

Argo keeps proving he's one of the guys on police force

By Kathryn Reed

Pacing back and forth, head out the window trying to sniff out trouble.

Argo is ready to respond.

He is one of the newest officers in the South Lake Tahoe Police Department. In March, this German shepherd marked his first year working to patrol the streets with Officer Mark Hounsell.

In some ways it would be hard to know Argo is a police dog if it weren't for him being in the back of a vehicle that says K9 unit. Like most dogs this time of year, he's shedding his winter coat. His tail wags as he's petted, looking up at the person with soft brown eyes asking why they took their hand away. Swimming in Lake Tahoe is one of his favorite things to do. Same with chasing the ball and playing tug-o-war with dad. And he'll bark at other dogs.



Argo and Officer Mark Hounsell drive around looking to defuse trouble.

Photos/Kathryn

Reed

But Argo, like all police dogs, is not ordinary based on having a job outside being a family pet – though that's also a big component of his life. (Hounsell and his wife have four children – newborn to 10 years.)

"He knows his place in the family. He listens to my wife," Hounsell says. "When it's time to work, he only listens to me."

Riding around with Argo and Hounsell, they get a lot of smiles. Hounsell admits Argo can defuse situations in many ways. In some instances having a dog around makes the officer with a gun seem less threatening. Other times, people are more fearful of the dog than a man with a badge and bullets.

From March-December 2010 Argo has responded to:

- Alarms: 49
- Perimeter security: 7
- Public and school demonstrations: 12
- Building, area and article Searches: 4
- Major crimes (robberies/burglaries/fleeing felons/wanted suspects/ high-risk car stops): 13
- Other offenses: 5.

"He can clear a building more quickly than three or four officers," Hounsell explained. "He's a tool and he's my partner."

Argo has followed a scent for 2 miles, has been clocked running 17 mph, and sniffed out a rifle buried in a couple feet of snow. The latter was on his first day on the job.

“Dogs aren’t trained to tear apart a person. They are trained to hold,” Hounsell. Puncture wounds is all a suspect should sustain if a dog catches them. Now, if they try to free themselves from the canine, a different outcome is likely to ensue.

Hounsell calls Argo the people’s dog – after all it was \$8,000 in donations and drug forfeiture money that paid for him. The city and South Lake Tahoe Police Canine Association own Argo. And it’s the city that pays for his food and vet bills.

Argo has a vest that will deflect a bullet and at least slow the blade of a knife. But he only has to wear the heavy armor when they are facing a known threat.

It’s Hounsell who brushes, bathes and feeds Argo.

Don’t worry about Argo getting too hot on a warm Tahoe day. The back of the vehicle is temperature controlled just in case it gets hot back there. All that seems to be missing is a comfy pillow for him to lie on. Instead, he wears a mat on the rubber flooring as he goes from window to window.

Like Duke, who is partners with Officer Tony Broadfoot, Argo will be a narcotics dog one day. He’s in training for it now.

Training is a big part of Hounsell and Argo’s lives. Argo is POST certified for patrol through Adlerhorst International K9 Academy in Riverside. On a weekly basis he works with Jim Barnes, a retired El Dorado County deputy K9 handler. Barnes’ expertise has a large part to do with why Argo passed the three-day POST course.

Having come from the Czech Republic, Argo is multilingual. Hounsell is now, too. Argo responds to hand and verbal commands.

Bad guys shouldn’t feel safe with Hounsell out of the vehicle and Argo in the back. Argo knows how and when to provide

backup.

The K9 trials are returning to South Lake Tahoe for the fourth year, Sept. 23-24. This is an opportunity for the public to see police dogs from multiple agencies compete. More information is online.

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