Sporting Breeds In Demand For Explosives Detection Work As Need Increases

By Penny Leigh

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The ports of San Francisco are safer thanks to the hard work of US Coast Guard Officer Feco. Feco patrolled ferries and shore-side buildings. He frequently is deployed with the Maritime Security and Safety Team to ships at sea and even to perform security for presidential visits and national football games.

Finding bombs is the valuable skill that Feco possesses, and the only payment he ever requires is a squeaky tennis ball on a rope.

Feco is a 5-year-old Vizsla who joined the US Coast Guard in December 2014 at a little over a year old.

“As with most Vizslas, Feco has a high-energy level and drive to work. He truly enjoys finding an odor source and the reward that comes along with it,” said Petty Officer Cory Sumner, Feco’s handler.

The skills of highly trained explosives dogs like Feco are in great demand today, with the rise of homegrown terrorism and mass shootings in America. In addition to the US Government, bomb dogs are sought by malls, schools, universities, theaters, sports stadiums and concert arenas with one major problem: there are not enough to fill the need.

The United States imports about 80 to 90 percent of their working dogs from Europe, which has a rich heritage for breeding and training dogs for police/military style competitions and certifications.

German Shepherds and Belgian Malinois remain the most popular choice for patrol dogs by law enforcement, and many are dual-purpose canines that also perform detection work. But the breeds in greater demand for public detection work are sporting dogs, including Vizslas, German Shorthaired Pointers, German Wirehaired Pointers and Labrador Retrievers. These breeds are less intimidating to the public, and their incredible hunting instinct is easily transferred to searching for explosives.

Pointing breeds have great endurance – a trait valued when there is a bomb scare or public security threat, said Sgt. Matthew Henry of the Floyd County Police Department in Rome, Georgia.

“Finding explosives is not for every dog. There is some kind of reward that comes with it,” Henry said. “After a dog finds an odor source, it is expected to drive to work. He truly enjoys finding an odor source and the reward that comes along with it,” said Henry.

The TSA's detection dog breeding program typically out-source the production of resources needed for national security. Due to budget cuts, this spurred Thomas to write the American Kennel Club and ask for support in encouraging a domestic breeding program that would reduce the need to rely on foreign sources for national protection.

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Veteran Tom Battaglia, a long-time German Shepherd fancier, has been fascinated since he was a child with the amazing contributions that his breed has made to the military. When he became president of the German Shepherd Dog Club of America in the early 1990s, he organized a trip by the club’s board to the Department of Defense canine center at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. This began a long-time relationship between Battaglia and the military dog team, resulting in many trips to Lackland and Battaglia being named as an advisor to the TSA’s canine program.

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The AKC, has always been a leader in purpose-bred pure-bred dogs. And these purpose-bred pure-bred dogs that have the skills, ability and breeding to produce the traits needed for detection dogs to successfully do their important jobs,” Battaglia said. “It is a natural role for AKC to assist in meeting this national need to protect our country.”
work, including low market price for top field line puppies and complicated government vendor contracts that make it difficult for individual breeders.

The government has stated that European dogs are less expensive than buying U.S. dogs, but they do not include the additional expenses of travel that could last up to six weeks for their procurement team, including the related costs of a veterinarian; shipping the dogs; and conducting health screenings and training while they are in Europe and again when they arrive.

In addition, most legislators are unaware of the U.S.’s dependence on foreign dogs and the fact that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to meet U.S. needs from foreign sources.

The AKC Government Relations team, led by Vice President Sheila Goffe, has made strides in bringing these issues to the attention of lawmakers.

AKC Government Relations provided recommendations in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 2810) to support using and developing additional sources for high quality domestically-bred working dogs. HR 2810 also requires the Department of Defense to provide reports on specific aspects of military working dog evaluation, procurement and breeding programs. This includes comparative costs of foreign versus domestically-bred dogs, availability of domestically-bred dogs, and non-classified requirements for “green” (minimally-trained) dogs.

The most successful detection dogs are developed from field/working lines known to produce dogs that can work all day without losing interest or energy.

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Networking/Education – The first AKC US Detection Dog Conference took place in early 2017 to start a conversation about increasing the domestic supply of detection candidates. The stakeholders and speakers included members of government, academia and private training/breeding facilities. The 2018 conference is planned for Aug. 28-30 in Durham, NC, and breeders and all interested parties are invited to attend.

In addition, the AKC committee members have conducted research to talk to the experts about the issue and needs, including visits to Lackland AFB, Auburn University Canine Performance Department, and the University of Pennsylvania Working Dog Center.

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year of age so they are ready to move into advanced training. But this can be difficult as not all breeders are willing or able to keep a puppy for several months so some training centers have started puppy programs so they can accept younger dogs.

K2 Solutions has started purchasing puppies as young as 8 weeks, as well as breeding some of their own dogs “because there is such a demand for these dogs and the supply of good dogs is not there,” K2 Chief Trainer Tracy Campbell said. “We are hoping that the proper breeding, proper nurturing and training them as puppies will make them really good working dogs.”

If breeders opt to keep puppies until they are 10 months or older, they need to provide plenty of socialization and early training opportunities so the dogs are prepared to enter advanced course work. The 2018 AKC US Detection Dog Conference will include workshops on providing the best foundation training for future detection dogs.

In addition to odor detection training, Feco has been acclimated to most any situation that he might encounter on the job with the Coast Guard, including helicopters.

“Training on board helicopters allows the capability to be delivered to a vessel at sea so canine bomb sweeps can be conducted before a vessel can enter the port,” Sumner said.

For all their hard work at their very intense jobs, both Feco and Blaze enjoy a normal life when off-duty and at home with their handlers.

“Blaze loves to hang out with the family and be outside. She is most definitely still a bird dog and loves to chase and point out birds,” Henry said. “She loves to go on runs and play fetch.”

For more information about the AKC US Detection Dog Conference 2018 or the AKC Detection Dog Task Force, contact the author at pxl@akc.org or call 919-816-3749.