

# Scent-dog handler admits possible error

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TODAY Staff Writer

Controversial dog handler John Preston spent a grueling five hours on the witness stand Friday as testimony in the rape retrial of Wilton Dedge reached its third day.

During testimony, Preston was forced to defend his credibility as an expert prosecution witness when defense attorney Mark Horwitz grilled him on his background and training as a dog handler.

Armed with transcripts of several previous trials, Horwitz read to the six-member Brevard jury how Preston had given conflicting testimony about the number of hours he spent training as a dog handler.

Preston, who once testified to having more than 540 hours of instruction in trailing human

scents with dogs, admitted Friday it was probably closer to 250 hours.

Horwitz also cited instances where Preston had testified that his dogs had received higher levels of training than they actually had.

In most cases, Preston said he didn't remember giving the earlier testimony.

Preston admitted, however, that a crucial scent sample used to allegedly link Dedge to the crime scene could have been contaminated when it was handled by Brevard sheriff's Investigator Steve Kendrick.

Because of the possible contamination, the dog could have been sniffing Kendrick's scent instead of the suspect's scent when it made a search of the victim's home on March 10,

1982, Preston said.

It was Preston's testimony in 1982 that helped convict Dedge of the 1981 rape and torture of a Sharpe's teen-ager.

During the first trial, Preston testified that his dog, "Har-rass II," had detected Dedge's scent on the victim's bed sheet nearly three months after the attack.

But the verdict was overturned last December by the 5th District Court of Appeal in Daytona Beach, which ruled that Circuit Judge William Woodson had erred when he disqualified an expert defense witness who was supposed to challenge Preston's testimony.

This time around, the defense is expected to bring in its own dog experts.

Preston has helped Bre-

vard prosecutors and police in more than 60 felony cases since 1981. His standing as an expert has come under attack in recent months by defense attorneys who challenge his claim that dogs can trail a human scent as long as eight years after it has been laid.

Retired Circuit Judge Humes Lasher of Fort Lauderdale has yet to rule on whether the defense can admit as evidence the results of a recent court-ordered tracking test.

Sources who asked not to be named said Preston's dogs failed the test when they couldn't pick up a five-day-old scent.

The trial is scheduled to resume Monday morning at 9 a.m. at the Brevard County Courthouse in Titusville.



**JOHN PRESTON**

... credibility under attack