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.”

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.

STORY BY LANE DEGREGORY | PHOTOS BY JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times Staff

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 want 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

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

[Instructor Roach describes a scenario where a suspect is armed and refuses to give up.]

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Kevann Malbon started call- ing her “Annie” after the movie she had seen. She loves that and wants to take it seriously to sharpen her skills.

Malbon is “The Rabbit.”

“I don’t want to take it seriously to sharpen her skills.”

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

When Malbon knocks loudly on the door, the coach calls, “Come in!”

Malbon scans the room, keeping his right hand on his holster. His partner checks the floor, then follows, closing the apartment door.

Before either recruit says a word, the coach rolls: “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 Malbon’s partner. He’s not sure why.

“Not! I don’t want to do that!”

Instructor Roach says: “This is my f—king house! And I can’t find my dog.”

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Instructor Roach tells his cadets that unless you get used to handling a gun, you will not be able to use it in a real scenario.

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

They teach them that if they call out “911” and aren’t always what they seem, a disorderly compliant suspect can lead to an armed assault. Someone loitering can turn into a K-9 chase. Havoc becomes homicides.

Sometimes, it’s shoot or get shot.

“Try to disarm them,” the coach says. “But if they threaten you, shoot for center mass. We don’t want to wound.”

“Keep shooting until the threat stops. That’s why you see suspects shot seven times, if they’re still coming at you.”

Metal music is throbbing inside “the apartment,” so Hamish Ashall knocks loudly.

“Police,” he says. “We want to talk to you and quell some tension.”

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

Ashall and his 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 a 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, Ashall’s partner decides. So she shuffles the door open and shows the man back.

While her partner is making contact, Ashall should be “covering” watching the hall. Instead, she follows her partner inside, leaving the door ajar. As her partner tries to sort through the man’s hand- cuffs, the neighbor strides into the room and grabs Ashall’s gun.

He wraps his left arm around her neck, presses the barrel to her temple. Says, “Give me your handgun.”

“Give me your handgun.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

That went horribly,” Ashall 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 missed a 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 I came into that apart- ment, 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 your first name, she’ll take a shot. She might hit you in the shoulder, but at least we’ll be alive.”

Ashall nods. “Did you feel my gun?” asks the coach.

Ashall shakes her head. “Not at all.”

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

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Halfway through the acad- emy, the recruits have learned to collect evidence, take photo- graph images, check suspects’ weapons for functionality. They figured out how to load a gun in six seconds, then do it with their eyes closed. They saw how blood pooled around a body.

Rioters, they now know, are any form of striking. If some- one draws a blank, it’s a fad- ary 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 shoot- ing with both hands, learn- ing 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 encour- aged to keep practicing and get more training.

They’ve been taught how to neutralize someone counter- planning suicide, to subdue suspects on their stom- ach. “Put your knee on their back,” a coach said. “Not on the neck. Never on the neck. With George Floyd, that was a tactic. That just screwed him up.”

They rehearsed knock- out blows, how to hit a person “POLICE”, so whoever is there will know. In the San- francisco case, that was the whole point,” a coach said. “They didn’t announce.”

After three months, they’ve learned about each other. Ashall is a great shot, typically at moving targets. Kevann Malbon started call- ing her “Annie” after the movie she had seen. She loves that and wants to take it seriously to sharpen her skills.

Malbon is “The Rabbit.”

“I can’t find my dog.”

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

“Not! I don’t want to do that!”

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"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’ minds from their holsters, showing them how quickly situations can escalate.
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.

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

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 deviate from those mandates, but coach Joe Saponare said “role-based training” in every block. After the first one, the cadets knew they’d 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 screaming at you, worrying that he has a gun — or might grab yours.

“It’s not like just reading it in the book,” Saponare 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 bet- ter off you’ll be,” the coach tells the cadets. “You have to keep working, stay sharp.”

Don’t get lazy, the coach says. “Laziness breeds complacency. And complacency breeds death.”

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

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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 your instinct guides you.

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."

At a watershed, 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 academy, the cadets are carrying blue guns that shoot pink paintballs.

"Have anyone here been hit by simulated bullets?" asks a coach. "They hurt, but not to the point of having to go to the hospital."

"Know where the threat is coming from. I've seen partners shot partners."

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

Tightly hush the first group. She stops at the doorway and stays there, using a tall bar as a shelter. She doesn't knock or announce. When she looks out to lock 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 remarks following: "Not close enough!" calls the coach "But to get."

With a flashlight in her left hand, the gun in her right, she searches a storeroom. "Clear!" she calls. "Clear! A cluttered classroom."

"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.

It had been hulking behind the door in that closet. He jumps on, and points his gun at Moody, aiming at his head. Pink splash stain her shirt. He is laughing and swinging the mirror open.

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

One of the male cadets shouts, "They said we never learn!"

"I don't say Coach Sap, smirking. "Show me how you're going to learn."

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

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

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

"You guys have to comment; 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. "If we can help you, put the gun down. Moody says calmly, shining a flashlight on Coach Sap.

"I can't. I've got a gun to my head!"

"Stop walking, sir," says Moody. "Put the gun down."

The other cadets keep freezing and stilt. When Moody saw Coach Sap tip his gun toward them, she raised. He psychosis. The next time she shot, she fell face-down.

"Somebody else needs to know what to do," Coach Sap says. "I can't always be Moody."

She beams 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 through, 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: Streamlining stress, starving lights, steering cars through quick turns.

But orange cones are everywhere. "Red guys" are getting away. Coaches are yelling, shouting on the speakers.

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

A coach rides with each recruit, watching their maneuvers, offering advice—and angry outbursts. "What are you thinking? If you do that out there, you'll die!"

It's a clip December morning. A second recruit had to drop out after catching COVID-19 during Thanksgiving break, so now there are 22. Everyone is tired, distracted, anxious.

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

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

They only have one week to practice in the white, unmarked car. They've been getting used to the powerful engines that lope off the line, the loud motors, tight steering, quick brakes. Most of them have been driving Turquoise. A few were assigned classic Cynic 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 cones that get handed down from class to class.

What you plan to go straight into the intersection, we'll shout at you where to stop. Make sure you stop correctly, no skills," cautions Moody always has her textbook and highlights so she can get in extra study time while waiting to be called into the next scenario.
Instructors keep the pace fast and the pressure high on the driving range.

Coach Rick Tapia lectures Anshah before her final driving examination.

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

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

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

“Yeah, and today everybody’s driving the Crown Vic.”

The cadets start complaining.

“Why those old rats? That’s not fair. Why touch us on Friday, then switch now?”

First up, Anshah, one of the smallest recruits. She climbs behind the wheel. The seat is so much lower than in the Blazer, the dashboard is so much higher. When she straddles to see through the windshield, her foot barely touches the pedals.

No time to adjust the seat.

Or mirrors. As soon as she steps on the gas, the coach shakes her hand, “Go!” and starts the stopwatch.

“Got it!” classmates yell.

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

On the rifle range, she learned to time everything out, keep her cool. She scored 47 out of 46 on the exam. “More Jane Wick stuff,” Mabon teased her.

That’s been her favorite part of the academy so far. For Hareeshka, she asked her fiancé for a gun, as she wouldn’t have to keep borrowing his. She’d wanted to take him shooting over the weekend, but she had to do pre-alongs with the Clearwater police.

Over Thanksgiving, she helped arrest an elderly homeless man detaining 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 do it today?”

A cadet had asked her classmate: Have you ever felt like you were going to die? One woman had panicked while rock climbing. Anshah 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 avoid, with coaches screaming and everyone watching.

“Crown Anshah!” someone shouts.

“Harry!”

“Grabbing the wheel, white-knuckled, she steers into the first turn. Beside her, the coach clicks on the stereo. Find the Judd blasts across the driving range.

Anshah, grimacing, puts over the first cone. “Out?”

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 10, 12, 15 hours, a coach told them. Practice paying attention. You can’t do that.

Make yourself get up and move.

And just because you’re unawned in a cop car doesn’t mean you’re safe. Chaos 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 need to treating strangers.

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

The next two cadets bowl over cones and get disqualified. Then a bobby gas speeds to the finish line and makes a clean step.

“That how’s it’s done!” shouts a coach. “T.O. That’s the time to beat!”

The recruits beam and fist-bump 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 turn, he’s grinning. “He loves being in a cop car, speeding through the obstacles.”

He takes into the straightaway, Angle Hills blasting through the open windows. He stops without skidding, races into the turn, pumps his brakes. He slams through the sinew, evades the pole, tears into the final stretch.

“Coming in hot! I like that!” calls a coach. “Low the aggressor!”

Mabon already broke the academy record for the 100-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 $30,000 a month. As a cop in training, he makes $3,000.

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

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

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

“Hopefully a classmate calls. ‘You go!’

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!’

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

“Be a chameleon,” he shouts. “Just do your job. Don’t make excuses. When you screw up, come at it.”

Back in the classroom, they have to take a written driving test. 50 questions in an hour. Malbon finishes first, in 10 minutes, score 90.

When Ashalt 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 talks this to a female recruit, who says, “Yeah. He told me I was going to be a nurse-depot”.

The cadets end the day listening to two young cops tell war stories. Trying to calm a schizophrenic woman rolling a bank with a bomb — that turned out to be a sandwich, lending to someone stabilized 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 not 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 Say 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 Malbon will beat his own record for the run.

Contact Lisa DeCrong at ldecrong@tampabay.com. Follow @LisaDeCrong.

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

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

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