

In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

Hockey Dogs

KEVIN ANGGARA PHOTO

NHL teams raise Labs as future service dogs – and spread a whole lot of cute along the way

The energy at a professional hockey game is thrilling – and noisy. Crowds roar as players slam against the boards, pucks crack off sticks, and horns blare for a goal. It’s an exciting way to spend an evening.

It’s also an unusual – yet ideal – place to socialize puppies training to be service dogs for people with disabilities.

A growing number of National Hockey League teams are doing just that, and often with Labs. The future service dogs get unique exposure to noises and attention from adoring fans while helping promote awareness of what service dogs can do – and of the importance of “puppy raisers.”

Cole Cook, director of business analytics for the Arizona Coyotes, is the puppy raiser for Luna, a black Lab training to be a service dog for a military veteran with PTSD and mobility challenges for the nonprofit National Assistance Dogs. He started caring for Luna in the fall of 2019 when she was just four months old, taking her on personal errands and to the office every day. The mellow Lab pup was an instant hit with players, staff, and fans.

“Our first home game this season was a sellout, and it took my girlfriend and I almost an hour just to go from our seats up to the concession stand,” he said. “Everybody wanted to say hi and get a photo. Luna handles crowds well, and everybody loves her. It’s fun.”

Luna is smart and food-motivated, so she took quickly to clicker training, learning *kennel* in just three or four tries. Cook, who grew up with a yellow Lab named Sully, said Labs lend themselves well to being service

Luna, with the Arizona Coyotes.



KEVIN ANGGARA PHOTO



Defenseman Matt Dumba with Breezer of the Minnesota Wild.

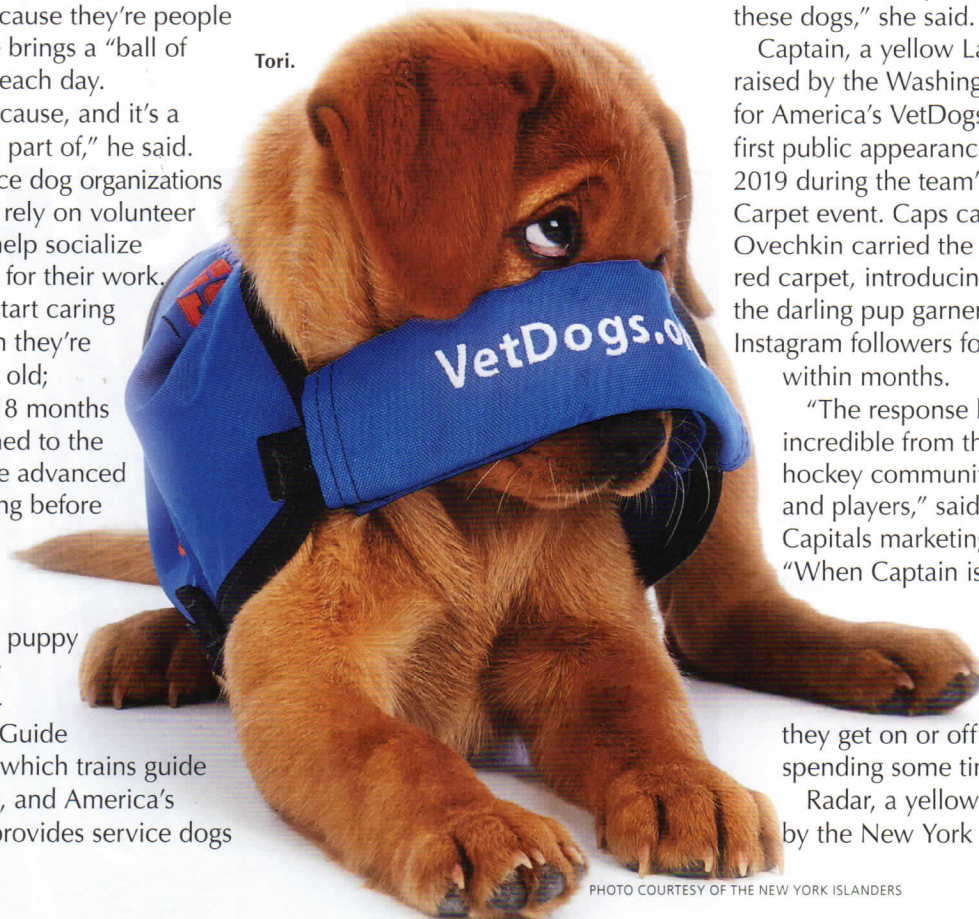
dogs not only because they're intelligent, but because they're people dogs. He said she brings a "ball of joy" to the office each day.

"It's for a good cause, and it's a cool thing to be a part of," he said.

Nonprofit service dog organizations across the country rely on volunteer puppy raisers to help socialize and train puppies for their work. Raisers typically start caring for the pups when they're eight to 16 weeks old; when they're 14-18 months old, they're returned to the nonprofit for more advanced service dog training before partnering with a person with a disability.

Lorin Bruzzese, puppy program manager for the New York-based nonprofits Guide Dog Foundation, which trains guide dogs for the blind, and America's VetDogs, which provides service dogs

Tori.



to veterans and first responders with PTSD and disabilities, said attending hockey games on a regular basis allows dogs to develop a unique confidence and experience level with distraction and excitement.

"Socialization is one of the biggest aspects and goals of the puppy-raising process," she said. "It's about making sure they're the most confident, comfortable, and well-socialized pups as possible. Our goal throughout the puppy-raising phase is to have the pup experience as much as possible while having a really good, positive time."

NHL teams are currently raising three dogs for Guide Dog Foundation and America's VetDogs: Captain of the Washington Capitals, and Radar and Tori of the New York Islanders. Bruzzese said Labs being raised by hockey teams not only helps the dogs' growth but raises awareness about what service dogs can do and the importance of puppy raisers.

"It's a great way for any organization to give back and have an impact on people who benefit so much from experiencing life with these dogs," she said.

Captain, a yellow Lab pup being raised by the Washington Capitals for America's VetDogs, made his first public appearance in fall of 2019 during the team's Rock the Red Carpet event. Caps captain Alex Ovechkin carried the puppy down the red carpet, introducing him to fans; the darling pup garnered over 62,000 Instagram followers for @CapsPup within months.

"The response has been incredible from the Capitals hockey community, including fans and players," said Erica Sandidge, Capitals marketing coordinator.

"When Captain is around for practice, players often can't resist pausing as they get on or off the ice and spending some time with him."

Radar, a yellow Lab drafted by the New York Islanders in

For more information, please visit:

Arizona Coyotes:
www.nhl.com/coyotes/community/luna

National Assistance Dogs:
<https://nadiassist.org>

Guide Dog Foundation:
www.guidedog.org

America's VetDogs:
www.vetdogs.org

Captain's Instagram:
www.instagram.com/CapsPup

New York Islanders:
www.nhl.com/islanders/fans/islanders-puppy

Coco's Heart Dog Rescue:
www.cocosheartdogrescue.org

Minnesota Wild:
www.nhl.com/wild

Soldier's 6:
www.soldiers6.com

September of 2018 and being raised for the Guide Dog Foundation, got a new teammate for the 2019-2020 season in Tori, a yellow Lab the team is raising for America's VetDogs as part of the team's Puppy with a Purpose program.

Ann Rina, senior director of community relations for the New York Islanders, said Radar and Tori are like mini celebrities. "The more awareness we can give toward both causes, the more that they'll be able to do in helping people," she said.

Radar has blossomed into a wonderful dog who is completely unfazed by loud noises like goal horns, she said. He gets along just fine with the new pup in town and particularly loves the team's mascot, Sparky, happily greeting the dragon whenever he appears. But he's such a relaxed dog that she's never even heard him bark. He's come a long way since being a puppy who was tugging on other dogs.

"It's funny now that Radar is essentially almost full size, having little Tori jumping on him," she said.

Minnesota Wild President Matt Majka is raising Breezer, a yellow Lab

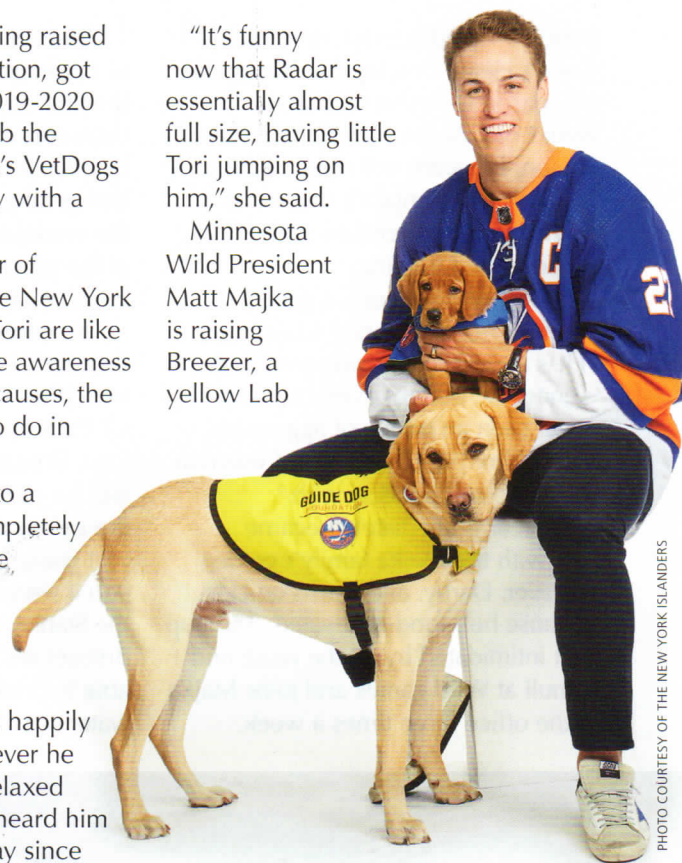


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NEW YORK ISLANDERS

Radar (yellow vest) and Tori with New York Islanders captain Anders Lee.

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puppy adopted from the nonprofit Coco's Heart Dog Rescue during the off-season when he was about 15 weeks old. At the end of the current season, the team will donate him to Soldier's 6, a nonprofit that trains service dogs for veterans with PTSD, for advanced training.

"He's just been such a great pleasure from day one," Majka said. "He's an awesome, awesome dog – energetic but not overly so. I've never seen an ounce of aggression out of him. He's friendly and warm to everyone he connects with."

Breezer immediately became pals with the Majka family's golden retriever, Darby, and learns quickly because he's food-motivated. The pup isn't intimidated by all the noise and stimuli at Wild games and joins Majka at the office three times a week.

"Breezer has been a real boon to our employees," he said. "On Breezer days, our employees have an extra sort of hop in their step. They take turns taking Breezer for walks and getting a mental break from the workday. So in terms of morale at the office, Breezer has had a huge impact."

The entire team loves dogs, so Breezer's been a natural fit for the franchise. In fact, if the team goes all the way and wins the Stanley Cup, Breezer will be part of the celebration.

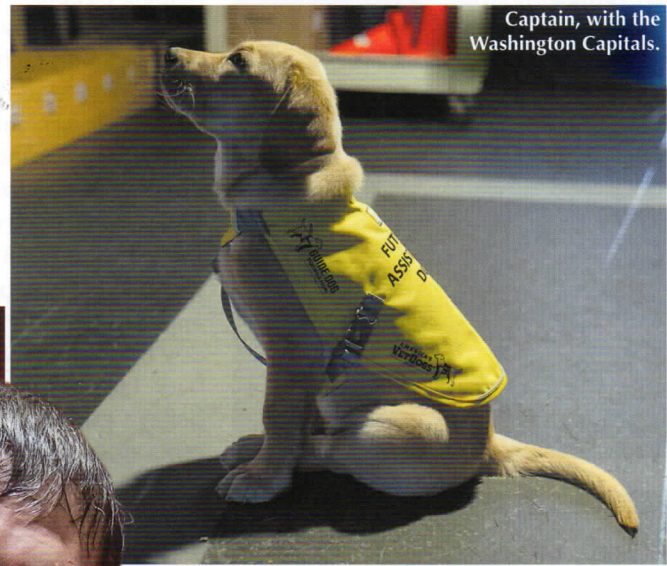
"I guarantee you if we win the Stanley Cup, Breezer will be able to drink water out of the

Stanley Cup," he said with a chuckle. "For sure."



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her

husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.



Captain, with the Washington Capitals.

JESS RAFFOGEL PHOTOS

The Washington Capitals' two captains: Alex Ovechkin and Captain.

