

# The Star-Ledger

## **A State Police recruit died after boxing. N.J. officials are now reviewing training for troopers.**

By Blake Nelson

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The state attorney general's office is investigating how the State Police Academy uses boxing to train recruits after a 27-year-old died earlier this week.

Officials will conduct a "complete review" of the "active countermeasures block," the training area where boxing is used, according to spokesman Peter Aseltine. The State Police previously said its Sea Girt academy had suspended the sport.

Late last month, Lucas C. Homeijer was boxing with a fellow recruit when he "lost consciousness," officials said. He spent several days at a hospital before he died Tuesday.

Homeijer's death was "one of the hardest things I've ever had to go through," Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the State Police, said Wednesday. "There is a thorough review being done of the incident," he said, which was "an anomaly, to say the least."

The inquiry will be run by Paul Zoubek, a former assistant attorney general and current partner with Montgomery McCracken Walker & Rhoads, Aseltine said. It's unclear how long the investigation will take.

The specific cause of Homeijer's death is still unknown, but the tragedy has put the sport under renewed scrutiny.

Retired troopers and a State Police spokesman told NJ Advance Media that boxing was a normal part of academy training. Recruits have been hospitalized before after fights, according to Lt. Jeffrey Flynn.

Law enforcement leaders said the sport prepared officers for a tough job.

"We have whole generations now that have been raised in a conflict-averse environment where they've never thrown a punch or been punched," Barnegat Police Chief Keith Germain said. While that's a generally good thing, he said, it can be a liability for cops facing violent suspects.

Officers who can both "defend themselves and deliver effective strikes" are better able to resolve violent encounters "more quickly and more safely," he wrote in an email.

State Police training is separate from other academies that train cops for local departments, which are overseen by New Jersey's Police Training Commission.

Only the academies in Cape May and Mercer counties currently use boxing to train recruits, according to Aseltine.

In June, the commission announced it would overhaul training statewide. Officials continued to review what defensive tactics were taught, while emphasizing “de-escalation, communications skills, cultural diversity training, and crisis intervention,” Aseltine said.

The new training will likely be rolled out in the spring.

Experts said training-related deaths were rare.

In 1999, Brick Township police officer John Lesemann had a heart attack a few days into training at the State Police Academy, according to the Officer Down Memorial Page. The nonprofit logged only a few recruit deaths anywhere in the country. In May, a Massachusetts sheriff’s department recruit died suddenly during exercises.

“Those deaths, unfortunately they do happen,” said William Johnson, executive director of the National Association of Police Organizations.

It’s difficult to know how often. Johnson’s organization doesn’t track them, nor does the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit which logs officer deaths nationwide.

The organization may count some recruit deaths in its statistics, but the numbers do not distinguish between active officers and trainees, according to Vanessa Varnado, one of the group’s research managers.

Boxing deaths are more common.

Hundreds of people have died from professional bouts in recent decades, according to the Manuel Velazquez Collection, a comprehensive database of deaths in the ring. One study concluded most boxing-related deaths were the result of a traumatic brain injury, but researchers said the sport has generally gotten safer in recent years.

On Friday, state Sen. Anthony Bucco, R-Morris, announced a proposal to count training deaths as line-of-duty deaths, so a recruit’s family would be eligible for survivor benefits.

“This tragedy is a reminder that being a State Trooper and training to be a Trooper are both difficult and dangerous jobs,” Bucco said in a statement. “Once someone answers the call to service, they deserve to know that we’ll take care of their family should the worst happen.”

Earlier in the day, Gov. Phil Murphy ordered flags be flown half-staff statewide until Sunday.

“I have no doubt that Luke Homeijer would have made a phenomenal Jersey trooper,” Callahan said.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*