



Peppers and  
Michelle Lyman

Police K-9s  
vie for  
the title  
of America's  
Best Nose.

By Mara Bovsun

# Masters of Hide-and-Seek

**W**e see them in theater lobbies and subways, at airports, ballparks, and schools, or sifting through rubble after disasters. Police K-9s are everywhere but, outside of law enforcement, few people really know much about them. Where do they come from? How are they trained? What exactly do they do?

In the fall of 2021, the United States Police Canine Association (USPCA) and the AKC teamed up to answer some of these questions through the

AKC/USPCA K-9 Detection Dog Challenge. First of its kind, the event took place on Nov. 15 at the PNC Arena in Raleigh, North Carolina, and was broadcast on ESPN2 on Nov. 28.

Melinda Ruopp, USPCA's national secretary, said that it was essential to keep it real, highlighting the work that police dogs do every day to keep America safe.

The challenge was based on the USPCA's own certification trials. These annual tests assess a team's abilities in a specific discipline. Police K-9s and their

handlers must be held to high, well-defined standards; ongoing training and testing is a fact of life.

The USPCA regional offices identified 20 top teams—10 in narcotics and 10 in explosives—for the competition.

In the first round, explosives teams scanned backpacks in bleachers, and narcotics teams examined suitcases in a lobby. In the second round, teams investigated a line of vehicles parked on the playing field.

The first-place narcotics team was Daobandon Meunsaveng and K-9

Bero, from the Des Moines (Iowa) Police Department. Michelle Lyman and K-9 Peppers, a 3-year-old Labrador Retriever, from the Raleigh (North Carolina) Police Department, won the explosives challenge.

AKC Family Dog asked them why their partners are scent-detection standouts.

## Superstar Genes, Floppy Ears

Law enforcement agencies often get dogs from outside the United States. But when Raleigh police needed a new explosives sniffer in 2019, they found the perfect pup practically in their backyard—North Carolina’s Core Sound Retrievers. The black Lab puppy was initially destined for a hunting home. When that arrangement fell through, the pup came to the attention of Lyman’s department. They visited the kennel to assess her potential.

“She’s definitely a genetic superstar,” says Lyman, who has been working with K-9s for 12 of her 18 years in law enforcement.

Peppers is a born working dog. Physically, she’s athletic, sound, and muscular. But what sets her apart,



K-9 Bero and Dao Meunsaveng display smooth teamwork as they examine suitcases during the challenge.

Lyman says, is her brain.

“She’s up for anything, and she is ready to work and go all the time,” says Lyman.

Her hunting drive is relentless.

“She wants to go out and hunt, like she’s using her nose to look for things instinctively, instead of because I asked her to or trained her to do that,” says Lyman.

Lyman chose a training method

based on verbal markers to mold precise alerts.

“You see a lot of dogs, when they find something, they turn around and they’ll look at their handler, or they’ll try to find where their reward is coming from,” she says. With marker training, Lyman taught Peppers to stay laser-focused on the odor until she hears the marker word *yes*. K-9 Peppers is one of the two dogs who work with Officer Lyman. Her other dog, K-9 Jakko, is a dual-purpose German Shepherd Dog who handles narcotics detection and patrol work.

Lyman says that Jakko, as a “pointy-eared dog,” has the natural instincts needed to apprehend criminals, which sometimes means the use of teeth.

This is not in Peppers’ nature. Like many Labs, she can’t help loving the people around her. The breeder told Lyman that all her littermates were the same.

“When I first got her, she was super loving. She gives kisses all the time. I’m like, *wow*, this dog really loves me. We’ve bonded so quick,” Lyman recalls.



Eager to Start: Peppers preparing to start the vehicle search

SUSU HAUSER FOR AKC



Traditional police-dog breeds, such as German Shepherd Dogs and Belgian Malinois, and some sporting dogs—Labs, a German Shorthaired Pointer, and a Weimaraner—were among the competitors.

Then she noticed that Peppers was showering kisses on everyone, even total strangers. She began to doubt the depth of their bond.

Over time, Lyman realized that she and Peppers really do have a special connection, the kind that is forged in working partners. Peppers just has a lot of love to give.

“She is the sweetest, most cuddly dog.”

## Clear Head and Good Manners

Teamwork and obedience training were the keys to the winning performance for Officer Dao Meunsaveng of the Des Moines, Iowa, PD. It showed in the smooth technique they displayed during the competition. For example, in the vehicle search, Meunsaveng swept his hand over



Work hard, play hard. Peppers loves swimming and retrieving.

each car and truck in a distinct pattern. Bero followed his lead. “People forget that K-9 teams are a *team*. It would not be fair for me to expect Bero to do all the work,” Meunsaveng told FD.

In 2021, Meunsaveng says they took about \$500,000 worth of methamphetamine and \$36,000 of cocaine off the streets.

Meunsaveng has been in law enforcement for more than 25 years, but Bero is his first K-9. He strongly emphasizes obedience training, which he sees as the best foundation for a clear-headed, calm, and well-focused partner.

Bero is a dual-purpose dog, skilled at sniffing out illegal substances and apprehending criminals, two very different disciplines.

The pair is together constantly, working or honing their skills.

“I’m with Bero more than I am with

my wife and my kids,” Meunsaveng says. “People will say, *trust your dog*. I think it needs to be more than trust. You almost have to have a sixth sense about each other.”

But it’s not all work for this decorated four-footed crime fighter. When Bero’s police vest and collar come off, he blends in with his partner’s wife and kids and the family’s small menagerie—cats, chickens, another German Shepherd, a Lab, and five Shih Tzus.

“When he goes home,” Meunsaveng says, “he’s a pet.” **FD**



“Tell us again how you caught the bad guy!” Bero at home with pals

For more information on the USPCA, visit [uspcak9.com](http://uspcak9.com).  
To learn more about the AKC’s Detection Dog Task Force, visit [akc.org/lakc-detection-dog-task-force](http://akc.org/lakc-detection-dog-task-force).

TOP: SUSU HAUSER FOR AKC; CENTER AND BOTTOM: COURTESY OWNER