

Police

Mounted police are workhorses

By Tracy Baim

SOMETIMES AN hour before their patrol, an hour before they clock in, officers of the Chicago Police Department mounted patrol are at work, grooming their horses in preparation for a day in Chicago's parks, on the streets or covering a parade.

The horse officers' commitment to the force doesn't stop at a few hours of unpaid work per week. The 23 riders, three sergeants and Lt. Tim Gainer, although they receive no extra compensation, must pay for their own mounted patrol uniforms, which can cost up to \$3,000 for boots, gloves, pants, special holsters, coats and other apparel.

In addition, officers like John Philbin, who worked as a homicide detective for 12 years before joining the patrol two years ago, have given up extra pay in special areas, such as detective work and field training, to join the unit.

BUT NOW THE mounted unit, which was reinstated in the department in 1974, may wind up as an also ran in the race for the 1985 police budget. Police Supt. Fred Rice has received a staff recommendation on funding for all areas of the force, including the possible a reduction in the mounted unit. Mayor Harold Washington's administration has considered cutting the patrol as an economy measure.

At present, with the budget pending, the 25 men and 2 women on horses, with mounting support from the citizenry, may remain in the saddle for another year.

The mounted patrol serves several purposes for Chicago, according to Gainer, Philbin and Patrolman Joe Thibault.

"Patrol is our primary purpose," Gainer said. "After that, the public relations comes naturally."

"There's nothing wrong with being appreciated for good public relations, for a good rapport with citizens. But that is secondary to patrol," Philbin said.

"STATISTICALLY we're a casualty," Philbin said, chiefly because it is difficult to gauge, the success of the unit. However, the



Tribune photo by George Thompson

Lt. Tim Gainer with his horse Nebo (left) and Patrolman Joe Thibault with his horse Bomber are members of the Chicago Police Department

high visibility of the patrol makes it "an ounce of a prevention for a pound of cure," he said.

Everyday routine for the unit involves patrolling in areas such as Grant Park, Lincoln Park, the Loop and along North Michigan Avenue. The horses and policemen are transported by truck and trailer from headquarters in stables at the South Shore Country Club at 71st Street and South Shore Drive.

Officers write tickets, make arrests and do general police work, Thibault said. The number of mounted police out at any one time varies greatly, he said, depending on the season [more are out in warm months], whether there is a demonstration or parade and other factors.

Thibault said other officers greatly appreciate the mounted unit for crowd control; each horse and rider does the work of 10 policemen on foot. This way, Philbin said, both officers and citizens

are protected from harm.

THE HORSES have been especially trained to perform efficiently in a wide range of situations, including dispersing crowds by not being afraid of body contact and nuisance training by getting used to loud noises and sudden motions.

"We can never know what we're going to run into on the streets," Thibault said.

Training for the mounted patrol is rigorous. Before they can even qualify to attend the 14-week academy, which involves classroom work and equestrian exercises, people must have two to five years of solid police work. "If they get this far, we know these officers have a good police background," Gainer said.

However, it is not necessary to have ever ridden a horse to qualify for the academy.

AT PRESENT, Gainer said, the mounted patrol budget is about \$85,000 a year, not including em-

ployee salaries, radios, gas and other items paid for from the general police budget. What is included, for example, is money for horses, a veterinarian, grooming, feeding and a blacksmith.

Horses are donated by farms, riding schools and other places, a fact that helps ease the budget constraints, Gainer said. Depending on their age, the present 27 mounts will be able to work for 8 to 10 more years. All horses are at least 16 hands high [about 5¼ feet] in order to be intimidating, all are brown for uniformity, and all are geldings [castrated males] to keep their attention focused on police work.

There are priorities in the funding process, Gainer said. Like the mounted patrol, other police units such as the canine and marine patrols are also under funding scrutiny.

"THE NUMBER one policy is filling the beat cars, so they look

at specialized units and see how they can be cut," Gainer said. Although the equestrian unit may not be eliminated, it may be reduced, which, he said, would cut its effectiveness.

Gainer said most major cities have mounted units and mentioned an 8-year-old New York study showing a high visibility for mounted officers over patrol cars and officers on foot.

Although he said his officers would be ready to go back to regular duties if the mounted unit was abolished, Gainer also noted a special dedication inherent in his women and men.

Not only do they pay for the special uniforms, work extra hours grooming their horses and give up the extra pay and benefits available in other areas in the police department, but considering the hours involved they have a special commitment, he said.