



NOSY POOCH: Danny, a German Shepherd, sniffed for drugs while his handler, O'Fallon Police Officer Dan Wunder, watched.

Drug-sniffing dogs put through their paces

PONTOON BEACH -- Bill Heiser got pulled over a dozen times Wednesday afternoon, but he was not arrested once for the stash of marijuana hidden inside his trunk.

Heiser is one of five canine instructors visiting the area from Florida this week to help local police departments train their dogs to sniff out drugs.

The pooches were allowed to play with their favorite toy -- a bundled towel, a reward that U.S. Customs agents have found more effective than dog biscuits.

"We want the dogs to think that this is fun, that drug work is fun to them," Heiser said. "They think it's play time."

Canine handlers from 13 police departments converged on the Mapco auto yard which covers 24 acres in Pontoon Beach. They also were staging mock traffic stops, with Heiser serving as the driver.

Police hid marijuana, cocaine and heroin in several of the hundreds of cars covering the lot -- then let the dogs find the drugs.

Danny, a German Shepherd police dog from the O-Fallon Police Department, has been on the job for five months but took just minutes to find a magnetic strip that smelled like marijuana stuck beneath a red Ford Festiva.

His handler, officer Dan Wunder, led him around the car

several times, then around a Toyota Tercel parked beside it. But Danny returned to the first car, zeroed in on the driver's side door near the strip, then began scratching at the paint.

Trainers used varying amounts of drugs, and tried to conceal the odor by wrapping some in cellophane and storing some with laundry detergent.

The demonstrations drew attention from passing motorists who thought they might be witnessing a police raid.