



IN THEIR DEBT

by Shelley Bueche

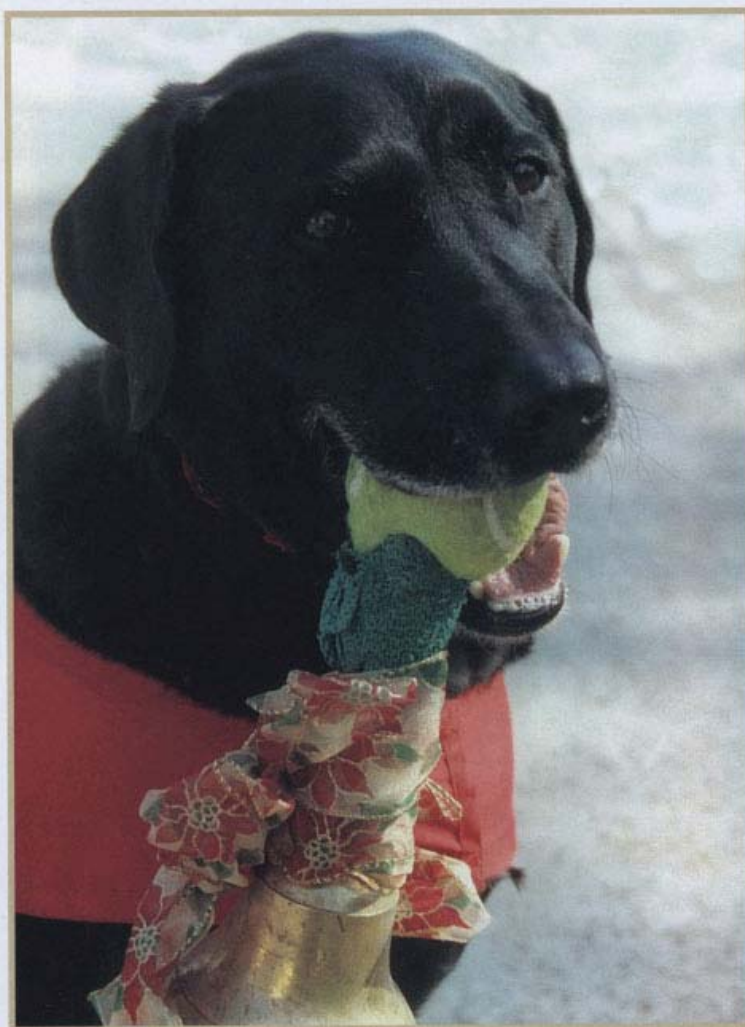
Dog Scouts of America

*Scouting has gone to the dogs,
and these hounds have the badges to prove it.*

Dog Scouts of America is the brainchild of founder Lonnie Olson. It is a nonprofit agency that started out with a few troops in 1995 and now has operations throughout the country and even overseas, with stations in Australia, Canada, and Japan. The Dog Scout parent's motto, *Our dog's lives are much shorter than ours – let's help them enjoy their time with us as much as they can*, aptly summarizes the Dog Scout philosophy of promoting the human-animal bond. The canine scouts have their own motto: *Let us learn all that we can, so that we can become more helpful.*

In the early 1990s, Lonnie Olson wanted her dog Karli, a border collie, to go to camp. Not just any camp, but one where she and Karli could participate in a variety of activities rather than being limited to a few options. "I started Dog Scouts when I realized there were no groups offering what I was looking for," explains Olson.

Dog Scout members work in the areas



Chelsea rings a bell for Salvation Army collections.

of public education and community involvement, and teach behaviors with positive reinforcement for canines and their owners. And just because typical working dog breeds, such as Labrador retrievers, and other large breeds are well represented in Dog Scouts, doesn't mean that smaller canines are not welcome to join the club. In fact, Olson says that a number of smaller-breed dogs are active in the Scouts. "One gal has about seven Chihuahuas, another has a rat terrier. Probably the most common smaller breeds [in DSA enrollment numbers] are Jack Russells and Shelties."

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOANNE WEBER



Kat Vogtman with Chelsea.

Like most scouting troops, Dog Scout troops frequently volunteer their time and energy for worthwhile causes. Troop #130 is an active troop that includes Chelsea, a nine-and-a-half-year-old black Lab and her parent Kat Vogtman. The troop hails from near Battle Creek, Michigan, and is made up of seven humans and nine dogs. Troop #130 participates in fundraisers for their local branch of the Salvation Army. Dog Scouts are trained to ring a bell while soliciting donations for the agency. "I'm not sure of the exact amount we raised as it goes into the kettle, and we filled two kettles," says Vogtman, but she can safely say the amount was above \$500.

Other DSA fundraisers include the Lone Star Paws Squad troop volunteer-

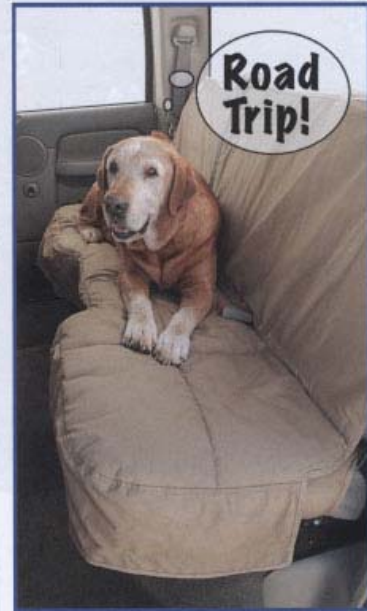
ing for the Pet Companion program, Meals On Wheels, even raising money to purchase bulletproof vests for police dogs! Dog Scout troops also volunteer to clean creeks, visit nursing homes, visit schools to help children read, and talk about humane education and responsible pet ownership.

Cindy and Mart Ratliff are troop leaders for Troop #119, in Fort Worth, Texas. With approximately 70 parents and even more canine members in the group, #119 is the largest of the DSA troops and very active when it comes to community service. Every year in November, the Squad goes to local North Texas businesses to seek donations for gift bags for Meals On Wheels clients and their dogs. They collect toys, dog treats, dog bowls, collars, and, of course, plenty of food. According to Cindy Ratliff, when it comes to distribution time, "There are many happy tears flowing."

Sunstar, a yellow Lab and service dog, and her owner, Katherine Hevener, belong to Dog Scout Troop #107 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Hevener is visually impaired, and Sunstar assists her in a variety of ways. "Sunstar's guide work is absolutely fabulous. One instance in particular during that first year proved Sunstar to be trustworthy, and that involved a hybrid car that was turning on a red light. I did not hear the car. When I thought the light had changed, I told Sunstar to go forward. She very decisively put her body in front of my left knee as if to say; *Excuse me, we're not moving.*"

Chris Puls, leader of Troop #107, is impressed by Sunstar's abilities. "Sunstar is an amazing Labrador doing amazing work. When she is in harness, she is fully on-duty. Being involved in the troops gives her some 'time off' to just be a dog, especially during troop parties and the off-leash time we have at a local doggie daycare where we hold our troop meetings."

But Dog Scouts of America isn't all about responsibility and proper stewardship; these hounds have fun! Sled-dog racing, Frisbee catching, agility, search and rescue,



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A typical Dog Scout troop at a summer camp.

flyball, water rescue, and kayaking are just a few activities that these canine campers and their owners can participate in, without breed discrimination.

No Scout troop would be complete without summer camps, and Dog Scouts of America offers camps for beginning, intermediate, and advanced scouts. Camps are held at the Maple Valley Conservatory in the northern lower peninsula of Michigan. The campsite includes a large pond, complete with a beach and boating area. The summer camps last six days and five nights during the months of June and July. There are also mini camps available: one at the Michigan location; at Lake Texoma, located near the Texas-Oklahoma state border; and mini-camps offered by Canine Legacy at their Sequim, Washington, location, near the Olympic Mountains.

There are also core areas of merit badges that dogs who have earned their Dog Scout title can acquire, including:

Trails: backpacking, hiking, biking, letter-boxing, geocaching, and overnight camping;

Obedience: all levels of obedience work, art of shaping (canine painting), tricks 101, musical canine freestyle, drill team, and household manners;

Agility: obstacle and agility badges;



Dog Scout members Kathryn Hevener and Sunstar carrying the torch for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

Water Safety: puppy paddlers, beach buddies, boating safety, and water rescue;

Other merit badges: phoDOgraphy, sign language for dogs, retrieving, fundraising, tracking, scent discrimination, search and rescue, hunting retriever, coursing, herding, temperament tested, flyball, scent hurdle racing, triathadog, Frisbee, dock diving, weight pulling, sledding, carting, skijoring, earth dog, terrier steeplechase, first aid, dog care and maintenance, travel safety, disaster preparedness, therapy dog, Clean Up America, and community service.

Realizing that responsible dog ownership begins at home, the Dog Scouts of America initiated a Junior Scout program in 2005. Children ages six and under are eligible to work toward a Junior Dog Scout certificate, and older children and teens, from ages seven through 16, may work to earn a Junior Dog Scout badge under the supervision of a troop leader.

Dog Scouts of America is tailored to canines and canine enthusiasts as a way for members to connect with one another, interact with the community in a positive way, and thoroughly enjoy themselves at the same time.

For more information on the Dog Scouts of America, visit their website www.dogscouts.org, or phone them at (989) 389-2000.

Shelley Bueche is a freelance writer and member of Dog Writer's Association of America. She and her family reside in Central Texas, and they share their home with a senior Lab, Belle, and two other canine companions, Brownie and Boomer. She writes extensively about working dogs and marvels at the contributions they have made in our daily lives.

