

The Rookies

by Linda Steiner

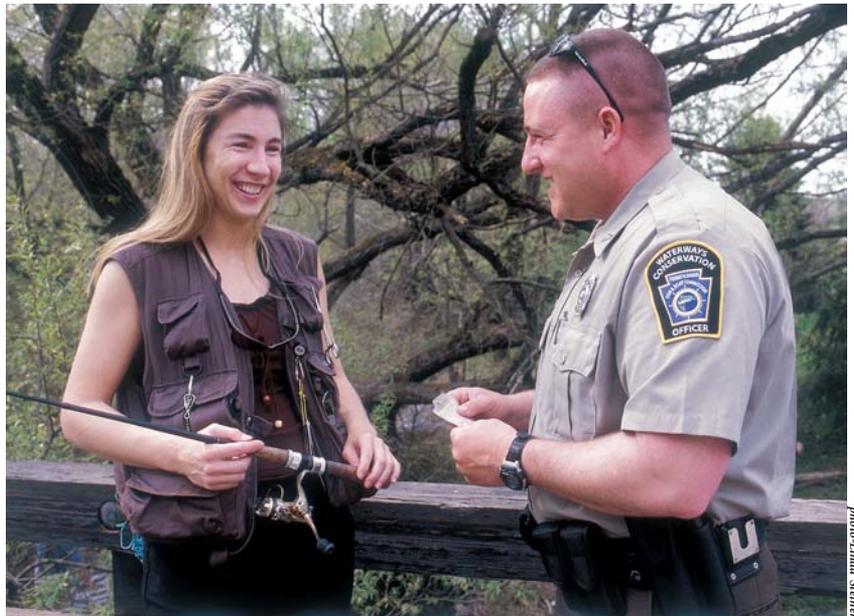
Rookies aren't confined to baseball teams. Even the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission Law Enforcement Division has its rookies—officers at the start of their careers. What do some of the Commission's "new kids on the block" have to say about how they got there, and what do they think of the job, now that they have waded fully into their duties?

PA Angler & Boater talked to four rookie WCOs, Brook Tolbert, Tom Edwards, Joe Russell and Jonathan Kay. All graduated in the 15th class of Waterways Conservation Officers in August 1999, but they did not necessarily get called to the "plate" until several years later.

Brook Tolbert was assigned to the Western Erie County district in January 2002. That's a long throw from Fayetteville, Franklin County, where he grew up hunting and fishing in nearby Michaux State Forest. After the Marine Corps and during his senior year at Shippensburg University, Tolbert took Civil Service tests toward a job in outdoor-related law enforcement. A successful applicant, he became a Commission seasonal officer, assigned to the Southcentral Region.

His first district assignment was Southern Luzerne/Southern Columbia Counties. His move to Western Erie was prompted by his love of boating and the uniqueness of the Great-Lake-bordered district. Tolbert says that as a boy he vacationed at the Virginia shore with his grandparents, flounder fishing, and on the Potomac River. "I've been around boats all my life," he says.

Tolbert's background is in environmental studies, and he says he was "always natural-resource-minded." He likes how his job connects that with law enforcement and educating the public. Although some WCOs have a county to themselves, Erie County is shared by three full-time officers. "That takes some of the heat off," says



WCO Brook Tolbert checks an angler's license on Little Conneautee Creek, Erie County.

photo: Linda Steiner

Tolbert, but with such varied responsibilities—fishing, boating, water pollution—he has plenty of turns at bat.

"The biggest thing I've learned since becoming a WCO is that it's a lifestyle, it's not a job," says Tolbert. "When we talk to people, we are the face of the Fish & Boat Commission." Although the emphasis of the job is law enforcement, Tolbert finds himself involved in much more. "It doesn't matter what's going on—the public comes to us to ask about dredging in the channel, why the limit is such and such, about Lake Erie research, everything."

WCOs don't work a 9-to-5, every-weekend-off job. Far from it. "I like the odd schedule, the flexibility of hours," says Tolbert. He appreciates the help that anglers and others give him in stocking fish, providing tips on violations, and in other areas. "More times than I expected, people told me thank-you and shook my hand after I cited them, saying, 'You're just doing your job and being a good officer,'" he says.



Photo courtesy of WCO John Bowers

WCO Tolbert's patrol area includes Lake Erie.

"I've found that if a person has leadership skills, he or she can make a big difference, but you have to be self-motivated," says Tolbert. He enjoys opportunities to help kids, like recommending to families where they can catch fish. "The job lets me have a positive impact on young people and show them the importance of conservation," says Tolbert.

He also takes pride in getting environmental problems fixed. "We watch what we do make a difference," he says. "This job has evolved into what I had hoped it would be and more. Sure, there are frustrating days, but other days, especially when I work with the resource directly, are great."

Tom Edwards is assigned to the Central Erie County district. He's from a small town in Warren County, adjacent to the Allegheny National Forest. He has always hunted and fished, "because that's what you do when you grow up in Tidioute," he quips. He was inspired to go into this line of work by the late George Jones, longtime Warren County WCO, who lived in the same town.

Edwards paved the way for his Commission employment. He was in the security police in the U.S. Air Force and studied resource management at Slippery Rock University. During his

internship at Chapman State Park, he met current Warren County WCO Bill Martin, who explained how to apply for the job. Edwards says he drove three hours to DuBois in a snowstorm to take the Civil Service test.

Edwards spent time as a seasonal ranger at Pymatuning State Park before getting the call from the Commission. He came to Central Erie, his first district, in January 2002.

"You're constantly busy here," says Edwards. He has found that he becomes involved not just in Fish and Boat Law situations, but that he also has to deal with drunk drivers, drugs and even wanted felons. "Some of the other officers' stories of what people do, I'd think they were lies," says Edwards. "Until I did the job, I wouldn't have believed it."

Edwards says he didn't realize he "would be wearing so many hats in this job. Everyone thinks you know everything about biology, fishing, boating. Thank goodness they write all this down in the book for us. It takes a while to learn." His is a metropolitan district, so the days jump from one thing to another. That's good for someone who quit the military when it got "boring."

Edwards says that in his law enforcement he wants to "key on" boating under the influence. "The number of injuries there keeps going up, and I want to increase awareness of that. When you keep seeing the numbers, you become more aware of the problem."

Edwards recognizes something will always be left undone. "I think we can do a job," he says, "but you can't be out there 24/7. You can't be everywhere all the time." Catching violators does get to be "almost an obsession," he confides. "It irritates you if someone is getting away with something. If people think the officers don't have a passion for what they do, they're sadly mistaken. The other Commission employees, too," he adds.



Photo: Linda Steiner

During a stocking of Little Conneautee Creek, Erie County, WCO Tom Edwards chats with an angler.



WCO Joe Russell looks over paperwork in the Northwest Region office with secretary Marlene Gilmore-Luben.

Joe Russell is assigned to Western Crawford County, and he laughs at being called a “rookie.” He has already had several careers. Russell hails from Hallstead, in Susquehanna County, and he served in the Navy Construction Battalion, the Sea Bees, during “Desert Storm.” He was next a paramedic for more than nine years, until he “got tired of that.” He spent several years as a deputy WCO for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, and then he was hired as a fulltime officer.

“When I was asked at my Fish & Boat Commission interview what made me think I could handle the stress of being a WCO,” he says, “I answered, ‘After being a paramedic, that’s no stress at all.’”

Russell was assigned to his district in September 2000. He immediately became involved in the community, joining the Jamestown Lions Club, the Pymatuning Lake Association and other groups. He says he has found “extremely friendly people” in his district. “When we moved in, the neighbors came over with gifts and food, and they snow-plowed the driveway. It was a smooth transition moving here.”

Russell says he loves dealing with the public, from working with anglers to conducting school and scouting programs. “Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the fishermen are glad to see us, and I enjoy being able to tell guys about good places to fish,” he says. Russell says most of his district is water—Pymatuning Reservoir and Conneaut Lake. He likes being busy year-round, he enjoys the flexibility of the schedule and, like the other officers, he was surprised by the “unbelievable” amount of paperwork the job entails.

What Russell says he doesn’t like about the job is “some people’s attitudes.” The negative aspect of law enforcement can be hard to take, when he’s just doing his job and “people swear at me and think I’m out to ruin their good time. I’m just there to make sure that in their good time they are safe and obey the law.”

Jonathan Kay is the rookie in Butler County. Kay says he “moved around quite a bit as a kid,” from his birthplace in Elmira, NY, to Ohio, to high school in Moscow, PA. He saw five years of active duty in the U.S. Army and was in the Gulf War. Then he moved on to Penn State to study administration of justice, minoring in political science. “If I had it to do all over again,” says Kay, “I’d go to college for business management. There’s not much difference between this job and running a small business.”

Kay says his Commission mentor was Brian Burger, now the Commission’s Northcentral Region Manager. While at Penn State, Kay worked with Burger and the university to set up a conserva-

tion law enforcement internship program. As an intern, he sampled all parts of a WCO’s job and helped train a WCO class “by playing the violator” during instruction scenarios.

Kay barely missed being in the 1997 WCO class and took a wide variety of Civil Service tests. He became a forest ranger at Bald Eagle State Park, where he “got a taste of environmental law enforcement.” Taking the WCO test again, Kay made the cut. “I’ll never forget that thrill. I wanted it so badly, I worked so many years for it, and to get that letter to be interviewed . . .,” he trails off in glad remembrance.

On the job he found that the WCO position is “not just a lifestyle, it’s a professional lifestyle.” WCOs are expected by the public to behave in a certain way, he says, even if all they’re doing is grocery shopping. “Because there is generally one Commission officer to a county, you are not ‘a’ cop, but ‘the’ fish warden. You must do right all the time.”

He remembers the “honeymoon” with his new job. “The honeymoon was the first couple of months, when you drive out of the motel in the Jeep, thinking, ‘This county is my baby.’ It’s like the first day driving with your driver’s license. You can go anywhere and do anything.”

A little of that freshness may have worn off, but Kay still finds great versatility in how to pursue the law enforcement mission. “I wake up every day and do what I want to do. I appreciate the individual authority I have from my supervisors. I have the freedom, when I think it’s important, to focus on this or on that.” He really appreciates that “in this job you don’t put a widget on a



WCO Jonathan Kay scans the waters of Lake Arthur, Moraine State Park, Butler County.

gadget in the same seat all day.”

Experience on the job has brought a realization: “When I started, I thought that if I carried a firearm and had a badge, the public would respect my authority,” Kay says. “Now I find that with that authority comes tremendous responsibility. People resent authority in this country, and having authority is not glamorous. You’re watched closely because of that authority.”

Kay says he has to do a lot of mediation, not something natural for a person who is a right-or-wrong, “black-or-white” person. “I have to force myself into the gray, and there’s a lot of gray area when you’re working with people,” says Kay. “Every person out there has a different story, a different problem.”

For those who want to become a WCO, Kay suggests “you take stock of what you want to do. Ask yourself if you are ready for the responsibility. It may look like fun, but this is serious business. There’s a lot of training and the work is really hard, all year-round. You must have the drive, the passion. Don’t go into it halfheartedly.” □

How Can I Become a Waterways Conservation Officer?

Guy Bowersox, Assistant to the Director in the Commission’s Bureau of Law Enforcement, described the lengthy process of becoming a WCO:

Applicants must be residents of Pennsylvania, have a Pennsylvania driver’s license, be age 21 or older when they are hired, and meet the job’s physical and vision requirements. Application is made to the state Civil Service Commission, which advertises WCO positions for testing. The latest round of testing began in August 2003 and continues until September 26. The Fish & Boat Commission can hire from this list for the next 18 months. For details, visit the state Civil Service Commission web site, www.scsc.state.pa.us.

Those who score high enough on the written exam undergo an oral interview process. The Civil Service Commission then provides the Fish & Boat Commission with a hiring eligibility list. Following Commonwealth hiring laws, the Fish & Boat Commission conducts oral interviews of a number of eligible candidates. Possible hires are further culled from the pool of people ranked in accordance with Civil Service rules, and the Commission begins the initial process of hiring.

Those candidates who are military veterans receive “veterans preference” points added to their raw scores. By law, the Commission cannot pass up a high-scoring veteran and hire a lower-scoring non-veteran. Although only a high school or equivalency diploma is required, most of the officers have at least two years of higher education; many hold full degrees.

Candidates next take an extensive physical examination

and swimming test. From those who pass that, the Commission hires the number it needs for a WCO class.

Classes rarely exceed 20 and normally number about 10. Lately, hiring has taken place regularly, to fill vacancies created by a spate of retiring officers. That pace is slowing as the openings dwindle. The Commission has only about 100 WCOs statewide. Competition is keen for WCO positions, with up to 700 testing.

For new WCOs, the Commission has a 52-week training program, centered at the H.R. Stackhouse School of Fishery Conservation and Watercraft Safety, at Fisherman’s Paradise, near Bellefonte. The officers-to-be, cadets, start with several weeks of in-processing and indoctrination. Then they take 20 weeks of Act 120 (municipal police officer) training. There they acquire basic law enforcement skills and return to the Commission to receive the technical training to be conservation officers.

That takes about 23 more weeks of classroom and field training, followed by weeks of assignment to a region for more field work, finishing with working with and being evaluated by field officers. In this last segment, trainees perform supervised WCO district work, getting experience nearly identical to having their own duty assignments. To graduate, trainees must maintain an 80 percent grade point average.

The process from taking the Civil Service test to becoming a full-fledged WCO is lengthy, with much testing and training. These high standards result in quality officers serving the angling and boating public.—*LS.*