

Six-Legged Goodwill Ambassadors

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
June 2016

Mounted police unit shrinks, despite love of the job



The Miami Police Mounted Unit connects with the community like other units cannot. When they ride by, people look up from their smartphones, children follow, and even those distrustful of law enforcement are happy to see them.

Sgt. Rafael Toirac supervises the unit of five mounted officers (down from nine, owing to promotions and transfers) and ten horses (one recently retired) at Lummus Park stables. In May they'll lose 60-year-old Toirac, too, as he retires after 34 years on the force, the past eight with the mounted unit.

Teams work ten-hour days, four days a week. According to Toirac, the horses last ten years or more on this job; the officers typically last four or five.

"You have to have a passion for this job," he says, "a passion for horses, manure, flies, and dusty boots. It's not just riding. It's eating, breathing *horses* nonstop. Long days in the saddle in the hot, wet climate are less attractive to most young recruits than shifts in air-conditioned cruisers."

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Department attrition has led to lowering prior police experience requirements to just two years for the mounted unit.

These ten-foot-tall crime-deterrent duos issue 3000 parking citations a year; if fully staffed, they make as many as 40 arrests a month. Most arrests are on the spot. In school presentations, their horses even motivate kids to brush their own teeth.

“I want my officers to communicate with citizens,” says Toirac, “and because we’re not driving around in cars, we can associate more with people. It’s easier for us to talk to the public and vice versa.”

The department doesn’t budget for horse purchases, so the unit relies on donations. Officer David Patton, trainer of the mounted unit for the past 11 years, says the unit was once full of horses donated from local racetracks, but he found the thoroughbreds too hyper, thin-skinned, and usually half lame from bad feet and fine bones.

He began searching for thoroughbreds crossed with draft horse breeds, to improve temperament and have thicker bone density -- important traits for long hours on urban blacktop. (Full draft horses would cost more to maintain.)

Growing up on a farm in bluegrass country near Louisville, Patton knows his horseflesh. From Kentucky, he brought a thoroughbred cross, Moe, and thoroughbred/Belgian, Ike, to the unit.

Ike was basically unbroken, he says, but has become the unit’s soundest horse.” He found Abe on an Amish farm in Ohio. This big Morgan/Percheron workhorse was paid for by Bacardi.

Other business owners made donations too. Felipe Valls of Versailles Restaurant donated \$5000 to purchase Felipon, a magnificent Morgan/Friesian; \$6000 was given by Omar Rodriguez of Presidente Supermarkets to buy the only white horse on the unit, Presidente. All are geldings (neutered stallions) except for Ms. Miami, a rare mare on a mounted unit whose temperament is exceptionally calm.

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Officers go through six weeks of training with horses that have pre-trained around high traffic areas, pedestrian crowds, and loud noises. They get experience on every horse but have their favorites; for Patton, that's Apollo, a bay-colored Morgan/Percheron. On NW 3rd Street, though, he demonstrates a sideways maneuver used to control crowds while atop Felipon. An imperceptible squeeze of Patton's left calf makes the horse sashay to the right, imposing his full intimidating size against an imaginary crowd to move them back.

Everything is seen as a training exercise; there's no substitute for experience. "Exposure and repetition never ends," says Patton. "We'll ride by construction sites and under the Metrorail. Even being tied up to a post for 30 minutes is a training opportunity, teaching the horse patience. We discourage hand feeding, as it can lead to biting people."

With his experience, Patton will be a hard man to replace when he retires in September 2017.

Miami police horses are vet-checked and dewormed every three months, and given annual vaccines; a vet is always on call. Last year a horse was seriously bitten on duty by a pit bull and had to retire. (Retirees are usually given to nonprofit groups working with kids and horses.)

Every six weeks a farrier visits to trim hooves and replace special borium-tipped metal shoes that give more traction on pavement.

Over the years, Toirac has transitioned from English to Western saddles, which are more comfortable for long hours of riding. Leather tie straps on Western tack can carry items like rain ponchos. Western-style handling of the reins also allows officers to have one hand free at all times.

On Patton's wish list are longer-lasting Old Mac's urethane hoof boots that provide the best protection against slipping on streets. Boots fit over hooves, making nailed-on metal shoes unnecessary, saving farrier costs. This makes perfect horse sense.

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