

# Sporting Breeds In Demand For Explosives Detection Work As Need Increases

By Penny Leigh  
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**T**he ports of San Francisco are safer thanks to the hard work of US Coast Guard Officer Feco.

Feco patrols 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.

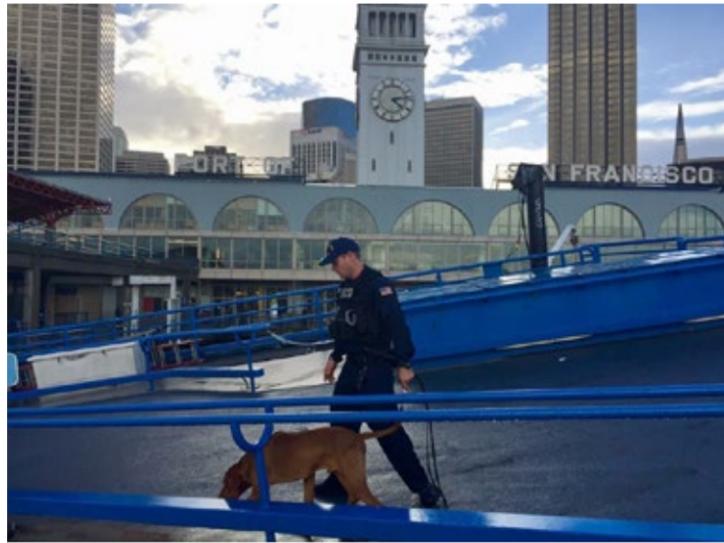
Finding bombs is the valuable skill that Feco possesses, and the only payment he ever requires is a squeaky tennis ball on a rope.

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.

Henry’s partner is Blaze, a female German Shorthaired Pointer who never stops running – until she catches a whiff of explosives. She and Henry serve an eight-county area in north-west Georgia but are on call for the entire state.

“The German Shorthair is just an excellent breed in my opinion; they are so loyal and hard working. They aim to please and are really just built for their odor capabilities,” Henry said. “They don’t tire out and don’t have aggression issues. I can’t say enough good about the GSP.”



Although sporting dogs are popular in America, the US Government still imports many from Europe, including Feco.

Feco was born in Germany and was trained by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

There is mounting concern about America’s dependence on imported dogs to provide this national security service. Due to growing terrorism threats and consequent demand for working dogs within Europe and around the world, there is now a shortage of foreign dogs available to protect the United States.

“The irony is that as a nation we do not typically out-source the production of resources needed for national security. It is even more difficult to accept the fact, that

as a nation, we cannot meet our own needs for working dogs when we have so many breeders and dogs within our borders,” said Scott Thomas, former breeding program manager of the TSA Canine Breeding and Development Center.

The TSA’s detection dog breeding program was eliminated in 2012 as part of 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.

AKC Board Member Dr. Carmen 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. When Battaglia received the letter from Thomas regarding help with a US breeding program, he took the matter to the AKC Board of Directors, which formed the AKC Detection Dog Feasibility Study Committee to document the current state of detection dog use in the United States and explore how to increase the domestic supply of this crucial national resource.

“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.”

The AKC committee, headed by AKC Senior Vice President Mark Dunn, interviewed key stakeholders involved in bomb detection including people from academia, government, military, policing, training and breeding. Subsequently, the AKC has launched initiatives focused on Government Relations, Networking/Education and Breeder Outreach.

**Government Relations** – There are many obstacles that stand in the way of U.S. breeders being able to easily sell dogs to the government for detection



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. HR 2810 has passed the House and, as of this writing, is under consideration in conference.

Goffe also was invited to testify on the issue before a Senate committee in October 2017, where she expressed the dire need for these dogs to protect the country.

"Experts recognize that there is no better or more efficient way to detect explosives than through the use of high quality, specially trained scent detector dogs. Since the terrorist attacks on 9-11, and subsequent attacks worldwide, global demand for high quality explosives detection dogs has skyrocketed," Goffe said. "A shortage of appropriate, domestically-bred dogs available for work as explosive detection dogs presents a significant threat to U.S. security."

**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 gov-

ernment, 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.

**Breeder Outreach** – AKC works with thousands of breeders around the country, but most are unaware of the detection dog shortage. The AKC Feasibility Study committee is taking steps to communicate the need to breeders through presentations to kennel clubs and parent clubs and articles in AKC newsletters and magazines.

### The Right Stuff

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.

"I look for drive, detection ability, tractability and intelligence," said Lane Kjellsen, CEO of K2 Solutions, a detection dog training center in North Carolina. Kjellsen

is also an AKC Field Trial judge and long-time competitor in retriever field trials and hunt tests.

"The field-line dogs have been bred for a long time with a purpose to work. These are the type of dogs that can end up in rescue as their owners do not understand how to channel their energy into jobs," he said.

K2 Solutions trained Blaze after purchasing her from a field-line kennel in Kansas.

Blaze's desire to hunt was focused on seeking the odor of explosives. She was selected for the K2 Person Borne training program, meaning she can trail moving odor, such as a bomb in a backpack that a person carries into a crowded area.

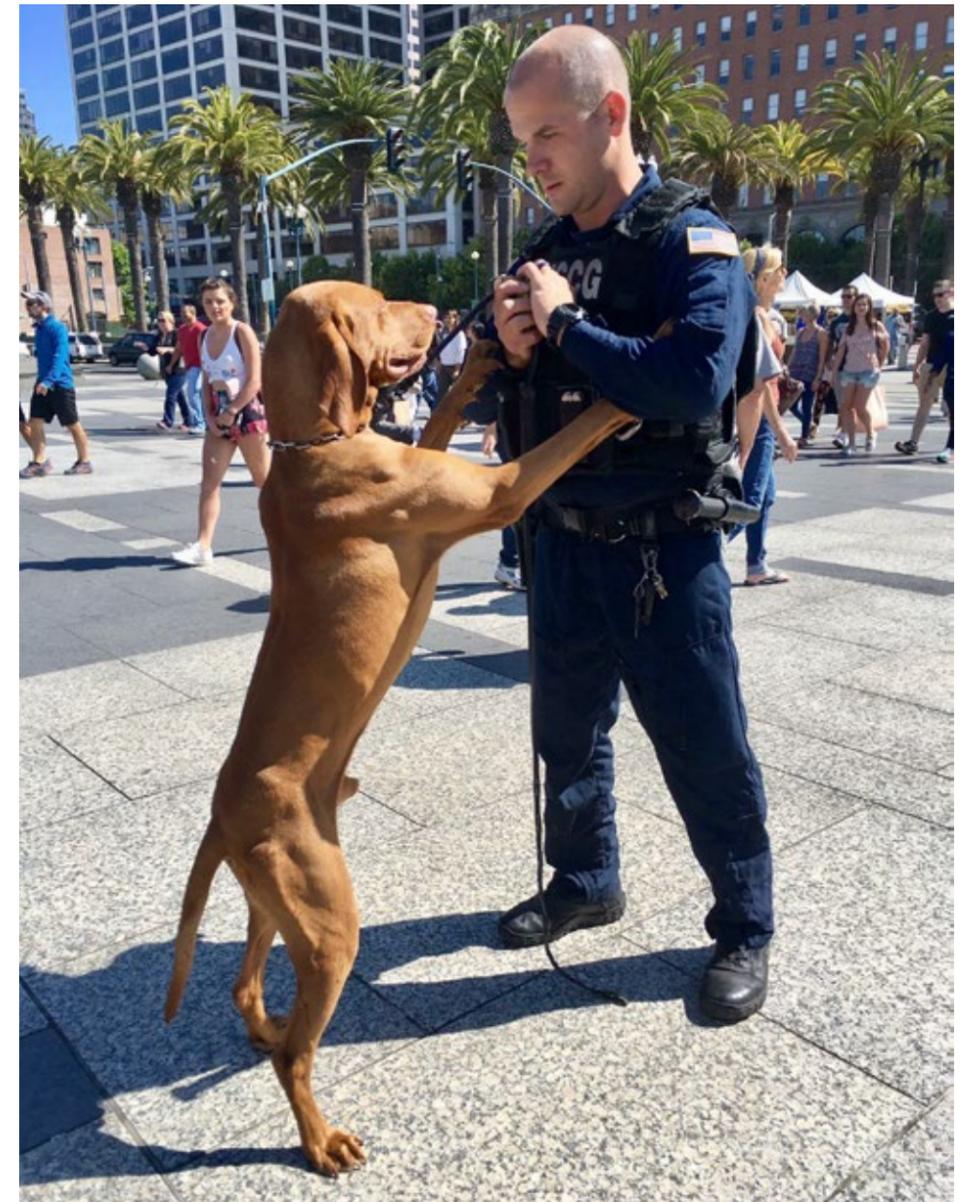
Blaze had received her formal obedience and odor work training when Henry joined her for the "real world scenario" training.

"I am her first handler so there was a bonding period, which we actually had to do while doing our training in school. I picked her up two days before our training started so we didn't have the usual couple of weeks to get to know each other. It made the first couple of weeks interesting. We were put through a five-week school where most of the training was hands-on, running different scenarios at all kinds of different places in metro-Atlanta," Henry said.

"We had to test out of the class with at least a 90% pass rate and once a year after that for certification. Blaze has passed every year with a 100% completion and is to this day as hard working and methodical as she was on day one."

When the US Government receives a detection dog candidate, they must pass a stringent health examination, including hip, elbow and lumbar radiographs, and then undergo an evaluation for these key traits:

**Sociability** – Dogs must be sociable enough to be easily handled by people and to be at ease around people of all types, but should not be so sociable that they are distracted by the presence of people.



**Environmental Stability** – Dogs must not show fear or nervousness around loud and/or strange noises; they must show physical rigor whether working in very hot or cold temperatures; and they must be bold and willing to walk/climb on strange surfaces.

**Desire to Obtain Reward** – The dog's drive to obtain its reward is the key to the dog working. Detection dogs are trained on toys, such as Kongs or tennis balls. The dogs must want that toy more

than anything. Food is not used as a reward on the job as it is difficult for handlers to carry, and there is too much food in the environment that could confuse the dog.

**Hunting Ability** – The dogs must show intense drive to keep hunting, even when they are not finding anything, without getting frustrated and without giving false alerts.

The US Government and most training programs want to purchase dogs at about a

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](mailto:pxl@akc.org) or call 919-816-3749.*



**Join us at the**

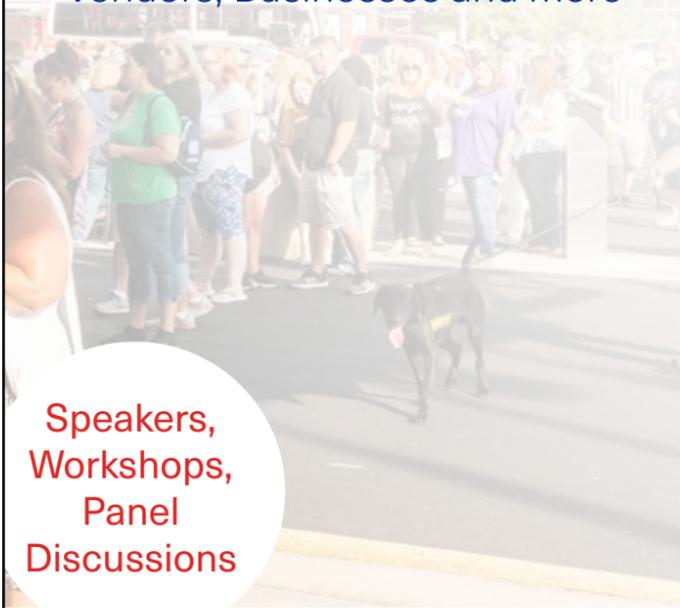
# AKC US Detection Dog Conference 2018



**Aug. 28-30, Durham, NC**

Explore Solutions to the Shortage of Domestic Dogs for Detection Work

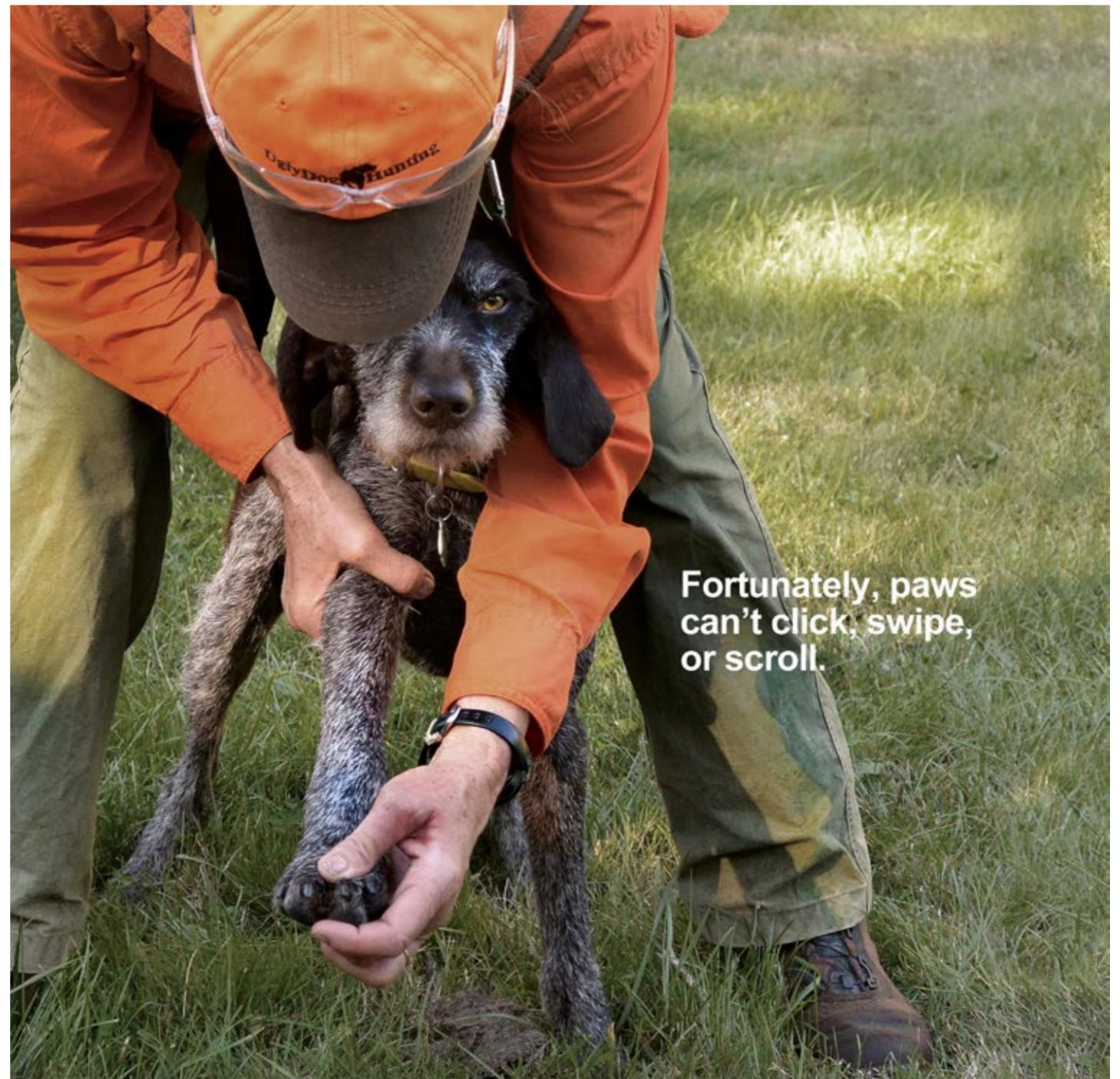
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