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WAUCONDA – For the second time in three years, the K-9 unit of the Wauconda Police Department has come out on top at the Regional K-9 Association's Canine Olympics.

K-9 handler Sgt. John Combs and his canine partner Maxx recently took gold in a two-day competition at TOPS Kennel in Grayslake, beating out 11 other K-9 pairs for the top honors.

The pair also won gold in the team competition with team members Sgt. Tim Gretz and canine Reaper of Buffalo Grove.

"You're going against people you respect, so to be able to win against people you know are at the top of their game, that makes it all worthwhile," Combs said.

Combs and Maxx showcased their ability by mastering several different obstacles in the competition. Maxx also had to prove he was obedient by laying down in three feet of water and tracking off lead to show Combs had control.

The end of the competition included a 20-minute run that culminated in a 150-foot sand mound on a steep incline that both handler and dog had to charge, Combs said.

"Just the mere fact you can compete in this and have control is incredible," Combs said.

Maxx, a 7-year-old German Shepherd from Germany, and Combs have been partnered for the last six years. In 2004, Combs helped write a grant proposal to start the K-9 program, and when the Wauconda Police Department received the grant, he was chosen to become a K-9 handler.

It took 20 weeks of training – 12 weeks of individual training for Maxx at TOPS, where he learned how to track and conduct area searches, followed by eight weeks of training with Combs – before the partners were ready to hit the streets.

It wasn't easy, Combs said.

"You're trying to understand how a dog thinks," he said. "How to help a dog when you're searching outside – the winds, where they're coming from; ... tracking in the rain; ... doing drug searches indoors, knowing scents travel to outside walls."

Even now, Combs and Maxx go in for training four to 12 hours each week to stay sharp.

But it's been worth it, Combs said. He enters the Canine Olympics every year to see what he and Maxx are capable of doing. The more time they spend together, the better they become.

The last three competitions, Combs and Maxx haven't placed lower than fourth. Two years ago, they took first place for the first time.

Police Chief Doug Larsson praised the pair and said departments that have a K-9 unit find them a necessary part of their law enforcement team.

Larsson also noted the village of Wauconda has a referendum on the Nov. 2 ballot. If it doesn't pass, several police services will be cut – including the K-9 unit.

"If we lose the K-9 unit, we'll be losing more than just two police officers," Larsson said.

Want to know more?

To view a video of Wauconda police Sgt. John Combs and Maxx, along with other Lake County K-9 units, visit www.vimeo.com/11513746.



Sgt. John Combs (from left), his K-9 Maxx and Sgt. Tim Gretz and his K-9 Reaper worked together to place first in the team competition of the Canine Olympics in August. Wauconda police Chief Doug Larsson said the award is indicative of Combs' ability as an officer and praised Combs' family for making Maxx part of their home. Combs, meanwhile, continues to train weekly with Maxx. The canine has even learned to open car doors. "The only thing I don't have him do is drive the car," Combs said. (Photo provided)