



# A DÖG'S LIFE

## THE HARD WORKING CANINES OF THE VAIL VALLEY

*By Joy Overbeck*

It's Thursday afternoon at the Eagle County Charter Academy in Edwards and Moose is at work helping a group of reading-challenged students make their way through their books. The four-year-old English Labrador Retriever looks mildly interested as he snuggles against a fifth-grader who is intensely involved in one of Robin Hood's more harrowing escapades. The boy had told the school's reading specialist, Elizabeth Dekanich, that he really wanted to read Robin's adventures to Moose.

Encouraging these kids to reach above their usual skill levels is only one of Moose's many talents; he's also a great speller. Rita Skelton, his trainer and owner, helps the kids check their spelling with Moose. "Is 'listen' spelled l-i-s-s-e-n?" she asks the dog, who gives her a noncommittal look that matches her flat tone. "Well, then, how about l-i-s-t-e-n?" she queries with an upbeat sparkle to her voice. As Moose's tail responds with the enthusiastic thumping that means YES, the kids are once again impressed by his keen intellect.

In fact, Moose has earned his own degree. To become a certified reading dog with the Vail Valley Pet Partners program called Wagging Tales, he had to pass a series of tests that make him a calm, unflappable presence in the classroom. Wagging Tales is a two-year-old off-

shoot of the therapy dogs outreach begun by locals Blondie Vucich and Sally Clair in 2005.

Moose brings to the reading sessions his anything-goes doggie personality, boosting morale of these struggling learners from kindergarten to sixth grade. If they make mistakes, he just yawns and lets it slide. "The kids' confidence and their reading enjoyment has definitely improved," says Dekanich, "and that's so important in this process. They practice so they'll be good when it's time to read to him."

But because Moose isn't a harsh critic, the students can bask in his non-judgmental attitude and risk more advanced material. Though you might think a dog in the classroom would prompt lots of goofing around, Dekanich says that when the kids are reading to Moose they're so focused that the usual fidgeting and distractions that can interfere with progress just aren't a problem. And instead of feeling "different" because they're in the special reading class, the students now are proud they belong to the group that gets to work with the reading dog; stigma has been traded for status.

Opposite page: Local "dog whisperer" Mark Ruark trains dogs such as Murphy, a 14-month-old Golden Retriever, for community "therapy" programs.



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Several other elementary schools have requested Moose and his fellow reading dog, Jetta, who also works at the Charter school with owner and handler Nanette Kuich. A similar program in the Chicago Public Schools found that students increased their reading rate by an average of 24 words per minute, while students who read without the dogs only increased by nine words. This spring, reading tests will help gauge whether Moose has contributed to the Charter kids’ improvement.

Archaeologists tell us that the wolves that eventually became our domesticated dogs were first drawn to human campfires over 14,000 years ago. These pre-dogs had a mutually beneficial partnership with their masters even then, serving as companions, protectors, and hunting helpers. As the centuries passed we took our furry pals into our homes as pets and gradually sublimated their working instincts to a pampered life of leisure.

But according to local “dog whisperer” Mark Ruark, most dogs today would eagerly trade their rhinestone collars and Gucci outfits for a real job. The working dogs of the valley likely agree, whether they’re the friendly canines Ruark trains for the Vail Pet Partners hospital therapy and reading programs, the Vail Police Department’s dog, or the avalanche and tracking dogs of the Beaver Creek Ski Patrol and Vail Mountain Rescue.

A tight little mafia of local dog-lovers including Ruark, Vucich, Clair and the Eagle Valley Humane Society’s director, Char Quinn,

have spearheaded much of the dog outreach here. Vucich and Clair had learned from an international organization called Delta Society’s research that hospital patients benefit greatly from dog visits. “They had clinical data that patients’ blood pressure was lowered and their healing was speeded up,” Vucich says. “It was incredible. When they saw the data, top hospitals like Sloan Kettering and the Mayo Clinic started including these visitation programs in their patient care units.”

That was enough for Vucich, who had headed the Humane Society for many years before Quinn’s tenure, and was searching for her next dog-related mission. In 2005, she and Clair affiliated with Delta Society and used their therapy dog certification program to launch the local branch of Pet Partners with three dog and handler teams that began visiting patients at the Vail Valley Medical Center. Now the group can count on 32 teams, with more volunteers being trained all the time.

But not every dog is cut out to wear the special green vest and photo ID of a Pet Partners therapy animal. Canine confidence, a personality that loves to please — plus some elusive pizzazz — are all essential, says Ruark, who conducts assessments of the candidates and, if needed, additional training toward their certification. At the assessment, the dog experiences what it will actually encounter in the hospital environment, including people lurching around on canes and walkers, equipment crashing loudly to the floor, clumsy petting, angry yelling, and even strong hospital



smells. The animal is also tested on whether it can ignore another dog and handler nearby. “It can get pretty rigorous,” explains Ruark, “but we want these dogs to be bulletproof.”

Though the program includes dogs from Chihuahuas to Bernese Mountain dogs, Vucich and Ruark say that Labs and Golden Retrievers, notorious people-pleasers, seem to make the best prospects. Each handler also must attend a two-day seminar that covers hospital protocol, conversational icebreakers to use with patients, and dealing with unexpected situations.

For the dog and handler teams that do pass the tests, all this preparation has a warm and fuzzy payoff. “You step into the room and immediately you see the patient’s demeanor change,” says Vucich, who is a certified volunteer along with her rat terrier, Puck. “You can see it in their smiles and in their eyes: suddenly they’re more animated as they reach out to pet the dog.” Sally Clair recalls one small patient who couldn’t stop laughing as he crawled around between the legs of her therapy Lab, Kokomo. His mom said it was the first time he’d acted happy in days.

The whole hospital staff also looks forward to the visits, according to hospital volunteer coordinator Amanda Visosky, who sees how the dogs help lessen the workday stress. “They lighten up the entire atmosphere here, they break up the anxiety and give the staff a moment to relax and step away from everything else that’s going on.” The program has expanded recently to bring dogs to Shaw Cancer Center patients receiving treatment as well as the out-of-town patients and their families staying at neighboring Jack’s Place, a cancer caring house.

Above: Donna Nolz gives a treat to Puck, a Rat Terrier working as a therapy dog at the Vail Valley Medical Center. Opposite page: Dog trainer Mark Ruark (left) works with Laura Sellards and her dog, Murphy, on Lake Creek Trail. They are accompanied by another dog owner, Nick Kuich.

Vucich’s rat terrier, Puck, has a Cinderella story that’s just one example of how the active local network of doggie do-gooding works. Puck was originally a bad-boy type that Char Quinn’s daughter found abandoned while she was visiting relatives in Iowa. As Humane Society director, Quinn takes in strays and mistreated animals like Puck and places them with volunteer foster families until they can be resettled in permanent new homes. But Quinn liked the feisty little guy and planned to keep him until he started harassing the family’s menagerie of cats, chickens, and ducks. Quinn then introduced Puck to Vucich, the two hit it off, and they began attending Ruark’s Canine Good Citizen classes to break the terrier of his bad-dog ways. These socialization and behavior courses are offered free by the Humane Society to anyone whose dog needs them. Puck proved such a quick study at rehab that he and Vucich went on to earn their certification for the Pet Partners therapy program. He’s now a big hit with patients and staff alike.

Quinn’s American bulldog, called Girl, is also a working dog. At 90 pounds, this sweet bruiser plays Quinn’s intimidating assistant for the Humane Society-sponsored bite prevention seminars she gives at local schools and scout troops. Quinn says when she adopted the dog from a shelter, Girl was shaking like a leaf with anxiety



Above: Moose, from the Vail Pet Partners' Wagging Tales Program, helps a child learn to read. Left: Vail Police Officer Ryan Millbern and his partner, Star.

issues. But love and training have produced a real character that's a favorite with kids and adults alike. Using *Girl* as a visual aid, Quinn shows the kids how to interpret dog language to decide whether to pet a strange canine. "When a dog yawns or licks its lips, that means it's trying to calm itself and the child can't just run at the dog, but should approach slowly, or not at all," explains Quinn.

She covers which people behaviors raise a dog's internal alarms and how to pet the animal safely – under the chin, not on top of the head. Quinn was gratified recently to hear from a boy who'd attended a dog safety session that her advice had worked. "He was riding his bike and being chased by this dog," she explains. "Even though he was scared, he remembered that he was triggering the dog's chase instinct. So he stopped, and the dog just sniffed him and ran away."

There are helping dogs and healing dogs, but the dogs that lay it all on the line, including potentially their lives, are the canines working in rescue and law enforcement. Vail Mountain Rescue uses two Labrador Retrievers on its missions. Scent dogs Rusty and Mallie are expert trackers that help find people missing in the mountains; Mallie has also been trained to dig people out of avalanches. Nine-year-old Mallie started training with her owner and handler, Ann-Marie Cooper, when she was only ten weeks old. The two worked with Search and Rescue Dogs of Colorado, the organization that conducts training for teams statewide, and still join their practice sessions several times a week.

Avalanche dogs and scent dogs need to have a strong play drive, Cooper says. "They must want to play fetch or tug and chase over and over again," she explains. "And you look for a dog that's easy to train;

that's why I pick Labs." Training begins as a form of hide and seek — a person crouches in an open snow hole with a doggie toy and the dog finds him. As the exercise progresses, the hole becomes a snow cave covered with snow blocks so the person is invisible, and then the snow cave gets deeper and deeper. Often it only takes a minute or less for the dog to hit the human scent and dig eagerly through.

Avalanche rescue is more likely to end with a recovered body than a live survivor because of the short time window involved, Cooper says. Lost person calls usually have happier endings, like the hiker who missed a turn on the trail coming down from the Mount of the Holy Cross last summer.

Cooper, Mallie and another VMR volunteer had trudged about eight miles up the mountain in the black dark and lashing rain when the dog ran a couple of hundred yards into the forest and disappeared. When Mallie returned and issued a couple of insistent barks, the searchers followed her into the dripping trees. Soon they came upon the hiker, so cold and soaked that hypothermic shock had taken over and he didn't know his own name or where he was. The rescuers bundled him up and got him safely down the mountain.

The Beaver Creek Ski Patrol has its own dog program that covers the ski area and additional terrain. Started four years ago by Brent Redden and Jeff Thompson, they have two seasoned avalanche Labrador Retrievers called Dixie and Blue, and three pups in training that were recently adopted from Char Quinn.

Because the focus of the ski patrol's effort is speed, the dogs need to be certified to ride in a chairlift or a helicopter. "Our goal is to get to the scenario quick enough to find the person alive," says Redden, although their two helicopter forays into East Vail last February culminated with the skiers' friends finding their bodies before the teams arrived.

The dogs spend most of their time helping ski patrollers teach backcountry safety on visits to local schools and libraries. "We educate the community on the proper equipment," says Redden, "and we talk about the weather and the unstable snow to watch out for so you don't get yourself in a bad situation."

Like other owners who have career dogs, Redden says his dog just wants to work. "When we're training and she's watching other dogs searching in serious avalanche holes, she's absolutely freaking out because she wants her turn. This is what she lives for. If she had a broken leg and I said go search, she would search with a broken leg. I think most dogs love having a job."

The Vail Police Department's canine officer, Ryan Millbern, has a Belgian Malinois-German shepherd mix called Star who brings a



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similar enthusiasm to her job as a tracking and narcotics detection dog. In 28 narcotics arrests last year, Star's expert nose, not the human officers, found the drugs hidden in the home or car, according to Millbern. A few years ago, the officer was trolling the Internet for a dog he could work with at a price the VPD could afford, but a well-trained dog often costs up to \$15,000, an impossible figure. He came across the website run by dog-trainers Jason and Erin Purgason who own Highland Canine Training in North Carolina, and read about Star, a "second chance" hard-luck case that the couple had taken in after an abused puppyhood.

"These are great people who take dogs like Star that are unfixable and they fix them," says Millbern, who flew to North Carolina for three weeks of training with Star, which the Purgasons donated to the police department along with the training. "She's a cuddle bug now and a much loved member of our family." Though her drug-finding skills are legendary, Star is also trained to track people and articles like money or a gun a criminal has thrown into the weeds. Incredibly, once she even found a set of keys a car thief had thrown into a bank of fresh snow along I-70.

When not fighting crime, Star assists Millbern in student presentations at local schools. "We talk about what she does for the community," explains Millbern. "About drugs and how her nose works and how she can find them if they're lost. Then they get to pet her and she loves every minute of it."

Mark Ruark believes dogs' ability to aid humankind is nearly limitless and many of their gifts may be medical. "Dogs are now

*Mallie, one of a team of two Labrador Retrievers with Vail Mountain Rescue, is a scent dog and an expert tracker who helps find people missing in the mountains; Mallie has also been trained to dig people out of avalanches.*

being used to sniff out cancer in its early stages," he says. And it's true: a few years ago, *60 Minutes* covered tests in which trained dogs had a high success rate in detecting bladder cancer. Other studies show that dogs can also find melanoma, and lung and breast cancer in tissue or breath samples.

There's also some evidence, mostly anecdotal, that dogs can alert their epileptic masters before a seizure. Ruark knows of several such instances with pets he's trained, as well as the case of a local woman whose young son had seizures — until they got the dog. "It probably has to do with the dog lowering the boy's blood pressure and calming him," says Ruark.

Dogs can help us when we're sick, track us down and save us, find drugs and bad guys, be our social directors and constant companions, cheer us up, love us unconditionally, and even help us read. Which takes us back to Moose and the dog bone wreath his students gave him last Christmas with their personal notes attached. Said one, "Dear Moose, thanks for reading with me. You inspire me." ♦

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