

Against all odds

by Natalie Ann Comeau

An RCMP officer and her dog prove they've got what it takes.



PHOTO: IAN SMITH / VANCOUVER SUN

Stephanie Michaud had always been an animal lover. So when she joined the RCMP in her early 20s, she naturally set her sights on the canine unit. Michaud worked hard to earn her dream job and in 1998 became the third female officer to be accepted into the elite RCMP Police Dog Service. Last year, at one of the largest police canine competitions in North America, Michaud showed the world just how much she deserved that job when she and her dog 'Snyper' won four medals and placed first overall. Three-year-old Snyper was the youngest dog at the competition, and Michaud was the first female to take the top prize in the trial's 27-year history.

"I grew up playing with dogs instead of dolls," Michaud recalls. "I just loved the idea of working with a dog as a partner." During her teens, she volunteered as a quarry with the Vancouver Police Dog Squad, donning a padded bite suit and playing the bad guy during training sessions. The experience led Michaud to her career in law enforcement.

Breaking ground

When she joined the RCMP in the early 1990s, there were no female handlers in the Police Dog Service – so the ambitious Michaud set out to earn one of the coveted spots. She spent 7-1/2 years volunteering as a quarry, one of the prerequisites for becoming a handler. Raising a puppy for the police dog service is another prerequisite, so Michaud raised not one but 13 puppies for the program. "My kennel never sat empty," she says. "I'd finish one and get another right away."

The level of physical fitness required of canine handlers is exceptional. When tracking a fleeing suspect, they need the stamina to run for several kilometres behind their dogs, boosting them over fences and other obstacles in their path – and the strength to face off with a combative suspect at the end of the chase. "You won't last in the dog section if you're not in excellent shape," Michaud explains. Competitive by nature, she was determined to meet the unit's exacting selection criteria. "I had to do exactly what the guys did to qualify," she explains, "but I tried harder knowing that I was breaking new ground." She finally earned her spot in 1998, becoming one of the first females admitted since the unit was established in 1935.

Michaud worked hard, logging hundreds of hours of training both on and off duty. Her first dog, a German Shepherd Dog named 'Abe,' had to be retired after just two years of service due to health problems. She was teamed with her second dog, a female German Shepherd named 'Casey,' in 2000. A couple of years before Casey's anticipated retirement, Michaud contacted her friend Suzanne Eviston to order a puppy she could raise as Casey's replacement.

The 2009 World Police & Fire Games

From July 31 to August 9, 12,000 police officers and fire-fighters from around the world will compete at more than 60 events in and around the Vancouver area. Visit www.2009wpfg.ca for more information.

A well-defined goal

Michaud and Eviston had quarried together for the Vancouver Police Dog Squad during their teens. Like Michaud, Eviston chose a career as a police-dog handler, working with the Everett Police Department north of Seattle. Eviston had also been breeding German Shepherds for police work since the early 1990s under the kennel name Von Grünheide. Her dogs have been placed with police departments across North America and around the world, and she attributes her success to well-researched bloodlines and well-defined goals.

“There’s a reason for the breed standard, and it’s not just about winning in the show ring,” Eviston explains. “If structure is wrong, the dog won’t move properly and will eventually break down.” Police work is physically demanding and the canine unit sees a lot of action. “You catch the bad guy and you’re onto the next call,” Eviston explains. “Police dogs need to have a ton of energy and drive, but they also have to be biddable and forgiving.”

With seven years’ experience to her credit, Michaud knew exactly what she wanted in her next dog. “She was very specific,” Eviston recalls. “The dog could not be handler or dog aggressive, and it had to be social so it would be a good PR dog.” Michaud wasn’t planning on picking up her new puppy for another year but one day, while observing one of her litters frolicking in her kitchen, a pure black pup caught Eviston’s eye. “Steph may not be ready, but he’s here,” she thought to herself. “He’s perfect. He’s exactly what you want,” she told her friend over the phone. One month later, Eviston drove to Vancouver and introduced Michaud to her future partner.

Head start

Michaud raised four-month-old Snyder alongside Casey, socializing him to everything he would encounter as a working police dog while giving him a head start on his formal training. “They sure don’t look like police dogs when they’re babies,” she says, recalling how her new pup seemed so small and insecure. But with three generations of police dogs behind him – his sire is Eviston’s patrol dog, ‘Axle’ – police work is in Snyder’s blood.

The benefits of the puppy’s on-the-job training were a pleasant surprise to Michaud. “When teaching Snyder to find an article, like a t-shirt with human scent on it, I’d first have him watch Casey from the truck,” she explains. “Seeing her working and having fun would build his desire, and he’d get out of the truck ready to show off.” His potential was evident from the start, and he consistently met all the benchmarks.

When Snyder reached 18 months of age, Casey retired and he began his formal training at the RCMP Police Dog Service Training Centre in Innisfail, Alta. “He got through way ahead of schedule,” Michaud recalls,

finishing in six weeks instead of the usual 11. The team became operational in the fall of 2007.

Competitive spirit

Although they had just graduated and had virtually no street experience, Michaud and Snyder entered the 2007 Canadian Police Canine Association Championships in Edmonton and placed 10th overall. “It was an excellent finish for a brand new dog that hadn’t worked the street yet,” Michaud says, and she set her sights on the 2008 competition.

To give them an edge, Michaud turned to dog trainer Dave Ellery. In addition to regular training, she worked with Ellery on her own time, every Tuesday evening for five hours. “Dave has a gift for reading and training dogs,” Michaud explains. “I could not have got Snyder to the level he’s at without his guidance.”

In July 2008, the team returned to compete in the Canadian Police Canine Association Championships at the Can-Am Police-Fire Games in Saskatoon. Three-year-old Snyder was the youngest and least-experienced dog at the competition, but that didn’t stop him from taking fourth place in agility, third in tracking, second in criminal apprehension and first in both explosives detection and evidence search. And his handler broke records of her own, marking the first time since its inception in 1981 that a female had won the competition. After a flurry of media attention, the team returned to work in their home detachment of Surrey-Langley, B.C.

In April, Michaud and her husband, an RCMP homicide detective, celebrated the birth of their first child. But motherhood hasn’t dampened Michaud’s competitive spirit, and she and Snyder have been keeping on top of their training. This month, they plan to return to defend their title at the 2009 World Police & Fire Games in B.C. And this time, the world will be watching.

Natalie Ann Comeau is a freelance writer with a special interest in working canines. She lives in Oakville, Ont., with her family and two unemployed dogs. E-mail her at nacomeau@cogeco.ca.