

## **From beginning to end: a police dog's journey through life**

Officer Dodd told me not to approach Xander when I got out of the car. "He doesn't know you yet, so just don't get too close."

Xander had only ever bitten two people. The first time when his shock collar malfunctioned in training and he bit Dodd to let him know, and the second time when a woman at the courthouse leaned in just a little too close to say goodbye. I didn't plan on being a third.

I got out of the car and walked around the passenger side, keeping my distance as Xander jumped out of the backseat. He didn't look standoffish, in fact he looked almost sweet, if not for the biting. His coat was a golden brown, and his round brown eyes looked me over just briefly before fixating on Dodd. He is the perfect size for a Belgian Malinois, Dodd said. Sixty pounds and lean for his age. Xander's ears perked up at the mention of his name.

Dodd pulled a toy out of the car: a long, yellow, braided rope attached to a ball that fit in the palm of Dodd's hand. When Xander saw it, he began jumping up and down in excitement, trying to take it from Dodd's hand.

"Af," Dodd said. Xander stopped and looked at Dodd expectantly. After a moment, Dodd threw the toy and Xander ran to retrieve it.

"What did you say to him?" I asked as Xander darted through the high grass to find where his toy had landed.

"Oh, I said Af. It's Dutch for down," Dodd said matter-of-factly. "We use a variety of Dutch and English commands to direct the dogs. Dutch is their native language, and it makes sure we're the only ones giving them orders."

Xander, toy in tow, ran back and sat at Dodd's feet. Dodd pulled at the toy, engaging Xander, and for a moment they play a game of tug of war. Dodd straightens, gripping the toy as tightly as Xander continues to tug, his pointed snout sticking straight up in the air.

"Los," Dodd said. *Let go.* Xander dropped the toy.

"Af." Xander laid down at Dodd's side.

"Blijf," *Stay.* Dodd looked down, then threw the toy again. Xander started to move, but thought better of it, looking up at Dodd. Dodd motioned at Xander, and he went to retrieve the ball again. However, this time he couldn't go straight to it. He was searching the tall grass to find it.

"They have terrible depth perception," Dodd said, eyes focused on Xander's search. "He doesn't know how far I threw it, so he's got to sniff it out"

After 2 minutes of searching, Xander was still at a loss. Dodd traipsed into the high grass after him, hinting where the toy might be until Xander found it. Dodd threw it once more and walked back out of the tall grass as Xander sprinted after his toy.

“He has a little bit of separation anxiety,” Dodd had said. I could tell. Xander kept close to Dodd’s side and followed him wherever he walked. Throughout the rest of the day, he would bark anytime we left the car, and when we got back in would stick his nose through the kennel until Dodd acknowledged he was there by petting him briefly or by giving him a command. Xander was bred to work, and in their time together, Dodd learned to trust Xander before some people. He might not be a pet, but they shared a strong bond.

A law enforcement K-9 will be on the job for eight or nine years barring any health issues such as hip dysplasia or eyesight problems. Many are procured from Europe, trained using a variety of methods using combinations of positive and negative reinforcement, and are partnered with a handler for most of their lives. Upon retirement, they are taught how to be a dog and how to transition to life as a pet, with their handler or someone who will take them in. But no matter where they are, they leave a professional, and sometimes a personal, impact on those they come into contact with.

### **Coming to America**

In 2000, Lazaro M. Cabrera and his wife Maria opened Police Service Dogs Inc. in Oxford, Florida. Cabrera started as a police K-9 handler and quickly learned he had a knack for communicating with and training service dogs. He started small, training household civilian dogs in basic obedience and protection as well as selling police dogs.

“Little by little, word spread that we were selling police dogs. We started selling more and more dogs, and here we are in 2017 as one of the premier police dog companies in the southeastern United States,” Cabrera said.

Police Service Dogs Inc. works with and sells dogs to TSA, border patrol, the Pentagon, the Department of Defense and many other law enforcement agencies across the country such as Asheville Police Department in Asheville, North Carolina. This is because Cabrera, the company’s training director, has developed a reputation for finding high quality dogs to sell to the agencies he works with.

He visits contacts in Europe monthly to procure 20-22 dogs each month, and he follows a strict system for finding the best dogs.

First, the dog must have an open social character. For Cabrera, this means that the dog must allow any stranger to pet them. Next, he looks at their desire for a reward, their hunting skills, strength of bite, temperament and their strength of nerve. If a dog passes these tests, they are medically evaluated with x-rays of their hips, elbows and back to ensure their strength, and if this test is passed, that dog will be procured by Cabrera’s company.

Cabrera said he chooses dogs from Europe because breeders there focus on a dog's work ethic rather than aesthetics, which, he said, is how a dog should be bred.

"They are not as concerned as we are here in the states about the look or the size of a dog," he said. "They have better bloodlines and breeding programs than we do."

### **An unbreakable bond**

There are a variety of ways to train a dog. Steve "The Dogfather" Canaday, master trainer at Specialized K-9 Services in Asheville, N.C., said when training a detection dog, you can use rags, paint cans, boxes, and other items, but you must teach the dog to associate finding the scent with receiving a reward.

"It's making an association of an odor with a major reward each time. Then they want to go find that odor," he said.

Canaday uses the paint can method where he starts by putting an odor in an empty can and associates a word with it. He then puts the dog's nose in it to smell the odor, following it with a command such as sit or heel. If the dog does what is asked of them, Canaday gives them a treat immediately.

"Detection work is basically the same. Whether you're teaching them for accelerants of bombs or you teach them for human remains," Canaday said. "You just have to teach them that that's the source you want them to find."

These training methods come down to positive reinforcement, which is becoming more prevalent in police K-9 training today. Before, many officers were trained using a method called escape and avoidance. With this method, dogs were trained to complete an action in order to escape punishment. Handlers were also told their dog served as a tool or a piece of equipment used to complete a work task, but Scott Muse, a senior police officer and dog trainer at A.P.D., said that's not the case anymore.

"That's not something we do as an agency. We're trying to change the mindset of handlers in other agencies because it's not right, it looks bad and we want the dogs to live a good and enjoyable life," Muse said.

Muse does work across western North Carolina to instill this mentality in handlers and to teach them how to train their K-9's using positive reinforcement because it's more effective and creates a strong bond between dog and handler.

"The bond that we have is really unbreakable," he said. "I don't think I could come to work without a dog. I've been a handler for close to 11 years now, and I just can't imagine not having my partner with me."

### **'Trust your dog more than people'**

"I normally try to run him for 30 minutes to an hour every day, depending on my schedule," said Adam Dodd, a K-9 officer with A.P.D. His dog, Xander, is about 3.5 years old and has been working with Dodd since he became a police dog.

Police handlers are outfitted with police S.U.V.'s made to accommodate their K-9 partners. The backseat is replaced with a kennel, and an opening so officers can see their dogs in the rearview mirror. Dodd said many work days are spent listening to Xander shuffle around in the backseat as Dodd answers calls that come over the radio. Typically, Xander gets to show off his apprehension skills in cases such as domestic assault, robbery, and other crimes where a suspect has fled the scene.

"In Asheville, I can only let him out to do an apprehension for a felony," Dodd said. "He's trained to find somebody and hold them."

Once, Dodd and Xander were tracking a suspect from a scene. Eyewitnesses pointed Dodd to a wooded area, but Xander tried to lead him behind a building. Dodd chose to go into the wooded area, and they were unable to find the subject. After exiting the area, Xander led Dodd back to the building where they were able to find and apprehend the suspect.

"That was a lesson for me," Dodd said. "Sometimes you have to trust your dog more than people."

Off-duty, Xander spends much of his down time in a kennel. He's a young dog, and he's too hyper for Dodd's 10-year-old daughter.

"She'll pet him through the kennel, but she knows he's not a pet," Dodd said.

Dodd hopes to spend eight or nine years with Xander, but even now Xander's hips are tight which could lead to hip dysplasia, rendering him unable to work. However, until then, Dodd and Xander will work together to find suspects and detect narcotics.

### **Ice cream cones and shadow boxes**

Upon a dog's retirement, the handler has an opportunity to adopt their dog. Some do, but for others, it's not always feasible. When the time came for Muse's dog Boris to retire, Muse, A.P.D.'s K-9 trainer, had a new working dog and was training dogs from other agencies. He didn't think he could provide for Boris the way he wanted. As he tried to figure out where to place the dog, a woman name Anne Gibbs approached him.

"I realized she was knowledgeable enough and had the ability and the time to make sure Boris had a good environment," Muse said.

Anne Gibbs is the owner of K-9 Hero Haven, a nonprofit in Herndon, Pa. dedicated to giving retired service dogs a home and teaching others how to handle these dogs. She employs a system that she calls "Time, Love and Patience."

"It's surprising. With time, love and patience a lot of the dogs, even the dogs that are aggressive, will start relaxing," Gibbs said.

The process takes three to four months because Gibbs said the dogs have to learn what it's like to just being a dog. Each dog requires a different level of care, but Gibbs is dedicated to seeing her dogs enjoy their retirement in her home, or in their adopted home.

"It's like it's my calling... I don't say no to any dog, I just work with them," Gibbs said.

She uses a combination of positive reinforcement and soft handling to transition dogs into being able to enjoy down time and being a pet. Gibbs also makes sure the handlers are kept up to date on their dog's lives. Gibbs sent officer Muse pictures of Boris on a regular basis. In photos, he would be eating ice cream, playing outside, even him curled up in bed. Muse said he really like seeing how Boris was living a happy life.

"She would take him out for ice cream every so often. I'd never taken Boris for ice cream, but he really seemed to enjoy it," Muse said.

Unfortunately, Boris passed away from a seizure about one year after being placed with Gibbs at K-9 Hero Haven. When he passed, Boris was cremated. Anne made a shadow box memorializing Boris and sent him back home to Muse.

Muse said that Boris' passing was expected but it was still sad. He was appreciative of the gift from Anne and to this day it's hanging in his home, a reminder of the time he had with Boris.

"He got to enjoy retirement, and got to do a lot of different things," Gibbs said "Unfortunately it just wasn't very long."