

Dogs of Duty

Meet two courageous canines from the York County Sheriff's Office.



It's afternoon at an elementary school in York County, and the children are lined up in miniature chairs in a sunlit library. They've just finished reading a book called "Officer Buckle and Gloria," about a police dog, and now the real thing is right in front of them, badges and all.

A second-grader with long brown hair raises her hand. Sergeant Shipley, who is visiting with his K-9 officer, a bloodhound named Lieutenant Lou, calls on her. "Yes?"

"Can he," she points a tiny finger at Lou, "drive?"

Shipley laughs. "I wish he could," he responds, looking down at his partner. "I get tired sometimes. I could use a catnap." The children scream with delight.

Lieutenant David Godfrey adds his humor, pointing to his partner, a black German shepherd called Dargo. "If these guys learn how to drive, we're out of a job." More giggling.

The kids stare at the two dogs, enthralled. And so goes the life of a K-9 handler. The dogs get all the love, all the attention, all the questions.

"How fast can he swim?" a little boy asks, pointing again to Lou, who is stretched out on the carpet and appears to be fast asleep.

Shipley pauses, thinking. "I don't know. Pretty fast. I just hang on to his leash and try to keep up."

As Shipley and Godfrey travel with their highly trained K-9s to various schools and other venues, one thing is clear. The two men might as well be invisible, just like Officer Buckle in the story.

"They're the stars," jokes Godfrey. "We're just the roadies."



Salute Your Superior

As if to make that point, the York County Sheriff has given the dogs a rank higher than their handlers. He likes to joke that, when the handlers get up in the morning, the first thing they have to do is salute the dogs. And while the handlers matter (they are the ones, after all, who are doing the driving), once they're on location, the dogs take the lead.

"They essentially tell us what to do. When Lou's tail is up, he's on the scent, and when he's lost the scent, he drops his tail," explains Shipley, adding, "I spend most of my day looking at his backside."

While this may not seem like a great way to spend your time, these two handlers couldn't imagine life without their K-9 partners. When the dogs are off duty, they live at home with them, becoming part of the household. For Dargo, this means hanging out with two Chihuahuas. For Lou, it involves playing tug of war with a large Bouvier, hanging out with Shipley's 13-year-old son, begging for rawhide bones and accepting yearly birthday cakes (he's now 6 years old) from Shipley's wife. Dargo, who just turned 2 years old, enjoyed his first cake at the office.

These dogs are local heroes, risking their lives to protect their community. By breeding, temperament and training, they are ideally suited to their jobs. Months of specialized training for both dogs and their handlers is involved, and the K-9s have to be completely recertified every year.

Their very presence is a deterrent to crime. Depending on the K-9 officer, as the dogs are called, they help track people; search for firearms, drugs or bombs; pursue fugitives; and participate in searches that would be dangerous for human officers. One source claims that a single K-9 can search an area seven times faster than a team of four officers. At times these police dogs confront violent suspects. Unfortunately, in the process, K-9 officers, like police officers, are sometimes wounded or lose their lives in the line of duty. Because of the added risk, some wear bulletproof vests.

Hopefully they won't need them; their handlers are particularly careful with these specialized assistants. Godfrey says, "Dargo expects me to take care of him. I'm not going to send him into a situation where he's going to get hurt." Sometimes the dogs are called off in situations that become highly unsafe, whether an armed fugitive is hiding in a building or someone they're tracking enters a hazardous area where the dogs would be put at risk.



Not Exactly House Pets

These risks must be weighed. After all, Dargo and Lou are not house pets; they're county resources worth about \$20,000 each. Lou, who has caught his share of criminals, was donated by the Jimmy Ryce Center for Victims of Predatory Abduction and serves on the York County Missing Child Task Force. Dargo was donated by Think Loud, a business venture of the York-based band Live!

"I was going to leave at 3 a.m. and drive to Ohio to pick Dargo up," recalls Godfrey. "Then the guys from Think Loud wanted to come. When they heard how early I was leaving and how long the trip would take, they had a better idea: 'Take our jet.'" The only problem was that Dargo wouldn't board the jet. Godfrey had to carry the dog into the plane and hold him on his lap the entire time.

In his own way, Lou's funny about vehicles, too. He's accustomed to his own patrol car but resists riding in Shipley's wife's car, and even puts up a fuss when another police vehicle tries to transport them when they're tracking someone.

Despite these similarities, the two canines couldn't be more different. Dargo, who is from the Czech Republic, understands only German. He's a bit standoffish. He has no interest in being petted or even in flattery. He's got a bead on his handler,

and there's really nothing you can do to get his attention, unless you're a bomb; finding explosives is Dargo's specialty.

A Rare Ability

Lou, on the other hand, is more than willing to lie down and let you pet him, for hours if possible. He sheds a lot, and he's been known to drool, but he's extremely loveable. Lou's breeding gives him a secret weapon: his nose. A bloodhound's sense of smell is so accurate, up to 1,000 times that of a human's, that it's considered admissible evidence in court. Dogs of this breed can tell individuals, even twins, apart just by their scent.

"A human's nasal cavity is about 1½ square inches," explains Shipley, "as opposed to a bloodhound's, which is about 22½ square inches. And because the average human loses 50,000 skin cells a day, Lou can find these clues and track people."

Lieutenant Lou is in demand when there is a search for a person—whether it's a fugitive, a suicidal subject or a lost Alzheimer's patient or child—because he's trained as a specialist in one scent: humans.

Captain Dargo is certified in 18 different scents and is the only explosives K-9 in York County. But for Dargo, it's not about the bomb or whatever else he's supposed to find. It's about the bunny rabbit.

"This is all prey-driven," explains Godfrey. "It's all a game. Dargo thinks he's going after a bunny rabbit, which is actually a rope toy we use to train and reward him." He checks lockers, luggage, offices, cars and more, all in search of "the bunny rabbit." While this sounds less than serious, Dargo is very focused. When Godfrey first brought him here, the dog would pace all night.

“He was always in work mode,” says Godfrey. “He didn’t know what home life was like, and he didn’t know he could relax.”

Now both dogs understand leisure, which is a good thing, because when the dogs retire, they will live out their off-duty lives with their handlers. This plan should work just fine, because it looks like nothing could separate these cross-species partners. They’re bonded for life.

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