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Do they have the stuff of State Patrol?

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Leah Mixon slammed her fists onto the floor.

After 60 seconds of situps, the exhausted 30-year-old Tacoma woman had completed 38. She'd missed her personal goal of 40, but was required to do only 25. Missing her goal angered her.

Mixon was among 91 people taking the physical and written tests applicants must pass to become a Washington State Patrol trooper.

The State Patrol will have 321 troopers eligible to retire by the end of 2017, leaving many openings to fill with new recruits. The goal is to hire 67 cadets for a class in mid-July at which cadets are trained in firearms.

The applicants' first major hurdle was phase one tests, those Mixon took Feb. 9 in Olympia, the physical and written tests. Each recruit had to successfully complete a set number of situps, pushups and a 1.5-mile run to qualify to take the written exam.

Only 2.5 percent of those who apply to become troopers are issued a badge, said trooper Guy Gill, a State Patrol spokesman and recruiter.

"We would rather run short than have subpar people working for this agency, period," Gill said.

WEEDING OUT RECRUITS

On testing day, a few men in sweats jogged up and down the street before sunrise to keep their muscles warm and cut the 28-degree morning chill. Another sat in his car, the overhead light on so he could do some last-minute studying.

It would be at least another 20 minutes before anyone was allowed inside the General Administration Building to take the first step toward what they hoped would become a new career.

As 7:30 a.m. drew near, the line extended down the stairway and along the sidewalk. Most of the men and women were donning athletic gear, while a handful wore suits, ties and carried briefcases.

A man wearing the dress blues each in line hoped to wear someday walked out the front door and shouted good morning to the crowd.

"Get to know yourselves," the trooper said. "I want you to line up in alphabetical order."

More than 150 applicants had signed up for that day's test; 91 showed up. More than half would be cut before the end of the day.

First cuts came during the weigh-in. Candidates must meet specific height and weight requirements to move on. A 6-foot-tall man between 21 and 29 can weigh no more than 204 pounds. A 5-foot-7 woman in the same age range must weigh no more than 165 pounds.

The only way around the requirement is by body fat percentage. Men must have 20 percent or less; women 26 percent or less.

The candidates were directed to a room filled with desks and chairs. It was standing room only, but not for long.

"Not everyone is going to be successful here today, and that's OK," Gill told the group. "How many have been here before?"

At least a third of the room raised their hands. One candidate, a man from Las Vegas, was back for a third attempt.

"We will work with you," Gill said. "If you don't get through, don't get your heads down too much."

Third time was the charm for the Las Vegas candidate. He passed the physical, written and oral boards, and will move on.

The introduction gave the candidates an idea of what was going to happen during the day, as well as what kind of career they were trying to get themselves into.

"Who knows what happened on Feb. 23, 2012?" asked Sgt. Troy Tomaras.

A candidate said it was the day trooper Tony Radulescu was shot and killed near Gorst in Kitsap County.

"People are out there that would want to kill you," Tomaras said. "It's a lifestyle choice, and you have to stay fit and be ready."

That's why the State Patrol emphasizes its physical test.

"It's a competition," Tomaras said. "... if you miss it by one, you are done, excused. If you miss the pushups by one, the run by one second, you are done."

PHYSICAL DEMANDS

The physical test was the end of the road for 25 candidates who failed to reach the required times.

Times for the pushups, situps and 1.5-mile run are based on the candidate's age.

Before acing the situp test, Mixon, a single mother of two, blew by the pushup minimum, finishing at a pace of one pushup a second. She was among the first to finish the run out of all the candidates.

Not everyone passed the physical test, including 20-year-old Michael Anthony Jones of Puyallup.

In December, Jones watched his older sister, 26-year-old Shaneka Phillips, graduate from the State Patrol academy in the Capitol Rotunda, and hoped to follow her example.

But while he beat the minimums on pushups and situps, he was about 30 seconds too slow on the run around Capitol Lake.

The failure didn't curb his spirit. He said he planned to test again.

"I thought it was great and a good experience," Jones said. "I just need to work harder."

While many trained specifically for the physical test, Mixon didn't have to. The gym has been the East Coast native's escape since her divorce from a Joint Base Lewis-McChord soldier.

"I just have to be tough – that's me," Mixon said. "I have no help, two children and an ex that is deployed. ... The gym has been my outlet, my home away from home."

Mixon didn't let her success on the physical test go to her head. She knew she had the written exam still to do.

"I don't want to psyche myself out," Mixon said. "I like to keep myself grounded."

WRITTEN TEST

Applicants who passed the physical test were sent back to the room where they'd gotten the introduction.

This time, there were more seats to choose from.

"We lost a whole handful of people," Tomaras said. "Hopefully we will see them back another day."

The written tests had multiple-choice questions, as well as some memory retention.

"These tests are situational, multi-choice questions that are going to judge your common sense and how you react in certain situations," Gill said. "You don't need any law enforcement background to take these tests at all."

Of the 62 applicants who took the written test, 22 failed.

"It was exhausting," Mixon said. "When you are done, you can't say if I did good because you don't know what they are looking for. ... Apparently I did enough; I passed and am completely stoked."

ORAL INTERVIEWS

The 40 who moved on from phase one testing were faced Feb. 12 with yet another obstacle: oral boards.

Quizzed by a panel of three troopers, applicants asked background questions, as well as situational questions.

"It gives us time to get to know the applicant a bit," Gill said. "Then we go into situational questions."

Mixon was put on edge during her oral board when the troopers kept circling back to the same question regarding what to do in the case of a fellow cadet or trooper lying to a superior.

"I would not want to cause internal conflict with myself or external conflict with him," Mixon said. "This is my co-worker and my partner. ... I would have confidence in my superior that they would make it right, and not put me under the bus."

Mixon is scheduled for a polygraph test later this month as part of the phase three background check. Phase four is a medical and psychological test.

"We lose a lot of applicants during the polygraph and background phases," Gill said.

"Our advice to any applicant applying for us is to be 100 percent honest about everything, and that is what people usually get caught up on. They think they don't want to tell us something that probably wouldn't have kicked them out of the program, but if they are untruthful about it, that would do it."

The candidates were warned about the polygraph several times during phase one testing.

"That one thing you don't want us to know about, you need to tell us about it," Tomaras said before issuing the written tests.

Anyone who fails the polygraph cannot reapply to be a trooper, or apply with any law enforcement agency in Washington state. Four applicants listened to his advice, came forward and were cut for previous drug use and past crimes.

There will be no sighs of relief for Mixon until she gets a job offer. To her, the success so far doesn't mean anything until she passes every step.

"If one piece doesn't work, and that other piece is exceptional, that exceptional piece means nothing," she said. "... Just because I can rock it physically doesn't necessarily mean I can rock it mentally; it's just one tiny piece of the puzzle."

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