



the working dog issue

FEATURES



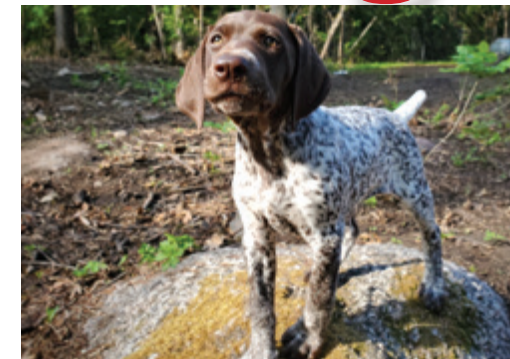
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THE MAKING OF A DETECTION DOG

AKC program gives pups a head-start.



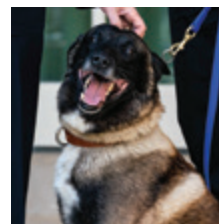
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THE MAKING OF A DETECTION DOG

An AKC program gives puppies a head-start for scenting careers.

By Penny Leigh

Recovering from a broken ankle, Kirsten Fulk needed an incentive to get outside and build up strength.

The doctor recommended a walking companion. Fulk, a lifelong dog lover, decided on a German Shorthaired Pointer.

Barron joined the household and was everything Fulk wanted in a family pet.

When the breeders invited her to a field training day, she had no idea what to expect—certainly not that it would change her life.

Upon seeing the pointers doing what they were bred to do, “I was hooked,” Fulk says. “Fast-forward a few years, and we had purchased a female and had our first litter of pups. We helped the puppy owners train their puppies and some of their friends and their dogs. We loved it and decided to build a boarding and training kennel.”

Since that day in the early 1990s, Fulk and her husband, Paul, have trained hundreds of successful hunting companions and hunt-test competitors at Field of Dreams Kennel in Oregon.

But they knew the dogs’ amazing noses and work ethic could also be used for more. In 2014, Fulk began evaluating dogs for urban search-and-rescue work as well as detection for arson, narcotics, and medical service.

When she heard about the AKC Patriotic

Puppy program a year ago, she was among the first to apply. She kept seven puppies out of a litter of 12 to enter into the program and hopefully become explosives-detection dogs.

“The program fit perfectly with my skill set, my current breeding plans with my German Shorthairs, and my desire to help our country in whatever way I can,” she says.

Home-Grown Noses

The AKC Detection Dog Task Force launched the Patriotic Puppy program in late 2018 to train and support owners who dedicate a year to preparing a puppy as a candidate for advanced detection training. Gov-



Dreaming Big: Detection-dog hopeful Tilly takes a nap with her mom. Follow her progress at: @americankennelclub on Instagram #AKCPuppyPack #PuppyTilly. Opposite: Learning to walk on all kinds of surfaces is an important part of the curriculum.

COURTESY OWNERS



Dog trainers Lyz Gregory (left) and Skyler Smith (right) take Angel, Apple, and Alexa on a field trip to the Eugene (Oregon) Airport. They toured the baggage claim, ticket counters, and passenger drop-off areas. The German Shorthaired Pointer littermates are participants in the AKC Patriotic Puppy program, an effort to prepare more American canines for future roles as detection dogs.

ernment agencies and most private vendors will not accept dogs until they are at least a year old.

But there is a lot of preparation that must be achieved in those 12 months for the puppy to be successful.

The AKC Patriotic Puppy program strives to make more puppies ready to enter the workforce and meet the growing need for detection dogs in the United States—for detection of explosives, narcotics, agricultural products and pests, arson triggers, and more.

The majority of U.S. detection dogs have been imported from Eastern Europe, which has a long history of producing working canines. As the entire world faces more threats, the competition for the dogs is high. The United States has a serious need for more dogs to fill roles crucial to protecting national security and resources.

The AKC Board of Directors established the AKC Detection Dog Task Force in 2016 to research how the AKC could help with the shortage.

“We cannot complain about the dependence on the foreign sourcing of dogs if we are not willing to prove we can do a better job within the borders of the United States of America,” says Scott Thomas, consultant to the AKC Detection Dog Task Force and manager of the AKC Patriotic Puppy program.

Thomas, the former breeding program manager for TSA, teaches participants



Learning and playtime overlap for puppy-in-training Fireball.

about the latest techniques for training future working dogs. They submit reports and videos of their work with their puppies and receive coaching and feedback from Thomas.

The program concentrates on a limited number of two core breeds: German Shorthaired Pointers and Labrador Retrievers. Both breeds are known for endurance, hunting ability, and keen noses. Owners of other breeds may apply for the program’s adjunct-breed division and receive access to instructional materials and data.

“It is approximately a one-year process of raising a dog. We need folks that are willing to look at new ideas and methods for raising superior detection canines,” Thomas says. “These ideas are shared on a website, on social media, with updates provided on a weekly basis, and all archival information is

Lessons to Learn from Detection Dog Trainers

All puppies—whether family pets, show dogs, or sports candidates—can benefit from many of the Patriotic Puppy skills and drills. Program Manager Scott Thomas says first, start with a healthy puppy with a sound temperament.

- Build an environmentally bold dog by having both home-based courses (such as tunnels, various surfaces to walk on, steps to scale, and obstacles to climb) and then take the dog to dog-friendly businesses. The goal is a dog who acts completely at home and comfortable no matter where he goes.
- Develop an independent dog. Let the dog be guided by the anticipation of reward from the environment, not necessarily needing assistance from the handler.
- To instill confidence in puppies, use clear communication and always put the dog in a situation where he can succeed. Avoid mixed signals or situations that may prevent the dog from being rewarded.

also available.”

In addition to managing the program, Thomas trains his own puppies, including a German Shorthaired Pointer named Task.

Task displayed his skills at a demonstration at the 2019 AKC US Detection Dog Conference. Entering a room full of people, the then-14-week-old Task acted like most puppies. He wiggled, jumped, and wagged his tail furiously.

But upon spotting a row of pots, Task showed why he is different than the average dog his age. He went to work scenting each one before stopping nose-down, motionless.

A beep sounded, and he ran to a remote-control treat dispenser for a reward for finding the pot with the correct odor. The reward comes from the remote dispenser to reduce dependence on the handler and to help develop puppies who think for themselves instead of relying on cues, Thomas says.

Patriotic Puppy requirements for raising a future working dog include:

- Weekly outings to expose dogs to simulated environment and obstacles that may be seen as an operational detection dog
- Developing olfactory acuity using remote-reward and odor recognition exercises
- Use of home-based environmental stimulation to develop the desire to go up, over, around, and through exercises of proprioception (floors, surfaces, noise, ramps, stairs, barriers, unstable surfaces, and other

distractions)

- Socialize a dog to be able to perform tasks in the presence of other people or other animals
- Use of self-discovery and self-reward to minimize dependence on the handler and create high levels of independent behavior
- Create an extreme desire for reward-object pursuit and possession
- Create a dog with high levels of endurance and conditioning.

Puppy Parades

Residents of Sweet Home, Oregon, barely glance when a large group of identical puppies enter the feed store or walk the town streets. They have been watching Fulk’s puppies since they were very young as they prep for the rigors of life as a working dog.

“We spend hours each day exposing the puppies to new environments, textures, sounds, and people. We take them on field trips to the airport, local feed stores, and on runs in our fields,” Fulk says. “We also work them each day on toy drive and odor detection. We will be adding more puppies to the program in the next year.”

While many people in the program are breeders, that is not a requirement. “Anyone with a young puppy can participate,” Thomas says. “We are looking for people who are willing to help in a ‘proof of concept’ that demonstrates the value of our American

breeders, trainers, and raisers and the dogs that they can produce to help protect our national security.”

North Carolina resident Sarah Burris is a professional detection-dog handler and had a desire to train a dog starting at the “ground floor.” She purchased a Labrador Retriever puppy from strong field lines for the program. Now 11 months old, Fireball will hopefully soon be sold to a law enforcement agency, Burris says. Once Fireball is placed, she plans to purchase two more puppies and eventually start her own breeding program.

“The best part is having a place to go with questions,” Burris says. “The website is very helpful with suggestions, tips, videos, and articles. It’s nice not to have a roadmap but a lot of ideas.”

The Task Force strives to make the Patriotic Puppy program a step toward developing a strong network of U.S. breeders and trainers producing highly skilled detection dogs to protect the country.

“The goal is, in the end, to have a dog with high levels of search ability, extreme desire for the reward object, a dog with the independence to be motivated in search for odor, and a dog resilient to stress and distraction,” Thomas says. **FD**

AKC staff member Penny Leigh has worked on the AKC Detection Dog Task Force.