

Steel baton to replace nightstick

Collapsible ASP clubs
help police beat crime

By Roger Roy

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

Orange County Deputy Sheriff Dave Parker was trying to handcuff an uncooperative suspect when two of the man's friends tried to interfere.

Faced with the prospect of fighting three men at once, Parker reached into a sheath on his belt and drew what looked like a small metal flashlight.

With a flick of the deputy's wrist and a startlingly loud metallic noise, the device became a 21-inch steel baton.

There wasn't any fight, Parker said.

"They saw it and they changed their minds. They just left."

The weapon was an ASP, a collapsible baton that Central Florida police agencies are increasingly turning to as a replacement for the traditional nightstick.

The Orange County Sheriff's Office has issued the batons to its court deputies and warrant detectives. The Orlando Police Department, after a recent six-month test by 16 officers, plans to issue the weapons to its officers.

The Volusia and Osceola county sheriff's offices are using ASP batons, and sheriff's officials in Seminole and Brevard counties are now studying ASPs or similar collapsible weapons.

Police who use the weapon said they prefer it to a rigid baton because it is more easily carried and concealed---and more fearsome.

The ASP is made of tubular steel rather than the aluminum, solid plastic or wood used in rigid batons.

But police and the ASP's manufacturer insist it is no more dangerous than the rigid batons it is replacing. And they credit its

frightening noise and appearance with stopping fights and assaults without officers actually striking suspects.

"I haven't heard one officer bad-mouth it," said Buddy Shephard, a sheriff's inspector in Osceola County, where officers began using the ASP about a year ago.

Shephard said he once drew his ASP when a drug suspect tried to hit another officer with a 4-foot-long board. The suspect changed his mind and let go of the board.

"If I'd had a shotgun, I don't think he could have dropped it any quicker," Shephard said.

Orlando police Capt. Paul Rumbley, who oversaw that department's test of the ASP, said the sudden and loud transformation from an innocuous handle that is almost hidden in the hand to a 21- or 26-inch baton makes suspects think twice about fighting officers.



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Many departments are replacing police nightsticks (right) with convenient collapsible batons.

"It's noisy, it's sudden, it's an attention getter," Rumbley said. "We've found it has a calming effect. The reports we got [from officers who tested it] are that it quelled some altercations."

As with other batons, Rumbley said, officers are trained not to strike suspects above the shoulders, and to aim for fleshy areas rather than bones or joints.

Rumbley said the ASP is no more dangerous than other batons.

"It's in the same category in terms of what damage it might do," Rumbley said. "It's not more [dangerous] at all. I wouldn't say it's any less."

The ASP costs \$30 to \$45, depending on the model --- about the same price as rigid batons.

Rumbley said a baton of any type gives an officer a weapon other than his fists and his firearm.

"You have to remember that when this [baton] is used, there's already significant resisting going on," Rumbley said.

The rigid batons also require patrol officers to remove them from belt holsters when they get into their cruisers. Rumbley said that means officers can forget them or leave them in their patrol cars in an emergency.

The ASP was designed by Kevin Parsons, Chairman of the Board of Armament Systems and Procedures, in Appleton, WI, which manufactures both the ASP and rigid batons.

Although it's been adopted relatively recently by American law enforcement officers, the ASP is not a new idea, Parsons said. And it's no coincidence that it bears some resemblance to Asian martial arts weapons.

Parsons said his ASP is based on a similar weapon used by the Tokyo Metropolitan Police since the 1960s. Officers there found that the weapon, although lighter than traditional rigid clubs, had greater shocking power to subdue suspects without causing as much tissue damage, Parsons said.

The U.S. Secret Service adopted the ASP agencywide about six years ago, Parsons said. Since then, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Coast Guard and several state police agencies have started using the weapon, he said.

Because the ASP can cause serious or fatal injuries if used improperly, Parsons said, the company emphasizes that officers be trained before working with the weapon.

Parsons appears in a training videotape to warn officers that they could face significant legal problems if not properly instructed in the weapon's use.

"Since they're made of steel, you or your colleagues may be wondering about the old plaintiff argument that the officer hit his client with pipe," Parsons says in the videotape.

But in 10 years of selling the ASP, Parsons said, the company has not been sued over the weapon. He said that shows the weapon is safe if properly used.

"To have a record like that, we think, can't just be luck."