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SHERIFF BACA'S "POLICE ACADEMY"

TV reality shows and police training don't mix



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By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. "The show worked to the detriment of the trainees...they didn't have a real chance to say no to being televised...people called them out as they worked in the jails because they recognize them from TV..." That's what [Michael Gennaco](#), chief of L.A. County's [Office of Independent Review](#) recently said about "The Academy," a popular reality TV series that depicts the travails of rookies going through the Los Angeles County Sheriff's academy.

For reasons that we'll get into later Gennaco and his small team of lawyers had been asked by the Board of Supervisors to look into goings-on at the academy, and the reality show in particular. What they found out wasn't pretty. "Nearly all" the [ex-cadets they interviewed](#) -- about twenty percent of those in the two classes that were filmed -- would have preferred not to have cameras around. A few also said that they were deeply humiliated by having their screw-ups broadcast for friends, family and future coworkers to see.

Of course, not even the Sheriff can make appearing on TV a condition of employment. Still, while cadets could opt out, they would have been rescheduled for another class, an unpalatable delay considering that some if not most had quit their regular jobs and had no other source of income. Although Gennaco didn't mention it, cadets must have also worried about saying "no" at this early stage in their careers. As it turned out only two trainees sat out the first class; none did so for the second, when more advance warning was given.

So far there have been two seasons, a total of 21 half-hour episodes, aired in Spring 2007 and Spring 2008. All are available for viewing on [Hulu](#). Enjoy!

Police academies are much like conventional places of learning, with most instruction taking place in classrooms. Naturally, no TV audience could be expected to sit through lectures on law and procedure, and considering the average viewer's attention span sexier topics like shooting, arrest techniques and pursuit driving would also get ho-hum after a while. Desperate for the "dramatic arc" that even reality shows need, editors constructed narratives around recruits who were having trouble. Will Cadet Smith, a none-too-bright fellow on his second go-round (he already flunked out once for academic reasons) pass the final? Will Cadet Jones, who can't hold up a pistol long enough to place a well-aimed shot, qualify on the range? Will Cadet Williams ever get over that wall?

These are made-up names. But in the [episode summaries](#) posted on the show's website, everything was for real. Here are some examples from the second season:

Episode 2. Recruit Paez struggles as the first class sergeant, and Deputy Miley gives her an ultimatum. Recruit Villareal finds himself in hot water when the drill instructors learn he went out to a club rather than studying.

Episode 3. Recruit Villareal is on the hot seat as the new class sergeant. Then he leaves his locker unlocked with his newly issued gun inside.

Episode 4. Class 368's first trip to the shooting range is a disaster when Recruit Valladores can't figure out how to shoot his weapon.

Episode 5. Recruit Marquez worries that her cancer has returned; the staff confidently appoints Recruit Leos to the role of class sergeant, but the class doesn't follow her lead.

Episode 6. Recruit Santos is in a bind when she can't lead the group. The recruits have a big argument while the drill instructors figure out how to get them to work better as a team.

Episode 7. A few careless recruits are in hot water after their weapons are stolen from their vehicle. Santos fights for her job as she struggles with all aspects of the training.

Episode 9. Recruit Villareal continues to disappoint the drill instructors and Class 368. Recruit Turner and others face separation as they retake the final test...just days before graduation.

Happily for producers the L.A. Sheriff's academy follows the boot-camp "stress" model, so there was always a drill instructor available to holler at trainees. In one

scene a towering D.I. who clearly loves being on camera ridiculed a plebe who dared mention that students felt too intimidated to ask questions. (That happens to be one of the many problems with “stress” academies.) Strutting down a row of her peers, all standing rigidly at attention, the D.I. demanded of each whether they felt free to ask questions.

They left jobs and civilian life to become cops. Answering incorrectly would instantly land them in the bulls-eye. What could they say but “yes?”

While Sheriff Baca reveled in the show’s success, happily boasting that it offered an unparalleled view of the leading training program of its kind in the nation, the overseer of police training in California, the Peace Officers and Standards Training commission, was about to revoke the facility’s accreditation. For months its [inspectors had been loudly complaining](#), to no observable effect, that in its rush to process a large influx of rookies, many of whom seemed barely qualified to become peace officers, the academy was providing a poor learning experience.

The actual list of deficiencies is far too extensive to go into here. Among the more serious complaints were employing uncertified instructors, using confidential test materials as teaching guides (i.e., essentially “teaching to the test”), providing test questions in advance, and having academically challenged cadets retake exams until they passed. Indeed, one episode of “The Academy” depicted a trainee who was already on his second tour trying to make up several failed exams at one sitting. Not only did he fail again, but he was unbelievably brought back to the academy for a third try. Inspectors also criticized the TV show for distorting the training experience and depriving cadets of an opportunity to make goofs without fear of humiliation.

By May 2008 it was painfully clear that the State hammer was about to fall. When the second season’s filming was over [Sheriff Baca](#) took the extraordinary step of shutting the door, pushing back the start of the next training class by a month. A top manager was quietly reassigned. State officials mentioned that it was only the second such closure in memory. Worried that his nifty P.R. and moneymaking scheme (it earned \$250,000 for the department in its first two seasons) was corkscrewing, Baca struggled to put the best possible spin on the situation. That’s when the normally laid-back Board of Supervisors finally stepped in and [ordered the OIR](#) to study the root causes of the academy’s problems, including “whether and how the filming of a reality television show focused on Sheriff’s trainees at the Academy has impacted the quality of the training program.”

At this point it’s uncertain if there will *be* an “The Academy” Season Three. A far more important question is whether the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department and Sheriff Baca have learned anything from the imbroglio. Yes, there *was* more going on

at the academy than what following around a bunch of self-absorbed drill instructors could possibly reveal. Surely many positive things *were* happening. Yet, as POST pointed out, degrading cadets and filming their flub-ups hardly seems the best way to convey the skills of policing.

Will the LASD continue along the “stress” path or adopt the more level-headed, collegiate training style favored by the LAPD? As they say in Hollywood, stay tuned!