

## Canine Finds Career Track Following Nose

Eileen Mitchell, San Francisco Chronicle, April 16, 2005

From the moment he was born, Elway was destined for a career serving others. Under the guidance of the nonprofit organization Canine Companions for Independence, the young golden retriever was marked to become an assistance dog to enhance the lives of people with disabilities.

So, shortly after his birth at the home of a volunteer breeder-caretaker, the pup was placed with a volunteer family that prepared him for his future as a service dog. At approximately 14 months, Elway then returned to the canine organization to begin advanced training. The plan was to match him eventually with his new guardian.

But even the best laid plans of mice, men and dogs can go astray.

Elway turned out to be too rambunctious and playful; he was hyperactive, curious and full of the devil. He dragged wheelchairs through intersections and was often more interested in playing with tennis balls than paying heed to his trainer. And so it was that at the tender age of 14 months, Elway's career as a service dog was finished before it began. But, as any wise career counselor will observe, traits that are perceived as negatives in one job can be useful attributes in another.

And that's how Elway came to be known as Officer Elway, badge No. 26 of the San Francisco Police Department's drug-detection canine unit.

"For drug detection, you want a dog with an inherently strong play drive," says Officer Kevin O'Malley, Elway's partner since 1997. "One that isn't afraid to jump on furniture, sniff inside a TV or scratch behind a light switch. These dogs aren't concerned with obedience training. They just want to follow their noses and get the scent of a narcotic so they can lead us to the hidden drugs. It's all a big game to them."

A game at which Officer Elway excels. The 9-year-old dog has found the most drugs and currency of any drug-detection dog in Northern California.

U.S. Customs Service first introduced drug-detection canines in 1970 as part of a movement to intercept the entry of narcotics through major ports and borders. Many dogs selected for drug-detection training are obtained from humane societies, animal shelters and rescue groups. These dogs might be considered unadoptable and otherwise destroyed, but the lucky ones get a second chance through law enforcement. Since a dog's sense of smell is 10,000 to 100,000 times superior to a human's, it's no surprise that a canine unit can process incoming packages in a fraction of the time needed by their human counterparts. According to the U.S. Customs Web site, a canine team can process 400 to 500 packages in just 30 minutes.

Officer O'Malley said there are two types of drug-detection dogs: passive and aggressive. Passive alert dogs act exactly as



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their name implies: When their gentle sniffing detects drugs, the passive-alert dog won't bark, paw or point like a retriever while tapping out "guilty" in Morse code. Instead, the dog will calmly sit and stare at the allegedly guilty object or party. Remember that time you were walking through airport customs and noted the loving gaze of a sweet Lab or golden retriever? Chances are that Lassie was about to launch a bust.

An aggressive alert dog, however, will claw, dig and scratch at the spot where he sniffs the hidden "toy." That's because these dogs are trained with toys, often a towel that is used in a game of tug-of-war. As a result, their training leads them to associate the smell of drugs with toys.

"We make it fun," said O'Malley, who spent 80 hours retraining the playful Elway as an aggressive-alert drug-detection canine. "Since he was initially trained as a service dog, he came equipped with a few extra skills," the officer chuckles. "He would pick up his own leash and give it to me, jump up and turn on light switches, things like that."

Training begins with several rounds of tug-of-war with a freshly laundered towel. O'Malley, who has trained several dogs, then contaminates the towel with a drug odor and throws the towel in high brush where it can't be seen.

"The dog has to use his nose to find it," he said. "Next, I plant the towel in a box and hide it among other boxes and let the dog find the box with the contaminated towel. The dog thinks finding the location of the drug odors will lead him to the towel."

After doing this several times, the dog starts to recognize the odor of the drug as the smell of his toy or towel. When he identifies and retrieves the hidden box, he's rewarded with plenty of praise and another round of tug-of-war. The process must be repeated with different narcotics such as heroin, cocaine, hashish, marijuana, ecstasy and methamphetamine because of their different odors. Surprisingly, training takes just two weeks, but daily field maintenance is necessary to sharpen the dog's skills.

"Every day brings a new situation, a different environment," O'Malley said. "A dog might encounter conveyor belts, the belly of a plane, ladders or escalators. They never stop learning."

As an aggressive-alert dog, Elway has encountered just one complaint and that concerned damage he did to a vehicle. "He found drugs concealed in the upholstery of a car and scratched up the seats." Recalled O'Malley in disbelief, "The owners actually had the gall to complain."

He told of another time when a drug-detection canine unit was dispatched to San Quentin State Prison as part of a drug interdiction effort. "Inmates knew the dogs were coming. They buried razor blades inside marijuana so the dogs would injure themselves. Drug-detection canines have actually had contracts put out on them."

Not surprising, since these furry officers are considered major weapons in the war on drugs. In a recent e-mail correspondence, Paula Keicer, public affairs specialist for Customs and Border Protection of the Department of Homeland Security, cited a few 2003 statistics:

"Canine teams were responsible for a significant proportion of narcotic seizures at ports of entry, accounting for more than 13,726 narcotic seizures totaling over 1,345,444 pounds of narcotics," she wrote. "The canine enforcement program was also responsible for seizures of U.S. currency worth \$27.9 million, and the U.S. Border Patrol canine enforcement teams seized over 722,000 pounds of narcotics."

As for Elway's contribution, O'Malley says, "In 2004, Elway had over 60 confirmed positive alerts, which resulted in the seizure of multiple pounds of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and marijuana with an estimated Bay Area street value of more than \$2 million. He also made positive alerts to cash that was seized as drug proceeds. The total amount of cash seized in 2004 by Elway's unit was \$499,754."

Whew. Little wonder that drug-detection dogs are recognized as valued law enforcement members. An attack or injury to any canine police dog can result in an arrest for assault on a police officer.

When O'Malley and Elway aren't working their usual beat at the San Francisco airport, they can be found at local schools doing demonstrations for the Just Say No and DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs. Even during walks on the beach or in the park, the friendly golden retriever is constantly searching for hidden toys.

O'Malley chuckles with affection. "To Elway, it's all just a big game."