

Santa Cruz police practice driving, shooting, decision making

By Cathy Kelly - Santa Cruz Sentinel

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SANTA CRUZ - The Santa Cruz Police Department was surrounded Wednesday by gunfire and high-speed car chases. But luckily, it was all simulated, in two trailers housing computerized continuing education for officers.

The state requires 24 hours of training for law enforcement officers every two years, in shooting, driving, defensive tactics and communication. This month, the instruction focuses on driving and shooting, or situations in which use of a gun might be needed.

The high-tech simulations are a way to provide relevant training that is convenient and cost-effective, Deputy Chief Steve Clark said. The training costs \$133 per officer for a four-hour course, officials said.

The trailers will remain at the Center Street parking lot for the rest of the month, Clark said, and other law enforcement agencies will take advantage of the training as well.

"We host it; it's a way to get some high-end

training without the high-end cost," he said.

In the shooting exercises, the training is more about decision-making than target practice, said Dennis Baldwin, an instructor and retired Fish and Game officer.

The goal is not only to remain safe and get the bad guy, but to use clear commands and other methods short of firing a gun to gain compliance, he said.

In some cases, the trainer can fire hard plastic pellet "bullets" on the officers, in what he smilingly calls a good motivator for them to take precautions.

In one simulation, a film projected at the back end of the trailer led officers down halls and through rooms of a home, as a woman's voice cried out against an attacker. In that case, when officers arrived at the simulated upstairs bedroom, the suspect complied with a demand to stop and put his arms up.

In another exercise, an officer approached three people involved in a drug transaction in a parking lot behind a bar. As the three dispersed, a woman standing to the side quietly reached into a jacket pocket, grabbed a handgun and fired, as some eyes remained on a belligerent man dressed as a gang member who was advancing toward the camera. Both were shot.

Afterward, there was a debriefing of sorts, with an instructor asking officers to explain their thought processes.

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In the driving trailer, police sat in a simulator giving a 225-degree view from a feigned standard-issue Crown Victoria patrol car. Again, it was about choices.

Instructor Roger Milligan, a retired Salinas police officer, sounded almost like a yoga teacher at one point, telling the assembled police officers to breath through their noses to calm themselves and to be humble (well, he warned of the dangers of over-confidence anyway).

"Pay attention to what your body and mind is telling you," he said. "And stay as relaxed as you can. That's what you are here to practice, to relax and gain self-control."

Officers get other driving training that is more focused on motor skills, said instructor Terry Moore, a retired Santa Cruz sheriff's deputy.

But techniques were part of it too, and the trainer talked about subtle steering moves, how it takes the length of a football field to stop when driving 60 mph and reminded officers to hold their hands on the wheel in the "8 and 4" position (not 10 and 2), in a way that accounts for air bag deployment and gives better control.

Moore said the trailer is one of the few mobile training centers in the state.

And it can be challenging, he said, showing how police can be in the middle of a simulated chase and the trainer can throw in a deer across the road, a blown tire, a bullet through the windshield or other obstacles.

Santa Cruz patrol officer Brad Hillier said he has been involved in numerous car chases in his 18 years with the department, and that it can be at least as important to get to the scene of a crime safely and quickly.

"This helps," he said. "It makes you think. It makes me even more careful."

Clark echoed that somewhat, saying "decision-making and judgment skills are paramount in the ability to make safe choices so they can actually get to the call."

The training is done by the South Bay Regional Public Safety Training Consortium. The Academy, as they call it, has a partnership with eight community colleges. The team in town now is from Evergreen Valley College in San Jose.

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