

# Fido Finds

Rubble rubble, toil and trouble, these hero canines respond to danger on the double.

By Carol Bryant

Ready to rumble, Fletch practices at a rubble pile to hone his search and rescue skills.



## ISN'T A DOG A DOG?

Why only certain kinds of dogs become SDF Search Dogs.

A disaster site is a treacherous environment—noisy, chaotic, dust-filled—and sometimes dark. At Ground Zero, for example, the search “pile” was a mountain of debris seven or eight stories high, composed of twisted steel and wobbly, uneven surfaces. It takes an extraordinary dog—with extreme boldness, drive, energy, strength, agility and focus—to approach every training exercise and deployment with energy and determination. These are dogs that love to work, need to work and want nothing more than to be out on the rubble searching. SDF has found that Labs, Golden Retrievers, Border Collies and mixes of these breeds are the most likely to have these qualities. *National Disaster Search Dog Foundation, Janet Reineck, Ph.D., Development Director, 501 E. Ojai Ave., Ojai, CA 93023; (888) 459-4376; Searchdogfoundation.org.*



Brent Brainard, Fletcher, Nick DeMarco, and Jan Peterson at Fletcher's graduation and future training site for the SDF.

RECENT DEPLOYMENTS INCLUDE SEVERAL TRAIN DERAILMENTS, HURRICANE KATRINA, HAITI AND THE GAS EXPLOSION IN SAN BRUNO, CALIFORNIA.

Once rescued, the dog will never need to be rescued again. Imagine a world where every dog saved from a shelter lives that outcome. For the canines involved in the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation (SDF), a forever home is a guarantee. And the expertise and training of these dog heroes by SDF guarantees that live bodies are found in the urban rubble of collapsed buildings, train wrecks or any place a person might be buried.

Meet Fletcher, black Labrador Retriever mix and a potential candidate for search dog status. Fletcher turned up at the McPaws Animal Shelter in McCall, Idaho. Although his second stay in the shelter, the local canine recruiter recognized search dog candidacy in this mega-ball of energy mutt. As Search Dog Foundation canine recruiters Jan Peterson and Nick DeMarco approached his kennel with a toy, Fletcher went into overdrive.

Peterson explained, “We are looking for workaholic dogs with an intense toy drive. These dogs are usually very driven and a bit ‘crazy,’ which does not usually make for a good pet dog. Many families cannot handle these dogs and many of them end up in shelters.” Fletcher returned to her Boise home with the recruiters where further testing was con-

ducted. Peterson recalled, “We found that he would even climb a tree to get to the toy.” Talk about the drive to succeed.

So how does a toy-driven Lab become a national search dog? Fletcher spent time in Gilroy, California, for further assessment and hands-on training for close to a year. Jan and Nick visited Fletcher at the facility and watched as he searched for live humans in piles of rubble and wooden pallets. “After their training, they are assigned to a fire fighter with a Task Force. They live with the fire fighter 24-7. Fletcher was assigned to Brent Brainard in San Diego, California, and CTF-3. The two of them then continued training for another year at which time they became FEMA certified,” Peterson reported. *FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency); Fema.gov.*

A day in the life of a search and rescue dog is busy and diverse. Dogs live with their handler, going almost everywhere with them, including learning to live at the fire station. DeMarco said, “The handlers continue training with the dogs in rubble piles several times per month as long as the dogs are in service. Once FEMA certified they must be ready to deploy anywhere in the world with very short notice. Recent deployments included several train derailments, Hurricane Katrina, Haiti and the gas explosion in San Bruno, California.”

SDF was founded by a retired schoolteacher, Wilma Melville, in 1996. After she and her FEMA-certified search dog were deployed to the Oklahoma City bombing, the shortage of canine disaster teams was evident to Melville. From there, the program was born. Disaster search dogs must be able to crawl through tunnels, walk up and down ladders, walk over and on debris and wobbly surfaces and stop to wait for hand signals from handlers. “Idaho did not have any Bark Force representatives, so the founder of National Disaster Search Dog Foundation, Wilma Melville, sent the Canine Recruiter to Idaho to teach us how to look for these special dogs in local shelters,” DeMarco reported.

A National Training Center is being created by SDF as a one-of-a-kind US facility. Canine recruitment and training will come together for training and disaster simulation. Scheduled to open in 2012, rest assured that Fletcher and hundreds of other dogs like him are ready for the call to duty at a moment's notice. And once rescued, the dogs will never need to be rescued again and will get the satisfaction of becoming rescuers themselves. 