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Just follow the pup'snose

There's no tracking technology quite like a good, old-fashioned dog nose. The Tampa Police Department's new bloodhound puppy is being trained to sniff out both the bad guys and those in need of help.

By EMILY NIPPS, Times Staff Writer
Published April 9, 2006

TAMPA -- Someday, Tampa police detectives will be stumped in a missing child case or a hunt for an elderly wanderer. And they'll have to call on Snoop, a floppy-eared, heavy-pawed, lanky 5-month-old bloodhound puppy.

By the time his services are needed, he should be fully trained and equipped with a nose that can smell your track for miles, perhaps up to two or three days after you've left it. He'll be able to smell a child's pillow and lope off with his snout to the ground, stopping only when the scent trail stops or the child is found. He'll be able to uncover a dangerous suspect's favorite hiding place.

All Snoop asks in return is a chorus of high-pitched praise and whoops, and maybe a dog treat or two. He has no idea that this fun game is serious police business.

"Hopefully, we'll never have to use him," said Tampa police Maj. Sophie Teague, Snoop's caregiver and the commander of District 2, which covers northern areas of the city, such as the University area and New Tampa. "But if we do, he'll be ready to go."

Even in these days of Global Positioning Systems and DNA evidence, there's no technology quite like a good, old-fashioned dog nose. Snoop is the only bloodhound among 14 dogs - mostly German shepherds - used by the Tampa police, and he is trained to find only people, not drugs or bombs. He is not trained to attack.

It's his olfactory superpowers that set him apart, and his ability to distinguish one man's scent from another's is helped by his long, droopy ears and folds of wrinkles, which trap the faintest of smells.

"When we walk into a pizza shop, we smell pizza," said Tampa police Officer Scott Bullard, a canine specialist who helps train Snoop. "When he walks into a pizza shop, he smells tomato sauce, garlic, onions, oregano . . ."

Each human's scent is unique, much like fingerprints and DNA makeup. People constantly shed microscopic pieces of skin along their paths. Police dogs are trained to sniff a "scent article," such as a dropped wallet or a pair of underwear, then follow the scent to its origin.

A bloodhound's nose has been useful in at least a handful of cases over the past few years. Ruby, one of two bloodhounds in the Hillsborough County sheriff's 19-dog canine unit, tracked a man for a mile and a half, from the liquor store he robbed to his Apollo Beach home. He had fled on a bicycle.

http://www.sptimes.com/2006/04/09/news_pf/Northoftampa/Just_follow_the_pup_s.shtml 4/16/2006

The same dog also found a suicidal woman who had been missing for four days and a kidnapped daughter of a sheriff's deputy.

So how does a puppy go from paper training to solving crime? It starts with a game of hide-and-seek.

Teague and a couple of canine trainers strap Snoop into a black harness leash every afternoon, a routine they began when he was about 12 weeks old. They started him off by running and hiding somewhere near the District 2 building, then letting Snoop discover them.

They gradually got him to work from a scent article, dropping on the ground a piece of gauze that had been tucked into someone's shirt and having Snoop follow the smell to the person.

Snoop can now find a trail that is 10 minutes old, but he might eventually work up to a day or two.

"He's a smart puppy," Teague said. "He's starting to figure out his own problems. We'll let him walk and he'll get off track, and all of a sudden he'll whip around and return to where he left off to get back on it."

Even if the police never have to use Snoop on a case, he'll still serve a purpose for the department. A bloodhound, one of the oldest icons of detective and police work, tends to be a public favorite, especially among children. Snoop will make a good spokesdog at school and expo events.

"It's nice having a dog as a partner," Bullard said. "A lot of people like to come up and pet the dog, and they usually have questions about the dog."

Since joining the department, Snoop has already filled some big shoes, especially for Teague.

After her last bloodhound companion, Jimbo, died suddenly from bloat caused by a flipped stomach in November, she was distraught and unable to talk about him for days.

In January, the Jimmy Ryce Bloodhound Network donated 8-week-old Snoop to the Tampa police, and he and Teague immediately became friends. Snoop reminds Teague and the canine trainers of Jimbo. Sometimes they slip up and call him "Jim."

Unlike most canine owners, who receive dogs that are at least a year old, Teague has had to raise Snoop herself. She has dealt with the crying in the night, the messes on the floor, the accidents in the wrong places, like the lobby of the district office.

She has also enjoyed his playful nature, his stubborn personality and the curiosity of a learning puppy. He loves riding in her truck, and he sleeps in a cage in her office.

Like his human colleagues, though, he doesn't take his job lightly.

"When we click on that harness," Teague said, "he knows he's going to work."

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