

FROM SHELTER DOG TO K9 UNIT: JESTER'S STORY



Before

Jester arrived at the Winnipeg Humane Society (WHS), some of his diet consisted of oatmeal and Kraft Dinner. Now the two-year-old Labrador Retriever/Border Collie mix is fed a high-quality dog food that's fit for a police dog. It's appropriate considering this rescued dog went from a neglectful situation to a member of the Winnipeg Police K9 Unit.

Jester is a bomb detector. He's trained to recognize 14 common explosive scents. Based on all combinations of those scents, Jester can detect around 22,000 manufactured explosives. It's an enormous task that requires a lot of training but Sgt. Wally Antoniuk, Jester's partner, knew the dog was up to the task.

"He's got unlimited potential. He just gets better every day," Sgt. Antoniuk says.

The WHS notified Sgt. Antoniuk of dogs at the shelter that show promise as police dogs. He tested a few of the dogs, but none were exactly what the K9 Unit needed - until Jester arrived. Jester had all the qualities Sgt. Antoniuk was looking for in a partner. He has a high drive and a willingness to not only fetch something from you, but to bring it back so he can chase it again (and again and again). Jester has a lot of energy and is also friendly, which is an important quality for a bomb detector dog that works in crowds.



Jester officially became a bomb detector dog in May 2017, but his training and preparation extended months beyond that. Sgt. Antoniuk took Jester home with him and for six months they got to know each other. Jester, previously malnourished, gained some weight and Sgt. Antoniuk learned more about Jester's personality.

In March, Jester completed his first explosive training course and he passed with flying colours. He breezed right through it, and Sgt. Antoniuk was confident that Jester was the right dog for the job. Jester's training sessions always end when he receives a reward. At first the sessions lasted 30 seconds, but they gradually increased to the point where an exercise would take 20 minutes before Jester received his pay-off.

Now Jester's main duty is working behind-the-scenes and detecting explosives in high-traffic areas. He performs 'explosive sweeps' of the vehicles and venues for VIP events. He'll search backstage areas at concerts and searches NHL teams that travel out of Winnipeg and directly to the United States. Whenever there's a bomb threat in Winnipeg, Sgt. Antoniuk and Jester are called to the scene.

The K9 Unit doesn't generally adopt dogs from a shelter. It has its own breeding program, but "anytime a dog with this kind of potential comes along, you wouldn't want to pass it up," says Sgt. Antoniuk, comparing Jester to a professional athlete.

Sgt. Antoniuk has grown especially close with Jester. When the pair aren't working together, they live together. He's witnessed Jester transform from a malnourished and neglected dog to one with limitless drive and ability. Their bond not only strengthens with each day, but also helps make Winnipeg a safer city.

HERE'S HOW JESTER IS TRAINED:

Jester was trained using the 'can system'. During the exercise a number of cans are placed on the ground. One can is planted with the explosive material while the other remain empty. This forces Jester to put his nose into each of the cans until he finds the scent. Once he finds it, he offers a sit and receives a reward. Treats are good, but Jester's favourite reward is his toy ball.

As Jester improves more cans are added to the exercise. Once he can flawlessly go through 15 cans and determine the scent, it's considered imprinted. After that, they teach him a new scent. Jester knows 14 common scents that can be combined to create 22,000 manufactured explosives.

After Jester learns a scent, Sgt. Antoniuk adds additional challenges: distractions and masking scents. He will put the latex gloves used to handle the explosives, food, and toys in the other cans. These scents and treats cause distraction, but it's Jester's objective to ignore them and only notify Sgt. Antoniuk once he's found the explosives.

Jester's challenge is only capped by Sgt. Antoniuk's imagination. Jester knows how to detect scents that are beyond ground level too. He'll detect scents on various levels of a location, including finding scents in the ceiling if he must.

Sgt. Antoniuk is constantly teaching Jester new scents and strategies. Jester must keep advancing his skillset in order to help keep his community safe.

Story C/O the Winnipeg Humane Society.