

Alabama Fire College, Hoover bomb squad host rodeo for K9s to sniff out bombs and robots to retrieve 'explosives'

By [Tiffany Ray -- The Birmingham News](#)

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Benny, the University of Alabama police dog, sniffs out explosive material hidden in the trunk of a car during a demonstration with UA police Sgt. Rusty Romine at Alabama Fire College in Tuscaloosa. (Tiffany Ray/Birmingham News) Benny, a 5-year-old yellow lab, makes his way slowly around a beat-up white Nissan, sniffing tires, doors, the trunk. At the front

driver's-side wheel he freezes, his nose pointing in the direction of the wheel well.

That's where his handler, Sgt.

Rusty Romine of the University of Alabama Police Department, finds a small, rectangular pack of C-4 explosive.

In this case, there's no emergency.

The C-4 was planted by law enforcement as a training exercise, and Benny is rewarded for the find with a chew toy.

But to make sure they're ready for the real thing, Benny and Romine and other bomb teams spent a day in Tuscaloosa last week practicing their skills.



A robot remotely controlled by Robert Heeschen of the Alabama State Trooper bomb squad retrieves an explosive device from a car. (Tiffany Ray/Birmingham News) Bomb squads from about 15 local, state and federal law enforcement agencies traveled from around Alabama and the U.S. for the 2009 Alabama Robot and Explosive Detection K9 Rodeo, held Wednesday at the Alabama Fire College in Tuscaloosa.

The Hoover Police Department organized the event in conjunction with the college and the FBI. Teams from as far away as New York and Maryland tested their skills as they used remote-controlled robots to retrieve explosive devices from train cars, passenger vehicles and other locations in a series of practice scenarios.

Bomb dogs and their handlers scoured indoor and outdoor courses, sniffing out explosives from filing cabinets, car trunks and suitcases placed in makeshift offices, parking lots and other locales.

Sgt. Rod Glover, who heads the Hoover Police Department's explosive ordnance disposal team, said organizers devised a series of realistic situations using commercial, military and improvised explosives.

In one, for example, a team, working from a mobile computer station, sent in a robot to disarm a suspicious package found in a building. In another, robots were sent in to deal with a pipe bomb found in the woods.

"What we want to do is make sure that they're ready for anything they could encounter," Glover said.

Capt. Jim Coker, a spokesman for Hoover police, said the department held a similar event last year in Hoover, but this year's is bigger and better. It's also an example of cooperation between law enforcement at every level, he said.

"In this area you will see a growing trend toward cooperation as far as sharing resources," he said.

Bomb dog teams also had the opportunity to take the first state certification test offered by the college, said David Latimer, chief of police for Harpersville.

Latimer devised a course on the campus and said he and other experts are working on a statewide certification program that would create uniform standards for bomb, arson and narcotics dogs.

Latimer said Alabama would be among the first states to adopt such standards.

"We'd really like to be on the cutting edge," he said.