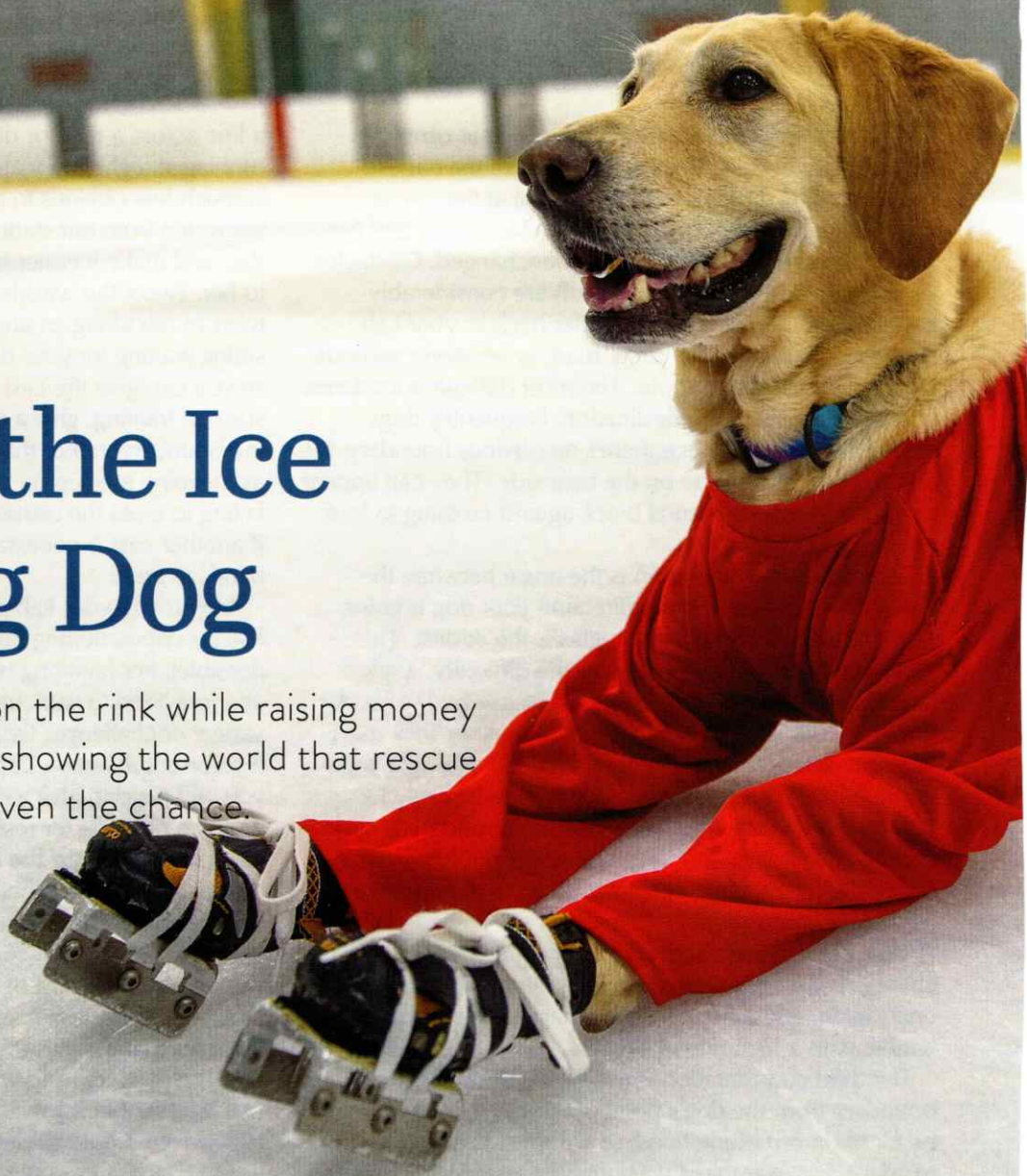


By Jen Reader
Photos by Rick Vierkandt

Benny the Ice Skating Dog

Yellow Lab wows fans on the rink while raising money for good causes – and showing the world that rescue dogs can shine when given the chance.



When Cheryl DelSangro happened to find a photo of an adoptable yellow Lab named Freckles, she didn't notice any spots – just deep black eyes that seemed to say, "I'm your dog."

The next morning, she was horrified to learn he was slated for euthanasia.

The retired professional figure skater lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the dog was in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Fortunately, the team at Las Vegas Labrador Rescue worked to transport the dog so that DelSangro and her husband could adopt the Lab, who they renamed Benny.

"He was just incredibly smart and incredibly intuitive from the day we got him," she said.

Benny fit in nicely with the other family dogs and became BFFs with Mia, a chocolate Lab who excelled at dock diving. Benny tried the sport, but he figured out the game – instead of jumping to catch the toy in the air, he'd just dive into the water where he thought it would land.

Ice skating, of all things, proved to be a much better fit.

In May of 2018, the NHL team Vegas Golden Knights made it to the Stanley Cup Finals in the hockey team's very first year. So DelSangro worked with her friend, photographer Rick Vierkandt, to make a video of Benny on an ice-skating rink to show his support by blocking the

net and carrying a stick. "I would skate and Benny would chase me around on the ice," she recalled. "He loved the ice. We made this silly video."

It went viral.

DelSangro got to work fashioning a paw-sized pair of skates for Benny's front feet. She'd taught many children to ice skate – including her daughter at just 17 months old – and he had better balance than most children. So she thought, "Why can't I teach Benny how to skate?"

On a fateful day in August, she dressed Benny in a vest with a handle on the back in case she needed to support him and strapped him into his little skates. Holding the vest, she skated with him to the middle of the ice and put him in a down while her husband, the photographer, and a few friends looked on.

"I said, 'Let's go.' He got up, and he started skating. He skated across the ice all by himself the first time he tried," she said. "We were screaming and yelling. The manager of the rink came running out because he thought something happened and he started clapping. It was incredible."

A friend made Benny even stronger skates, and he learned to do skating moves like crossovers and jumps – while holding a hockey stick in his mouth. He skated during breaks at two Golden Knights games for a roaring crowd of 18,000 people. "He didn't even notice the noise," she said. "He couldn't wait to get on the ice. He was so amped. It was incredible."

Benny went on to skate at the US Figure Skating Nationals just before the pandemic shut things down. Backstage, Olympic gold medalist Brian Boitano asked to take a photo with Benny, to DelSangro's delight.

The Lab uses his new-found celebrity and skills to support rescue organizations, such as The Animal Foundation and Nevada SPCA. He loves skating with Spectrum on Ice, a nonprofit that provides training in hockey and ice skating for children and young adults with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities, and recently visited Opportunity Village, which offers programs like on-the-job training for people with physical and intellectual disabilities.

"Everything we do is free, or for anything that costs money, it's for charity," she said. "I want to share him and his ability."

The key, she noted, is giving the energetic dog activities that engage his brain, like swimming, rally, and agility – and, of course, skating. The eight-year-old Lab knows around 100 cues and tricks – including skateboarding, pushing wheelchairs, and climbing trees – and understands some complete sentences. DelSangro trained





“He knows when the camera’s out, and he knows to look at the camera. He kind of just zones in and stares at it, and it’s very interesting as far as how he photographs versus other dogs. I can get other dogs’ attention as well. But Benny just seems to know, ‘Okay, this is for me and I’ll let you know when to take the picture.’”

He feels Benny is a wonderful ambassador for Labs as well

him to do all this with positive training methods; playing with a ball is Benny’s reward.

On social media, people often ask DelSangro, “Where can I get a dog like Benny?” and she advises, “Check your rescues.” She loves when strangers reach out to say they’ve adopted a Lab because of Benny. “He’s the perfect example of what a shelter dog can be,” she said. “Our whole lives have changed because of him, and our whole outlook on life has changed because of him. The possibilities that he has shown are available to anybody if you try hard.”

Rick Vierkandt, a professional photographer and owner of Bark Gallery in Las Vegas, met DelSangro and Benny through Las Vegas Labrador Rescue. He filmed the viral cheer video for the Golden Knights and has enjoyed photographing Benny over the years.

“You get to where you’re like, ‘Let’s see what kind of amazing thing he’s going to do today,’” he said.

as rescue dogs in general – and for people who nurture their dogs’ interests and abilities.

“He became this amazing dog. It just shows that if you find the right home and the right fit, everything comes into place,” he said. “Working with the two of them is awesome. Benny probably wouldn’t have been the same Benny, so to speak, if it weren’t for Cheryl.” 🐾

For more information, visit: www.bennytheiceskatingdog.com.

To see more of Rick’s photography, visit: www.barkgallery.com.



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.