

DOG HANDLER CLEARED OF PERJURY CLAIM

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Prosecutors Friday cleared tracking-dog handler John Preston of perjury accusations made by the former owner of a Pennsylvania dog-training school, who said Preston lied when he testified he had attended the school.

Thomas McGinn, former owner of McGinn's School for Dogs, said on ABC-TV's 20/20 last fall and under oath last month that Preston never received training at his school and that the certificate of attendance he had was forged.

On Friday, prosecutors said the statements were unsubstantiated and no criminal charges will be filed against Preston. They still are investigating McGinn for perjury because of his testimony.

Preston, used in a dozen criminal cases in Brevard before failing a court-ordered tracking test in 1984, testified during several trials that he received 240 hours of training from James Hardwick at the school during the mid-1970s.

After taking statements from five law enforcement officials and a former school employee, "it became obvious that Tom McGinn is incorrect as to each allegation he made in the 20/20 segment and in his sworn statement" last month, Assistant State Attorney Wayne Holmes said in a report Friday.

The six people told prosecutors Hardwick did teach at the school, despite denials by McGinn, and a few said they had seen Preston at the school, the report says.

Although Preston has been cleared of the perjury accusations, neither he nor his dogs will be used in investigations by the state attorney's office, Holmes said. In a 1984 trial, the last at which Preston testified, about eight expert witnesses were called.

Half of those experts, who were called by prosecutors, ended up costing county taxpayers \$25,000 in fees, hotel rooms and travel expenses, he said.

"I don't think the benefits of his testimony outweigh the cost and distraction from the rest of the trial," Holmes said.

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