Press Release

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Military working dog teams compete for Top Dog honors at Fort Drum

FORT DRUM, N.Y.  -- The 8th Military Working Dog Detachment, 91st Military Police Battalion, hosted the 2023 Top Dog Competition, April 26-27, with eight MWD teams and two civilian K-9 teams testing their unique skills in a series of events across Fort Drum.

The competition kicked off with a timed physical fitness event outside the MWD Facility. A bit unorthodox compared to traditional Army physical training, the handlers hoisted their dogs on their shoulders or in their arms to conduct a series of squats and lunges, followed by a one-mile run. They were also challenged to complete as many pushups as possible, while keeping their MWDs in a fixed position.

At the Outdoor Recreation paintball field, competitors navigated a shoot-and-move course where they engaged hidden targets and unleashed their MWDs to apprehend a “suspect” in a padded suit. Then, over the course of two days, the teams moved to three different facilities for timed narcotics and explosives detection lanes.

While MWDs are skilled at sniffing out narcotics and explosives, they are not trained to do both.

“They can either be a patrol explosive detection dog (PEDD) or a patrol drug detection dog (PDDD),” said Capt. Eric Napier, 8th MWD Detachment commander. “Once they are trained on one – either explosives or drugs – they don’t deviate from that.”

Competitors also completed a medical lane where they treated simulated wounds on a dog, using the “Hero Dog,” a state-of-the art canine mannequin that simulates injuries.

“Each different detection lane throws in different stress factors,” said Sgt. 1st Class Coleeta Smith, 8th MWD Detachment kennel master. “We set it up where they went from a detection lane into a vet lane, so it becomes, ‘What do I do if my dog gets injured?’ So, the scenario went from searching for explosives or drugs to treating the dog.”

The Hero Dog can whine and bark like a real dog to indicate pain, while handlers dig into their kits for the medical supplies to potentially save their partners.

“For this scenario, we simulated a gunshot wound,” Smith said. “Competitors had to locate the injury and go through the steps to treat the dog. We work very closely with veterinarians to learn these basic techniques. That way, we can keep our dogs stable until they can get to the vet for life-saving treatment.”

The final event was an obedience course, which tested the dogs’ ability to follow commands and maneuver through various obstacles.

“The focus for a lot of the competition is on obedience,” Napier said. “Right from the start, you see how the military working dog and the handler work as one team, going from one objective to the next as fast as they can.”

Teams from Fort Bliss, Texas; Fort Carson, Colorado; Fort Stewart, Georgia; the New York State Police, and Watertown Police Department participated in the competition.

“The competition is a way to build cohesion within the Army dog teams and also with our neighboring agency partners in the community,” Napier said. “It makes everybody better when we can work and train together, picking up different techniques and different ways of working with the dogs.”

Sgt. Nicholas Walsh and MWD Nitro represented the 50th MWD Detachment at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

“This is one of the better MWD competitions I’ve attended in the past few years,” Walsh said. “It really tests the both the handlers and the dogs to determine the best team.”

Walsh described Nitro as a sassy Belgian Malinois, whose experience makes up for some of the energy lost over time.

“He’s a lot more mission-oriented now,” Walsh said. “He focuses on his tasks instead of playing around. Once he hears the command ‘seek,’ he knows what to do and he goes right to work.”

Officer Michael Maney represented the Watertown Police Department at the Top Dog Competition, with his K-9 partner Jochie.

“This was a great way to get everybody together and showcase our skills,” Maney said. “The competition itself is fun. I might stress about it, but I try to let him (Jochie) have a good time.”

While MWDs are sheltered at the kennel when the Soldiers go home after work, that’s not the case with civilian K-9 teams. Maney said that Jochie is a part of his family.

“We are with our dogs 24/7,” he said. “I think having him with me all the time establishes a huge amount of trust between us.”

Spc. Joshua Richter and MWD Andi, with 8th MWD Detachment, was named the overall winner of the Top Dog Competition. He said the competition was tough, but he appreciated having the learning experience.

“The competition environment is the same as certification,” Richter said. “You want everybody to do well, and you hope that everyone succeeds. This is all a learning experience.”

The paintball move-and-shoot was unfamiliar grounds for a few teams, and Richter said it was fun.

“The first day of the competition was a little rough for everybody because we didn’t know what to expect, but we were all happy to be here and ready to be challenged,” Richter said. “We’re all pretty close – almost like a family – even though it’s only for two days. We come from different installations, but we all have the same job, and that’s what brings us together.”

Richter said patience is key to his profession as an MWD handler.

“Nothing comes at the snap of the finger, and it takes time to develop a relationship with your dog and build trust,” he said. “You have to put in the time and dedication to that.”

Richter has served at Fort Drum since 2018, and he has worked with Andi, a Belgian Malinois, for the past three years.

“She’s a little fur missile, a ball of fun,” he said. “She loves to bite, but she’s also calm and collected. She reads me well. If I’m nervous, she knows to come over to let me pet her and calm me down. And when I see she’s nervous, I know to take her by my side and make sure nothing happens to her.”

The top performing PDDD team was Pfc. Austin Meads and MWD Condor, with 8th MWD Detachment. The top performing PEDD team was Spc. John Monsalve and MWD Uulm, with 513th MWD Detachment, Fort Bliss, Texas.

“I really liked being able to come out here and compete with all of these teams,” Monsalve said. “It feels good to take home a win.”

Smith said the scores were close leading up to the final events of Day 2, and that was indicative of the level of skills that the teams brought to Top Dog.

“The caliber of talent here is great, and all the competitors were outstanding,” she said. “It was amazing to see all these teams come together the way they did. Oftentimes, we are in our own little bubble with the way we train and think about our jobs. This gives our handlers an opportunity to talk with other handlers outside our installation, to share detection techniques and see how other people train. I think there’s a lot of significance to cross-training because it can increase our proficiency.”

The success of Top Dog is due to months of preparation and planning, and a team of judges, medics, and veterinary technicians to work the two-day event.

“It takes a lot of work and there’s a lot of logistics to it,” Smith said. “If it wasn’t for all the support we received, it wouldn’t have happened. “It really is amazing how everybody at Fort Drum knows what we do and why we do it, and the support we get to advance our training is a good feeling.”

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For further information regarding this release, contact Public Affairs at katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil or 315-772-9043

Additional photos from the 2023 Top Dog Competition are available at [www.flickr.com/photos/drum10thmountain/albums/72177720307824461](https://usg01.safelinks.protection.office365.us/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.flickr.com%2Fphotos%2Fdrum10thmountain%2Falbums%2F72177720307824461&data=05%7C01%7Clisa.r.albrecht.civ%40army.mil%7C053bbcc613344acc9e5f08db4819a8bc%7Cfae6d70f954b481192b60530d6f84c43%7C0%7C0%7C638183047273669874%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=AxrqVy9phFX8gMU37cW5Vnd212mNyPIsq9d8D11T0tM%3D&reserved=0).

Photo Captions:

Top Dog 1 - The 8th Military Working Dog Detachment, 91st Military Police Battalion, hosted the 2023 Top Dog Competition, April 26-27, with eight MWD teams and two civilian K-9 teams testing their unique skills in a series of events across Fort Drum. Competitors completed a physical fitness challenge, 5K ruck march, an obedience course, and substance detection and veterinary care lanes during the two-day event. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

Top Dog 2 - Spc. Sean Deyton performs lunges with Military Working Dog Crazy on his shoulders during the physical challenge at the 2023 Top Dog Competition on April 26-27. The team with 8th MWD Detachment, 91st Military Police Battalion, was among eight military competitors and two civilian K-9 teams participating in the event at Fort Drum. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)