaking his head. “Besides, they’re both such girly girls.”

What about him? Would he join now?

“That’s a tough question. I have such a passion for it,” he said, pausing. “But I don’t know if these recent events would quash my passion.”

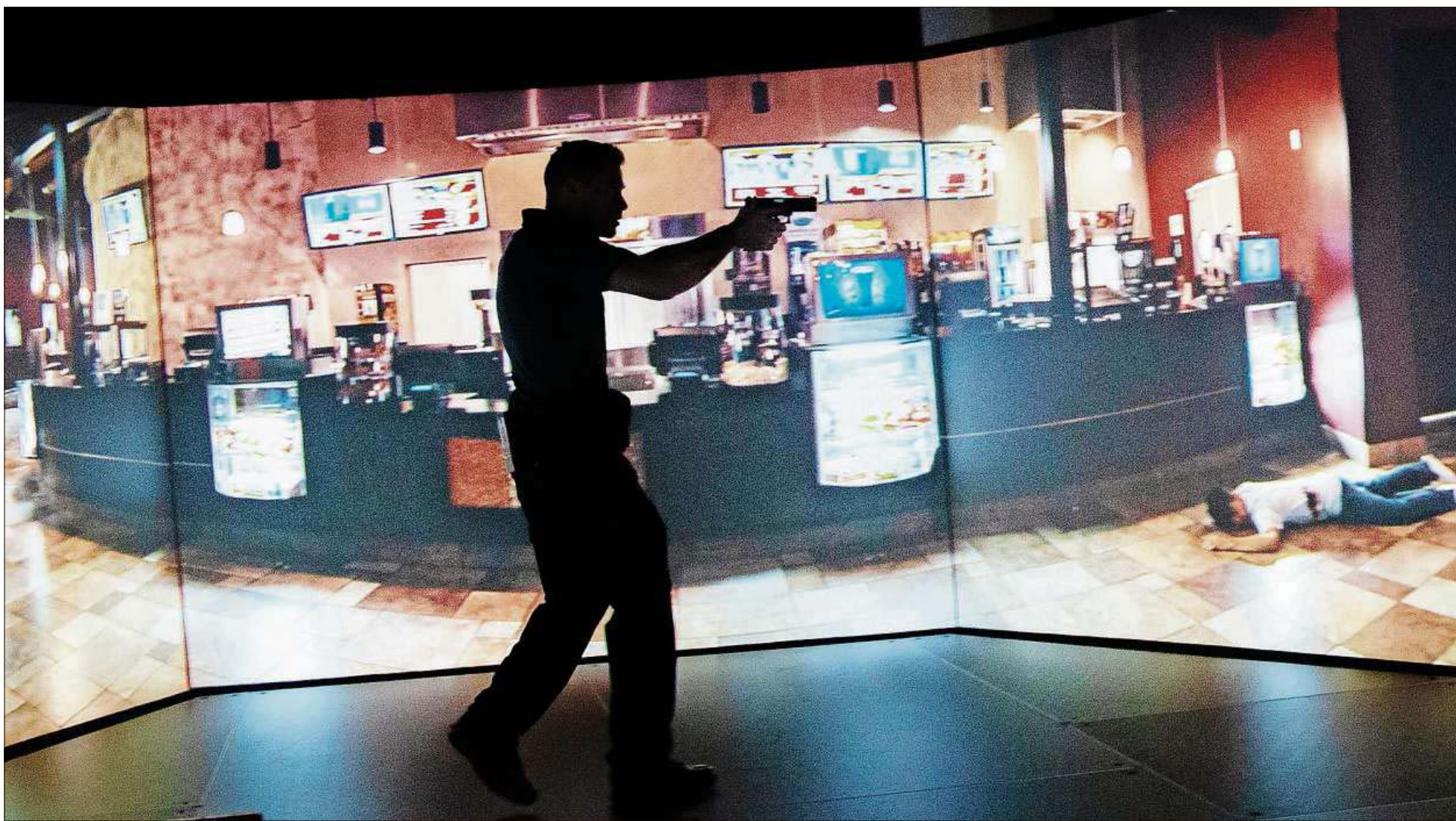
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Envision this, Coach Sap told the cadets: A Camden woman decapitated her 2-year-old son, then called 911. By the time police got there, she had put the toddler’s head in the freezer — and fatally stabbed herself.

He showed them the crime scene on YouTube. Two of the recruits looked away.

“We try to prepare you for everything,” Coach Sap said. “But how can we prepare you for that?”

He let the silence linger. Coach Sap seldom teaches in the classroom, preferring to lead physical activities. But



Class 219 is the first one to get to use a new video simulator, which projects scenes cadets might encounter. A cadet reacts to a virtual movie theater shooting.

one afternoon, he told them about some of his worst calls, then walked them through a PowerPoint called *The Law Enforcement Culture*.

Another video, another crime he was called to in Camden: A man was raping a 12-year-old girl and her younger brother, who was 6, tried to stop him. The man slashed the boy's throat, then ran.

"We had a manhunt for that guy from 4 a.m. until noon," Coach Sap said. "We kept searching empty buildings, finally found him in a rental house. He got 110 years."

He asked how many cadets were married: Four. "Well 70 percent of officers' first marriages end in divorce," he said. For second marriages, the failure rate is 85 percent.

"You change when you become a cop," he said. "You have to be able to turn that switch off and be normal, find outlets."

He fired off statistics.

"In the U.S., every 22 hours, a cop commits suicide," he told them — a higher percentage than the rest of the population.

"You can care, but you can't save the whole world," he said. "You're going to get frustrated, stressed, fed up with the criminal justice system. Don't start drinking. That only makes things worse."

The cadets looked stoic, not visibly reacting. But Coach Sap hoped the message sank in. He wants them to know what they're signing up for, to scare them.

No one knows how they're going to respond to trauma, Coach Sap said. "I had one friend who used deadly force and wanted to come back the next day," he said. "Another just shot at someone, didn't kill him, but he couldn't come back. It shook him to his core. He started drinking, doing drugs, weed, coke. He became someone else. Now, he moves furniture."

He wants them to learn from the mistakes of others. He remembers every time he screwed up and enjoys cautionary tales.

August 2004: He and his partner had arrested a guy, put him in handcuffs and thrown him in the back of the cruiser. They didn't get in the car with him. "We were joking and smoking," Coach Sap told the cadets. All of a sudden, the cop car sped past them. "The suspect slipped the handcuffs, crawled through the partition and drove away," he said. "Don't relax too soon. It's not over until he's in a cell."

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In a parking lot beside the shoot house, Coach Sap is on his back beside an old school bus, his legs bent to one side, holding a gun, screaming, covered in fake blood.

"Officer needs assistance. He just got attacked by a dog. He can't walk. He's bleeding," a coach calls. "He shot the dog."

Mabon kneels beside Coach



In most of the "reality-based scenarios," coaches become the "bad guys." After cadets take down Coach Sap, he corrects their communication and actions.

Sap. Anhalt gently asks for his gun. Moody calls EMS. Again, no one secures the scene.

The whole time, Coach Sap is moaning, blood spurting from his thigh. It looks real, dark and viscous, running down his leg and pooling on the pavement. No one tries to put pressure on the wound, or bandage it.

Suddenly, Coach Sap goes quiet, closes his eyes.

"What are you doing? Do something. You're letting one of your own fellas bleed to death!" shouts a coach. "It only takes 90 seconds to bleed out. Hurry!"

Mabon pulls a tourniquet from his medic bag, slides it over Coach Sap's thigh. "Check his pulse!" he yells.

"He has a weak pulse," the coach says.

"Sir," says Anhalt. "Sir, are you okay? Can you open your eyes?" She's the only one who talks to Coach Sap. When he doesn't answer, she starts CPR.

"What are you doing?" yells a coach. "Why are you doing CPR?"

He's not having trouble breathing, just losing a lot of blood.

"Prop up his feet," says Mabon, tightening the tourniquet. Moody does.

"Okay, I'm EMS now. What do you got?" asks the coach. "Okay, I see the injury to the leg. What else?"

The three cadets look at each other. Mabon finally says: "Nothing. Well, nothing that I know of."

"Did you check?" screams the coach.

Mabon says softly, "Nooo ..."

"Well check! You got to check! Talk and move at the same time. Roll him over. Be careful. That blood is slippery!"

The imaginary ambulance gets there too late.

As the three cadets walk back to the shoot house, the next group gears up for their scenario. Coach Sap stands up, grinning, gravel caked on his arms and legs. He's ready for more blood.

And he wonders: What else can he do to get these recruits ready?

Graduation is only a month away.

Week 23: *End of Watch*

A van is driving in from the west; a car is speeding from the east; a school bus is coming from the north, blinking its lights to turn left.

Four lanes of traffic cross here — and the light has been turned off.

The only thing keeping the vehicles from crashing is a cadet in a neon yellow vest.

He blows his whistle, one long blast, holds up his hand toward the bus.

"Watch that van behind you!" Mabon shouts from the curb. "Man, it's confusing out here. You got to have 360-degree coverage and think like a spotlight."

It's the end of January, and the recruits are at the corner of 22nd Avenue S and 22nd Street, learning how to direct traffic. Everyone has to stand in the road for five minutes.

Putting them out there, a coach says, "is terrifying."

"Make sure they can see you," he calls to the cadet. "You got to get out there in the center of the intersection more."

The instruction is brief: One long whistle means stop. Two short tweets mean go. Get the drivers' attention. Show them

what you want them to do. Keep your head on a swivel. Don't cause an accident. Don't get killed.

"You're going to have to address each car, because the driver in the car behind it might not see her hand signals," says the coach.

Mabon strides into the intersection, adjusts his vest, plants his feet shoulder-width apart. For the first couple of minutes, cars only come from opposite directions; he waves them straight through.

Then someone driving in from the east wants to turn left. "Exaggerate your motions," shouts the coach.

Mabon waves with his right hand, stops with his left. A tow truck rolls by, then a car with a dog. When two cars come in from the south, side-by-side, he stops the east-west traffic to let them turn. "Nice!" shouts the coach. "Good job keeping the side streets moving."

"Hey, Mabon!" calls one of the recruits. "I hope to be like you when I grow up!"

When it's Moody's turn, she slides on dark sunglasses. She forgot her whistle, which she had taken to her son's basketball game. She's coaching his team now.

"That's okay, the whistle is optional," the coach says. "Now go get 'em."

Each cadet develops their own style in the street. Mabon mimics a referee's motions. Instead of using her whole hand, Moody points to drivers with two fingers.

"Good job! Great! But be careful!" calls the coach. "Just because you put your hand up doesn't mean they're going to stop."

A man in a silver Nissan honks at one recruit. A woman in a sedan waves and shouts, "Thanks for being here!"

An hour later, traffic picks up. Anhalt had wanted to wait,



Sprawled in a parking lot, playing a fallen officer, Coach Sap keeps asking for more fake blood.

watch her classmates, build her confidence. “You look scared,” Mabon tells her. “Just go out there and get it over with.” He fist-bumps her. “You got this!”

She stands beneath the stoplight, motions with her right arm above her head, then swoops her left hand across her waist, waving on a pickup.

“Looking good out there!” calls the coach.

Later, Anhalt admits, “It wasn’t that bad.” Directing traffic, she says, “will be the least of my worries.”

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Graduation is only a couple of weeks away. Then the recruits have to pass the state test.

After that, they start training with the agencies that hired them. They’ll spend at least four more months shadowing “field training officers,” going to accidents and incidents, working the radio and writing reports.

Even if all of them make it through the academy, another 40 percent don’t make it through that next phase, when every day a senior officer rates them on appearance, communication skills, problem-solving, reactions — 36 aspects of their performance.

They really need a year of training at the academy, says one coach. The others agree. “That’s why law enforcement officers get in trouble. They under-train and overreact, go for their guns.”

In Florida, basic training for police officers was authorized by the Legislature in 1967 and began the next year. It then featured five weeks of sessions.

The state changes training standards often but not the length of the academy. As the Legislature adds requirements, there is “the possibility of an increase in hours in the near future,” said Jessica Cary of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

This month, the state curriculum will add 24 hours of communications training and teach recruits about using “emotional intelligence and empathy as tools ... responding with professionalism and empathy to people who appear different from oneself” and how to interact with people who fear police.

The next class of cadets just started — the biggest yet, with 32 recruits. The class includes 11 women, 5 minorities, people from six countries and, surprisingly, two men in their 50s.

When Coach Sap asked why they enrolled, they echoed the current class: To serve my community, be a leader, because my dad was a cop. Several had been in the military. During the pandemic, some wanted “an essential job.”

“I grew up in a household of really terrible criminals and got out at 18,” says a woman from Largo. “I want to help people like me.”

“I grew up watching a lot

of *RoboCop*,” says a guy from Clearwater. “I want to be part of that.”

A man from Tarpon Springs says, “If change is possible, I want to be that change.”

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Over the last year, the Minneapolis City Council pledged to dismantle its police department, New York lawmakers opened officers’ disciplinary records to the public, and several states banned chokeholds.

Florida legislators recently approved new standards to limit the use of chokeholds.

And around Tampa Bay, law enforcement agencies changed training and policies. Some departments now make officers wear body cameras; some send social workers on non-violent calls. Several added training on defensive tactics, de-escalation and mental health.

The state now investigates all officer-involved shootings in Tampa and Hillsborough County. In Pinellas County, a new task force investigates any “use of deadly force.”

And most agencies added a “Duty to Intervene,” requiring officers to prevent or report wrongdoing by co-workers.

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The recruits are quiet, for once. It’s the day before graduation, and they’re finishing lunch in the classroom. Normally, they’d be joking around, making the youngest do push-ups.

Today, it’s starting to sink in that they’re almost done. Some will stay together: three in Clearwater, four in St. Petersburg, 14 at the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office.

Their class started with 30 members. The 23 who stuck it out bonded so well they chose the slogan, “One family! One fight!” for the flag they’ll leave as a legacy.

“No tears,” Mabon tells a female cadet, who is sniffing. “My gun is hot, so don’t make me use it!”

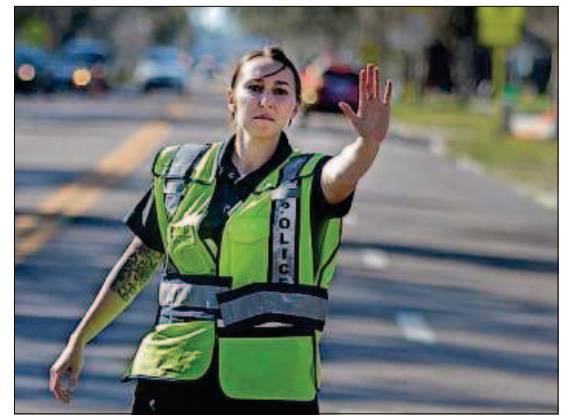
Over the last couple of weeks, they learned to make traffic stops, and that they’ll pull over an average of 500 cars a year. “Always touch the vehicle.” If the driver races off, there will be evidence for later.

They learned to investigate accidents. “Measure the skid marks, draw a diagram.”

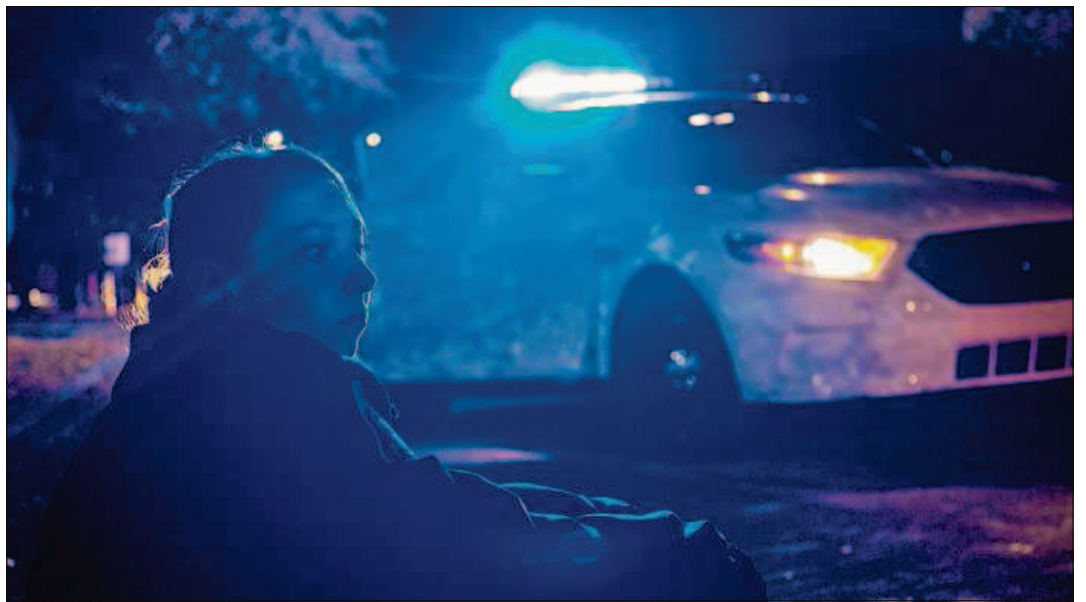
They learned to test people for drunken driving. “If the ladies have heels on, let them take them off before you make them walk in a straight line.”

They reviewed for the final exam, defining probable cause, proof beyond reasonable doubt, aggravated battery. They went over voyeurism, molestation, elder abuse. What to do when you show up at a carjacking, home invasion, dead baby. How to deal with runaways, computer crimes, meth labs, biological weapons, Nigerian scams, swarms of insects.

“If the subject is urinating



Moody, top left, doesn’t need a whistle to direct traffic. She’s confident in the intersection, using just her hands. Anhalt, top right, is nervous in the intersection, with cars coming at her from every direction. The cadets say Mabon, above, looks like an NFL referee when he directs traffic.



During traffic stop training, Anhalt waits by a police car to take her turn.

against a building, that’s disorderly conduct. If he turns around to face the street, it’s indecent exposure.”

This afternoon, as they’re cleaning up from lunch, the academy director comes in and stands by the podium. “Congratulations!” Michael DiBuono tells the cadets.

He asks about their experiences, what they would change about the academy.

“We need more tactical gear to train in, sir,” says a former soldier.

“More ride-alongs in the field,” says another.

More walkie-talkie training. More driving. More days in the mat room.

“Yeah, I want to add furniture in there, too,” DiBuono

says. “You guys need to learn to fall over couches, into glass coffee tables.”

Mabon wants more time talking to strangers. “We go through all these intense scenarios, but that’s like 1 percent of all we do,” he says. “We need more interaction with real, random people. Those 15 minutes at Walmart weren’t nearly enough.”

As tough as the physical training was, Mabon and Moody say there should be more. Coaches, they say, should be tougher on slackers.

“I don’t want someone to be my backup who barely skimmed by in the PT here,” Moody says.

Cheaper, healthier food for the cafeteria, someone says.

Roaches out of the locker room. Hot water in the showers.

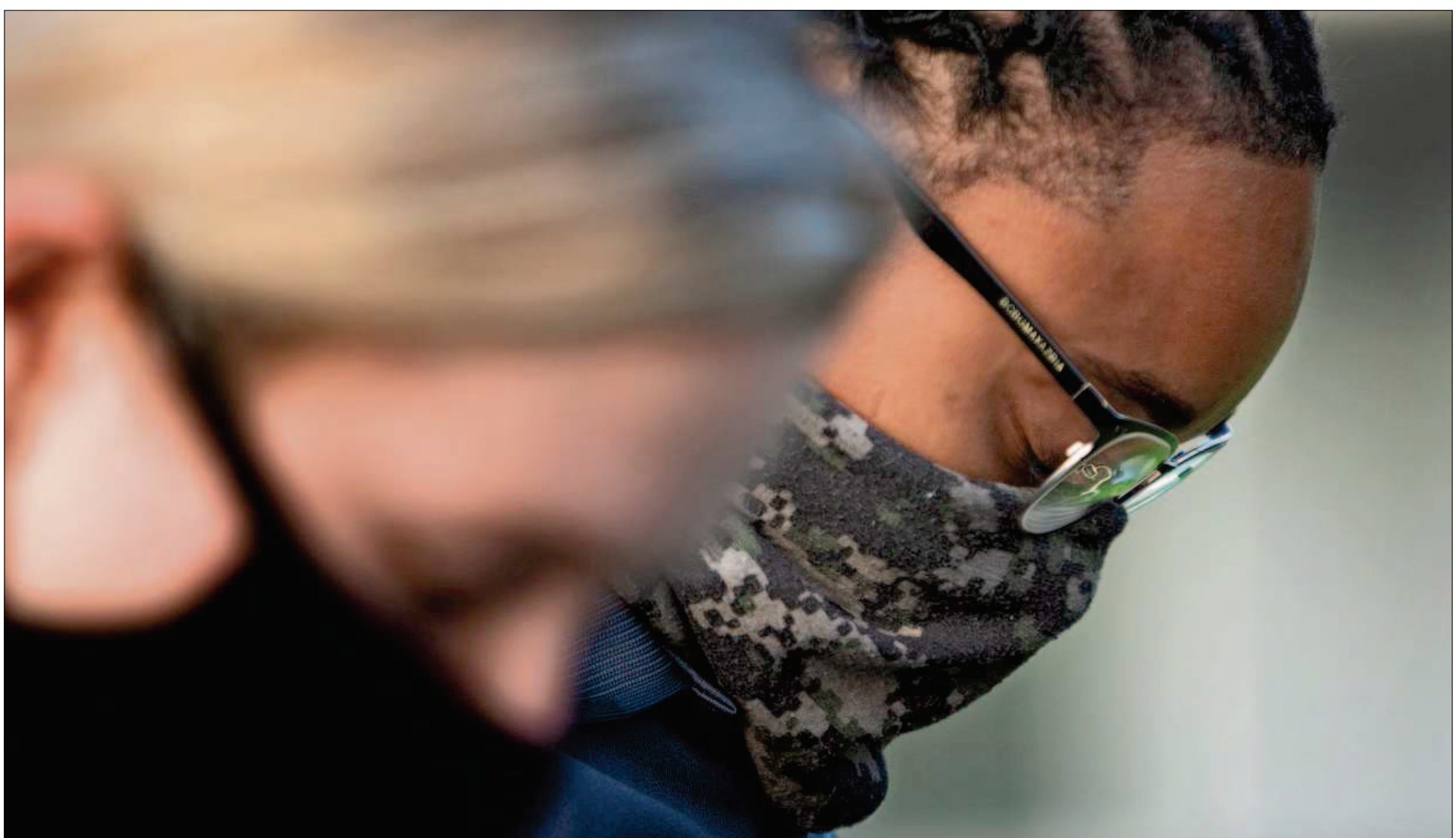
When everyone finishes their suggestions, Moody raises her hand. “Every suspect in the scenarios,” she says, “was a Black male.”

The room falls silent. The director looks at the ground, then out at the cadets. “I don’t take that lightly,” he says. “We shouldn’t base crimes on someone’s ethnicity. I’ll take care of that.”

“One more thing,” says Moody. “We could use a more diverse group of instructors. More women, people of color.”

The director stretches out his arm. “Will you come back and teach with us?”

Moody smiles. “Absolutely.”



While the recruits bow their heads to honor fallen Pinellas County Deputy Michael Magli, Moody thinks about coming home to her son.



On graduation day, the recruits get to wear their new uniforms. Mabon and Moody are both going to be deputies for the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office.

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On their last morning at the academy, the recruits line up outside, shoulder-to-shoulder around the flagpole, like they always do. A recorded bugle pipes reverly through a speaker. The sun shines low in a cloudless sky.

Moody carries the Florida flag and marches in step with four classmates, one cradling an American flag. While they raise the banners, the cadets salute.

A broad-chested recruit calls for a moment of silence, like he always does, to honor an officer killed somewhere in the country, often years ago.

This time, though, it's one of their own.

"Now, let's all bow our heads," says the cadet, "for the deputy who lost his life in the line of duty last night."

Moody closes her eyes, imagines her son waiting for her to come home.

After the recruits march back into the building, recite the levels of force and code of ethics, she walks to the front of the room and unfolds a piece of paper. She didn't have to do this, but she wanted to. Looking out at her classmates, she says, "End of Watch."

Then she clears her throat and begins to read: "Pinellas County Deputy Michael Magli was killed by a drunk driver who fled at a high rate of speed on East Lake Road. The subject was passed out inside his vehicle and when paramedics broke the window, he suddenly awoke, accelerated, and crossed the median into oncoming traffic. Deputy Magli was preparing to deploy stop sticks when the driver lost control, overturned, and struck him."

A week later, she would have been working with Magli.

"He was 30 years old," she says shakily. Even younger than her. She folds the paper, swallows, lifts her glasses to wipe her eyes. Her classmates have never seen her cry. "He is survived by his wife," she says, choking on her words. "And two young children, including a daughter who isn't even a year old."

A coach comes to her side. "What happened yesterday was tragic. But it happens. You got to get back to work," he tells the recruits. And he offers perspective: In 109 years, "that's the first deputy Pinellas County has ever lost."

Later, while a coach runs the cadets through a review for the final exam, Moody rushes from the room, out of the building. She lowers the flags to half-staff.

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"All right, everyone line up! Time for the final fist-bump!" Mabon calls a half-hour before graduation.

"Why do you keep saying

final?" asks Moody. "This is really the beginning."

They're in the classroom, taking selfies and group shots, dressed in new uniforms: Anhalt, in all black for Clearwater; Moody and Mabon wearing the sheriff's forest green.

The youngest recruit, who barely passed the physical training, still has on his academy uniform. He's the only one who hasn't been hired.

"I'm so nervous," says Moody, who seldom gets nervous.

Her classmates selected her to be their graduation speaker. She practiced her speech several times but keeps thinking of more to say.

Over the last six months, they've all learned so much — about policing, the world and themselves.

Mabon, the consummate team player, says he now knows he can't trust everyone, not even all his classmates. With his life on the line out there, he says, "There are certain people I wouldn't want to be paired with. You can't count on back-up. You got to be able to fix things on your own."

Anhalt, who initially doubted she could do this, sees herself differently now. "I don't question myself so much," she says. "I'm no Mabon. But I'm so much more confident and capable than I thought I was."

For Moody, it's all about her son. Now, she's so much more scared, that something might happen to him. She shares the biggest fear of all parents, compounded by what she now knows police face.

"I think about him all the time, especially when we do stuff like school shooting drills," she says. "Where should



Moody promised herself she wouldn't cry. But she does.

I tell him to hide? How can I help him if he's in Hillsborough and I'm working in Pinellas?"

They file into the hall and line up in alphabetical order. One cadet steps forward, salutes a coach and barks: "23 signed, 23 present, sir! Forward, march!" The cadets turn so their right shoulders are against the wall and, for the last time, fall into step. "Left, left, left, right, left!" Their boots thud heavily, new guns bounce against their hips.

In the auditorium, Coach Sap talks about their tenacity, willingness to tackle new technology, the way they came together. "Family means you never give up on each other," he says.

Anhalt's academic score ties for second-highest. Mabon wins the coaches' award for

leadership and athleticism.

Moody starts her speech strong. "Today, we stand in front of you as brothers and sisters, united for a common purpose in a time of too many injustices to count." Soon, she has to pause because she can't read through her tears.

As they cross the stage to get their certificates, their families film them. Anhalt's dad, stepmom and fiancé are in the front row. Moody's mom, girlfriend and son are a few chairs back. In the corner, by the door, Mabon's coach from pee-wee football sits with his wife, clapping.

They're all proud of the recruits. And terrified about what they're getting into.

Afterward, officers from several of the agencies shake their hands and welcome the cadets

to the thin blue line. The Pinellas sheriff couldn't come, because of the officer's death the day before. But he sent someone to give the new deputies their badges.

Silver stars to wear over their hearts. Each bears a thick, black band.

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

Coming Wednesday
Epilogue: *The new officers are in the field*

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



Anhalt, left, is going to be an officer in Clearwater. She, Mabon, center, and Moody pledge to keep in touch, and look out for each other on the streets.