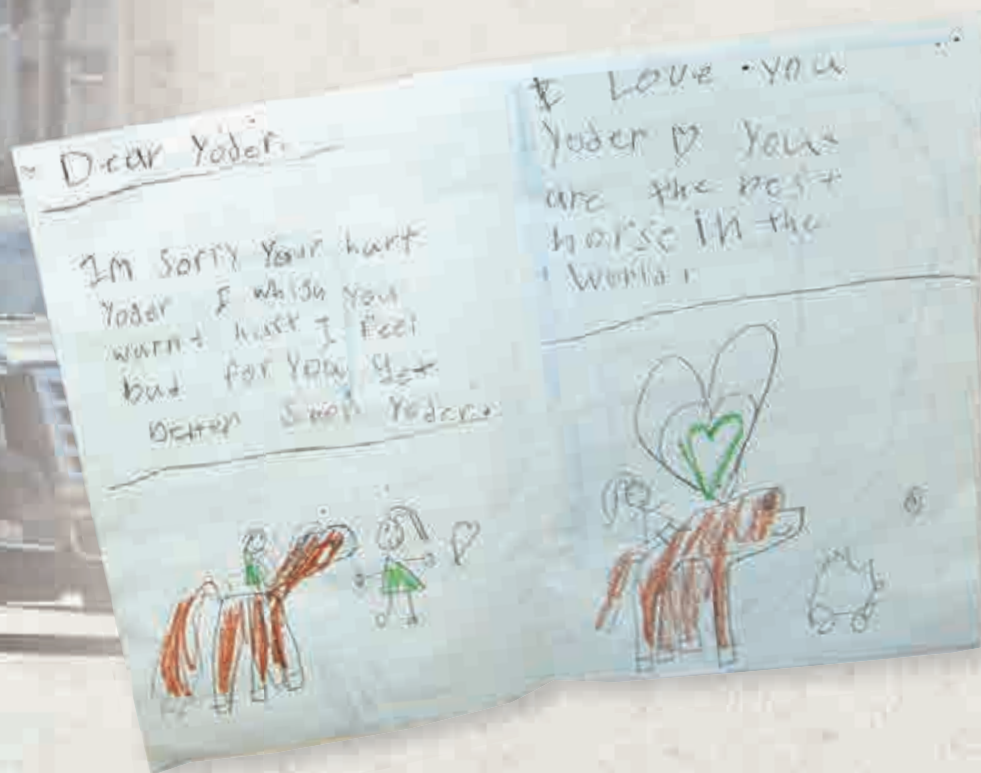




After a harrowing accident while on duty in December, Yoder, right, is back on the job with Officer Shawn Davis in the saddle. They are on downtown patrol with Bishop and Sgt. Joe Eckhardt, left. Opposite, supporters sent Yoder cards during his recuperation.

RESCUING YODER



The saga of a trapped police horse brings out the community's affection for the four-legged members of the Lexington Mounted Police Unit

By William Bowden
Photos By Rick Samuels



Davis gets Yoder ready for duty.

Officer Shawn Davis was astride Yoder early in the evening on Dec. 4 heading downtown with the Lexington Mounted Police Unit for duty during Lexington's Christmas Parade when his police horse abruptly went to his knees. In the darkness Yoder had stepped into an uncovered utility hole on East Sixth Street near Elm Tree Lane, burying his left hind leg up to the hock and wedging his foot into a small pipe.

"I dismounted immediately and worked with Yoder for about 20 minutes to keep him calm so he wouldn't injure himself further until we could sedate him," Davis said. "Keeping the other horses in the unit around him also helped to reassure him."

Media coverage of the dramatic rescue of Yoder by the Lexington Fire Department that evening riveted the attention of many Lexingtonians, who have affection for the horses of the LMPU. The potentially disastrous story had a happy ending, as



Canadian visitors Rachael Brassard, left, and her daughter, Cadence, pose with Yoder while touring downtown Lexington.

Yoder escaped with only minor cuts and abrasions after being treated at Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital in Lexington.

Yoder has been a visitor to nearby Harrison Elementary School in the unit's community outreach programs, so he is known to the students there. They sent Yoder more than 40 handmade get-well cards and letters. Others in the town brought carrot treats to him in the barn, and Mayor Linda Gorton declared Jan. 11 "Yoder Day in Lexington."

"It was very gratifying to see the concern expressed by many in the community over Yoder," said Sgt. Joe Eckhardt, who is in charge of the unit. "Our horses are great ambassadors for the police force, and Yoder's accident affected many people."

To top it off, Rood & Riddle selected Yoder as the winner of its 2019 Comeback Award, putting him in the elite company of famed Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes winner California Chrome, a previous recipient. The award, to be presented at the Kentucky Horse Park in July at Hats Off Day (an annual celebration of Kentucky's horse industry), recognizes a horse treated by the equine hospital that has come back from injury and returned to full service.

A unique partnership

Yoder's accident brought attention to the LMPU and highlights the unique partnership that mounted officers and their horses enjoy. Police officers everywhere depend on their partners for support in all situations. For Eckhardt, Davis, and the other five officers in the LMPU, that relationship goes beyond the normal officer-to-officer interaction and adds a unique, highly practiced performance between human and animal.

"Our horses are our partners in every sense of the word," said Eckhardt, a six-year veteran of the unit, as he commented on his own police horse. "Through extensive training and patrol experience, Bishop has learned to respond to every nuance of my commands. Together, we make up a very effective law enforcement team."

The LMPU is a component of the Lexington Police Department's Bureau of Special Operations headquartered in an office, stables, indoor training arena, paddocks, and pasture complex at 575 West Sixth Street. Riding in pairs, members of the unit regularly patrol

the downtown business and entertainment district and other selected areas, and are highly visible at parades and other outdoor events.

Just like officers in cruisers or afoot, mounted officers are charged with being observant in all situations while on patrol and anticipating problems that might be developing.

"We train to do everything from the back of a horse that an officer on foot can do," Eckhardt said, with obvious exceptions like entering a building. "This may include apprehending a suspect, where our horses can give us a tactical advantage, or everyday duties like writing a parking ticket."

Crowd control is one of the most effective capabilities of the mounted unit. Part of that comes from the sheer presence of the horse, a large animal that can be intimidating to many. But the officer's vantage point from on high is also a distinct asset.

"An officer astride one of our horses is effectively nine feet tall," Eckhardt said. "This gives them a great view over the tops of crowds and allows us to spot potential problems or move peo-



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Officer Scott Falconberry and his partner, Gandalf, greet a local resident near the courthouse.

ple about. In these situations, one mounted officer can do the work of about eight officers on foot.”

Mounted officers on routine patrol can also reflect the gentler side of law enforcement and aid the police department in its community relations mission. Most criminal situations call for stern intervention, but two officers at a walk astride well-groomed, well-behaved horses encourage law-abiding citizens to interact with them in a positive atmosphere. This has the effect of putting an approachable, human face on the force. For children, school visits by the unit serve

a similar purpose.

Ellen Ishmael, having joined the unit in January as its newest member, has already seen this effect in action. “I was riding in Coolavin Park on a training exercise and the children playing there came up to me, along with their parents,” she recalled. “In my years hidden inside a police cruiser, that never happened. The horse attracts people, especially children, and that gives us the chance as officers to have a comfortable, friendly encounter with the community.”

In addition to its regular duties around town, the unit works the



Falconberry, Eckhardt, and their mounts are a frequent presence in and near downtown Lexington.



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Falconberry gives Gandalf a friendly rub while the two take a short break from patrol.



Julie Suarez, DVM, uses a toy to show members of the mounted unit how to wrap an equine leg.

annual Land Rover Kentucky Three-Day-Event at the Kentucky Horse Park and travels to Louisville for Kentucky Derby assignments. The unit had a presence during the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, held at the Kentucky Horse Park.

Training is rigorous

Both officers and horses go through extensive training to form an effective mounted police team. It takes from six months to a year of gradual, very patient work with a horse before he can venture out with confidence into what for him is the scary noise and chaos of downtown Lexington. New officers train for 10-12 weeks to perfect their equitation and communication skills with their mounts. Refresher training for both horse and officer takes place on a continuing basis.

"There's a saying that goes, 'No matter where you take a horse, it will find something to be afraid of,'" Eckhardt said. "A big part of the training has to do with desensitizing them to sudden noises and movements that would completely spook an untrained horse."

Groundwork is the first step in training the horses, which are all geldings. Officers on foot in the unit's training arena use various props to get the horse accustomed to unexpected noises and sights. They work up



Lexington Mayor Linda Gorton greets Winchester, a new member of the mounted unit.

from small noises to a pistol shot, and from waving a tarpaulin in front to covering the horse's head with it. It was this desensitizing training that helped Yoder stay calm during his traumatic experience.

With officers mounted, the principles of natural horsemanship come into play. Riders use aids (hands, legs, arms, seat) and cues (pressure and release of pressure) to encourage the horse to follow commands willingly. This is related to how horses communicate with one another. "Horses are masters of body language," Eckhardt said. "Getting him to become your partner is a lot like speaking another language — the horse's language."

The elements of dressage are also used when training the horse to move sideways, back up, perform patterns, loops, and serpentine, and become adept at formation riding. Walk, trot, and canter are the gaits used.

Finding the right horse

The horses selected for duty are mostly draft crosses, the result of breeding a Thoroughbred with a draft horse such as a Percheron. The object is to create a horse with some of the athleticism of a Thoroughbred and the stamina, patience, and strength of a draft horse. Their stockiness relative to a Thoroughbred is necessary to carry the approximately 200 pounds of an officer and his gear during many hours of patrol. They must be at least 16 hands high and weigh a minimum of 1,400 pounds.

The LMPU works in association with the Friends of the Lexington Mounted Police in locating suitable horses. The Friends is a non-profit organization of volunteers whose support is essential to the unit. Most importantly, it owns all the horses, whether it purchases them or receives them as a donation, and leases them to the city for a nominal fee.

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Eckhardt leads Bishop to some well-deserved turnout after a day on patrol.

The police department covers salaries, utilities, vehicles, and basic horse care such as feed and veterinarian's fees. The Friends then step in to buy tack, pay for specialized training for the officers and transportation to competitions, and pick up unexpected costs. They recently funded two horse trailers, one outright and another jointly with the police department (the Keeneland Foundation funded a third trailer). The organization derives its funds from proceeds of the annual National Mounted Police Colloquium (see sidebar), as well as individual and corporate donors, and goods and services contributions.

"All of our board members are 'horse people,' as owners, riders, or horse industry workers of some kind," said Anne Anderson, treasurer of the Friends. "It's important to us to retain ownership so that when our horses retire they go to a good home. We don't want them just sold off like a used police car."

An example of the Friends' amazing devotion to the LMPU came in 2008 when the recession forced the city to cut the unit down to just two horses and riders. "Our members took the other horses and found homes for them until the city could afford to build the unit back up," Anderson said.

Support also comes from the Citizen Police Academy, which supplies badges for the horses that symbolize their status as sworn police horses.



KENTUCKY HORSE PARK MOUNTED POLICE

COLLOQUIUM, COMPETITIONS BRING MOUNTED POLICE UNIT RECOGNITION

The Lexington Mounted Police Unit enjoys an enviable reputation in the United States and Canada, largely due to the annual National Mounted Police Colloquium held in Lexington and the unit's top performances in national competition.

Begun in 1983 and offered every fall at the Kentucky Horse Park, the four-day colloquium features instruction and competition in all equine issues benefiting the mounted officer, including obstacle handling, crowd control, and search techniques.

The event typically attracts approximately 100 riders, many of whom bring their horses, from as far away as Texas and Florida. Past instructors have come from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the U.S. Park Police, and the New Orleans Mounted Police, among others.

The event is a joint project of the LMPU, the Kentucky Horse Park Mounted Police, and the Friends of the Lexington Mounted Police. It's a major fundraising event for the Friends, who use the proceeds to purchase horses for the unit and defray other costs.

A Civilian Equine Sensory Clinic is offered on the weekend following the colloquium. It offers much of the same training as the colloquium, but aimed at competition and/or trail riders.

The LMPU's national profile is further enhanced by its stellar showing at competitions. At the 2010 North American Police Equestrian Championships, Lexington's horses and riders came away with blue ribbons in all eight major categories.



Mounted unit officer and instructor Scott Lynch demonstrates groundwork to Officer Ellen Ishmael, the newest member of the unit.



Eckhardt and Falconberry head toward the stables after an afternoon on the streets.

Leading the big parade

Now in its fourth decade, the LMPU can look back to its modest beginnings in the city's Fourth of July parade in 1982. Bob Maxwell, former longtime owner of Sallee Horse Vans and now retired, got a call from his friend and then-Chief of Police John McFadden with a cryptic request: "Do you know where I can find a horse that can lead a parade and not hurt anyone?"

Turns out Maxwell had just the horse. He became the unit's first volunteer and friend when he supplied Buck, a retired racetrack lead pony living on his small farm on Briar Hill Road, for the parade. Then-officer Robert Taylor, who had suggested the idea, carried the American flag as the unit's first rider.

Community response was so positive McFadden asked to use Buck for the rest of the year in what became the genesis of Lexington's mounted unit. As the unit grew to 10 officers and horses at its peak, the horses were stabled at the Kentucky Horse Park until 1996 when the current stables were built on West Sixth Street.

Maxwell served on the city's Horse Commission, now defunct, that originally oversaw the mounted unit. A founder and present board member of the Friends, which was incorporated in 2008,

he epitomizes the community support that has been behind the unit since day one. "My involvement with the Mounted Police Unit and the Friends all these years has been nothing but a labor of love."

It's that kind of long-term dedication from the Friends and the exemplary service of the members of the LMPU that is much appreciated by Chief of Police Lawrence Weathers. He recognizes both the hard police work the officers and horses are charged with as well as their invaluable public relations contributions.

"The Mounted Police are one of our most visible and popular units within the police department," Weathers said. "The horses and riders are highly skilled at working in an active, noisy urban environment. The horses are also excellent conversation starters. Residents may not want to approach a police officer, but they will ask to pet a horse, and that's a great way to make connections within the community."

Pet a horse; make a friend. In the end, that might be one of the signature accomplishments of the officers and their equine partners in the Lexington Mounted Police Unit. **KM**