

Sit. Stay. **Protect.** *Find.*

*All in a
day's work
for man's
best friend*

by Michelle McNeal



Search and Rescue is all a game to the dogs. Shown here is puppy Argus anxiously waiting for the command from his handler McGuire to find a hidden friend. When Argus succeeds, he'll get his favorite treat.

*Photo by Jerri Schaefer,
Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative*

When many of us think of dogs we think of rousing bouts of tug of war, endless games of fetch, warm nuzzles with wet noses, wagging tails, unconditional love and happy companions. They are known as man's best friend. But dogs can also be man's savior and protector. Some dogs go beyond traditional canine roles and are trained to not only sit and stay, but also to find and protect. They are vital members of rural Illinois police forces and search and rescue teams. Beloved by their owners and respected by their communities, their jobs can be a matter of life and death.

With her officer badge around her neck, 4-year-old Sari, a German Shepherd patrol dog, quietly sits by Hancock County Sheriff Department Officer Jim Lansing's chair. She never takes her eyes off him. Over the past two years, Sari and Lansing have formed a bond beyond what many of us could fathom. Like all K-9 police units, their partnership is built on respect, trust and love.

"We compliment each other. We're a good K-9 team," says Lansing. "We're so attached that when she's not with me I miss her. She's my buddy. She's my best friend."

Sari lives with Lansing and his family. She is with him 24 hours a day, seven days a week and watches out for him at all times. "No matter how many times I get up and walk around, she's up too," he says.

Handler protection is an important part of Sari's job. She never takes her eyes off Lansing while he is on a traffic stop. With a door popper on his belt, Lansing can open the car door and let Sari loose to protect him if need be. Thankfully, he has never needed her in that capacity.

Sari has also been trained to sniff out seven types of drugs, search buildings and cars, track fugitives at crime scenes and find lost persons. Originally from Budapest, Hungary, Sari came to the United States in 2005 and she was trained for three months. Lansing then trained with Sari for three weeks to learn the Hungarian commands and how to work as a team with his new partner. "She's been with me ever since," says Lansing.

"I tell people that I'm just the taxi cab driver, she's the one who does all the work," Lansing says. "She makes me look good."

With 17 positive drug or drug paraphernalia searches, 19 tracks and 15 demonstrations, Sari is certainly making an impression on everyone in the community. She is a true member of the force and even has her own bulletproof vest.



Like a switch, Sari can change from a lovable friend to a daunting opponent. "I can't say enough about her temperament," says Lansing. "She is great around people but when she needs to kick butt she can kick butt." This training exercise helps keep her ready for action.

Her biggest arrest so far happened March 9 this year. A home was burglarized and the owner's gun and some money were stolen. Lansing and Sari were called to the scene, where they immediately got to work.

"Most tracks end when they get in the getaway car," says Lansing. "This one went across the street, and Sari just kept going, down the driveway to the neighbor's house. Long story short, I'm questioning the guy and he admitted to stealing the gun and throwing it into the lake. We got the gun back, the money back and we sent him down about two weeks ago. He's spending the next four years in jail."

Another interesting case came about when a man wouldn't give consent for local police to search his car. They suspected drugs so they called Lansing and Sari. "The Supreme Court has ruled that it's not a search when I take her and do a free air walk around. If she alerts I know that now I have probable cause," Lansing says. Sari did alert. She jerked Lansing back and reached under the front wheel-well and came out with a bag of marijuana.

She can also search for cocaine, crack cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, oxycotton and methamphetamines (meth). As we all know, meth and other drug use has increased in recent years in rural areas, making Sari's work even



Sari never takes her eyes off Lansing, even just walking around the station.

more important in rural areas.

Lansing gives Sari commands in Hungarian, her native language. They train twice a month with other K-9 units, and work on obedience continually. It's all a game to Sari and the reward for finding drugs is her favorite canvas bag to chew on. The reward for successful tracking is a great game of fetch. But it's not a game to the criminals she encounters.

"They're not afraid of this," Lansing says, pointing to the gun at his side. "They know we're not going to shoot them unless they attack us, but they don't know what the dog is going to do." Lansing says Sari deters a lot of crimes. "People know we have a dog here."

Rudy Drexler, of Rudy Drexler's School for Dogs, Inc. in Elkhart, Ind. trained Sari, along with more than 6,000 other working dogs in his 43-year career. "I've had police dogs that were poisoned, some have been

shot and killed in the line of duty, but saved the officers' lives and that is the main thing. You can replace the dog, but you can't replace that human," Drexler says.

He says he gets dogs from Europe, like Sari, because they are bred differently. "Many American German Shepherds are bred so much for temperament that they don't actually make good police dogs," he says.

Drexler says an average police dog costs about \$10,500, fully-trained, including handler training. That may sound like a lot of money for a dog, but consider what this dog may do. It could save a policeman's life, save a kid from a life of drug use by catching him early, find a lost Alzheimer patient, help locate and shut down a meth lab, or track a dangerous fugitive and prevent him from causing more harm. You can't put a price on these things, but if you could, it would be far more than the price of the dog.

Find

Argus, an anxious young 4-month-old German Shepherd is just beginning the year-long training process to become a search and rescue dog. He trains with his handler, Dana McGuire, at least two or three times a week. He's learning to be an air-scent dog. He will travel through an area with the aid of McGuire and search the air for human scent. It's just one type of search and rescue that dogs can be trained for. McGuire will use Argus as part of his work as Founder and President of the new Little Egypt Search and Rescue team (LESAR) in Southern Illinois.

We all know how large the expanses of rural areas can be in Illinois. In central Illinois there are fields, lakes and rivers. In southern Illinois there's the wilderness of the Shawnee National Forest. From finding children lost while hiking, to easing the pain of families searching for their drowned family member, these search and rescue teams provide a vital service.

Also an EMT for Union County, McGuire is dedicated to helping people, as are all of the volunteers who make up LESAR.

"The volunteers are an amazing group of people," says McGuire. "They drop what they're doing and go help someone in need. When that call comes in, it's no longer about them, it's about that lost person. I think it's the most beautiful thing to have this group of people show up and say, 'we're here, what can we do?' I count myself lucky to be in that group. If anything happens in southern Illinois, we make ourselves available."

Greg Horn, Founder and President of Illinois Search Dogs, a canine search team, focuses on several types of canine search. "We basically train dogs to find people, alive or dead, in a variety of different environments," he says.

The dogs in his group can search water, land, wilderness, do air search and perform disaster searches. "We have the only FEMA certified disaster dogs in Illinois on our team," he says proudly. "Three of our members are also members of the FEMA team in Missouri."

Horn says his team's dogs have been involved in a variety of different searches in the last four years of the team's existence. Several searches have involved finding victims of drowning. Incredibly, the dogs can smell cadavers that have settled at the bottom of the body of water.

Horn says, "Lakes and small ponds aren't so rough, but anytime you put a diver in a river, you're risking his life. The less time the divers have to spend in the water, the less risk. If you can use certified, qualified dogs, you can narrow down the area."

He used the example of a drowning case in central Illinois where divers had been searching for three days. When Illinois Search Dogs were called in, one team member searched the lake with her dog, who indicated that he found a person more than 300 yards from where the eyewitnesses said the man went in.

"When I work I trust my dog more than I trust eyewitnesses," says Horn. "So I went to the indicated area and after three passes through the area, my dog, Cole, got what bird hunters would call 'birdy.' He danced

all over the bottom of the johnboat. The fourth time through he got all birdy and dove over the bow to stay in the area.”

Horn marked the area with his GPS system and when divers were sent back out, they still didn't find the man. Skepticism for the canine search and rescue team rose, until the body surfaced in the exact spot marked, the next afternoon. “It's black water and divers only search the bottom, they would not have found him in the middle anyway,” says Horn. “That made believers out of the fire department.”

Illinois Search Dogs has also become involved in several crime investigations. “Because of our cadaver work we've been involved in some homicide cases. And a lot of that will be clearing areas,” says Horn. He says clearing an area is needed when police get a tip or find a clue and need an

area searched. The dogs don't search for articles, just people. But if they are searching a 100-acre area, the dogs can save a lot of police man-hours.

“Of course it's important to find people alive. That's very rewarding. But it's equally rewarding to find the deceased ones. I can't imagine having one of my loved ones out there that I couldn't find,” Horn says.

It is indeed important work. Both McGuire and Horn say their teams are always looking for new members. The people who participate in search and rescue teams are as varied as the dogs. Some are housewives, Ph.D.s, computer analysts, firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and the list goes on and on. But Horn warns that it is a large commitment of time. He and his team get together often, usually every weekend, to do some kind of training. Their most recent session, for example, was

training the dogs to search through rubble. You can contact Greg Horn at 217-341-3139 or visit his Web site at www.illinoissearchdogs.com.

McGuire is holding a free search and rescue two-month class now comprised of a variety of courses. The courses will teach how to locate victims, gain access to them, stabilize them for transport and take them to safety. He says people can take either the full course load or just a course here and there to learn more about a particular area. E-mail McGuire at k9preydrive@yahoo.com to get more information.

Sari, Argus and Cole were just three examples of the amazing canines the live right here in rural Illinois. Who knows, maybe one of these canine heroes will save your life or find a missing loved one.



The Illinois Search Dogs team gets together nearly every weekend. Shown here is part of the team at Adams Electric Cooperative's annual meeting last year. Nikki Earnhart with Mayko, Tina Shaw with Taeryn, Greg Horn with Asta and Elle, and Danelle and Gary Nall with Neeva. Danelle is an employee of Adams Telephone Cooperative.