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In Their Debt
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by Jen Reeder

Retriever Rivalry

Labs charm even golden fans as Helping Paws service dogs

Jennie and Aster.

Aric Elsner never thought of himself as a Lab guy. In fact, he was an affirmed golden guy – his childhood dog was a golden retriever, as was the first dog he got with his wife, Jenny.

But a black Lab named Minnie changed that.

Elsner served in the U.S. Air Force and Minnesota National Guard for 25 years, nine months, and 28 days, including three overseas deployments after 9/11. After retiring in 2016 because “the effects of deployment started wearing on me” – such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder,

and severe muscle and joint pain – Jenny encouraged him to consider getting a service dog from the Minnesota-based nonprofit Helping Paws, which breeds and trains Labs and goldens to be service dogs for veterans with PTSD and people with mobility challenges. Meeting fellow military veterans who’d had positive experiences with Helping Paws dogs convinced him to give it a try.

“I envisioned getting a male golden retriever,” he recalled with a chuckle. “But I got over that right away. There really couldn’t be a better match for me. Minnie is just unbelievable. At Helping Paws, they are so good at placing the right dog with the right person.”

Minnie’s intelligence and sweet disposition immediately charmed Elsner. She assists him with tasks like pulling off his socks when it’s too

painful, turning on lights in the house when they first enter, and making eye contact in public so that he can feel safe navigating a crowded hallway or retail store. They’ve even ridden the light rail together and attended his sons’ baseball games – something he couldn’t have imagined before their partnership. She does it all with devoted care.

“Some days it’s difficult for me to pick up things because I have really bad muscle-joint pain. Minnie can pick up a credit card off the floor or grab my keys, a remote control, or a phone – anything I’ve dropped. She picks it up like a precious treasure. She’s so gentle.”

While Minnie was trained for many tasks, some she’s picked up on her own through intuition. Elsner can have terrible nightmares from which it’s impossible to return to



Photo by Judy Michurski

Aric and Minnie

sleep. Now Minnie sleeps next to his bed and when the night terrors start, the dog will jump on and off the bed to disrupt his sleep pattern. (His wife once watched Minnie do it seven times until it worked.) Now he awakens feeling rested instead of exhausted.

“Our relationship has developed so much that she just knows [what’s needed]. If I get a little anxious, she comes closer,” he said. “Minnie really keeps me in the present. You can live in the past, you can worry about the future, but she keeps me right here, right now. It’s been life-changing for my family.”

Labs like Minnie have been changing lives for the past 30 years through Helping Paws. They inspire the loyalty that longtime Lab lovers know so well, and a friendly rivalry has developed in the Helping Paws family between Lab and golden enthusiasts.

Eileen Bohn, co-founder and director of programs for Helping Paws, said while some clients, volunteers, and employees might choose sides, they share

a dedication to the nonprofit’s mission. Volunteers whelp the litters and care for the pups. When eight weeks old, each puppy goes to live with a volunteer foster home trainer for two years, with weekly training sessions at the Minneapolis-based facility or at places such as a local fire station to socialize the dog to loud noises and uniforms. When it’s time to partner a dog with a handler, the staff works for several weeks with the team to ready them for everyday life, and offers support throughout the life of the dog.

“I always have tears in my eyes at graduation,” Bohn said. “It’s a reminder of how a community of people got us to this point of being able to make a difference in someone’s life every day with the placement of the service dog. There’s such joy in seeing that.”

Thanks to the generosity of volunteers and donors, Helping Paws charges just \$350 for a service dog that actually costs about \$30,000 to raise. The organization also maintains a fund to help graduates with veterinary emergencies.

Currently, 56 Labs and goldens are training for placement as service dogs for veterans and people with disabilities, or as facility dogs for therapists who counsel children and teens. Bohn said retrievers excel in the roles.

Get the door!



Photo by Judy Michurski

Just Labs

“They like to please people – this is basically, to a certain degree, an extension of their natural instincts to retrieve and work with people. They’re also an appropriate size, and they’re looked at as a friendly dog by the general public, which is really important,” she explained. “By having a dog that has a soft face with a pretty expression, people are less intimidated by the fact that you might utilize a wheelchair versus walk.”

Bohn, who co-founded Helping Paws in 1985 when it was a pilot project for the University of Minnesota’s Center to Study Human Animal Relationships and Environments (CENSHARE), said the organization has “the best volunteers in the world” and that she’s grateful her work is her passion.

Jenny Peterson is passionate about her work as an executive coach – as well as her yellow Lab Aster, a Helping Paws service dog. In 1983, Peterson broke her neck in a skiing accident and became a quadriplegic when she was just 17. Her first Helping Paws service dog, a golden named Alpha, helped rebuild her confidence.

“When I went out in public, people were so enamored with seeing the dog that they didn’t see the chair anymore,” she shared. “Over time, I stopped seeing the chair. It wasn’t such a big deal.”



Learning to tug.

She also loved her subsequent Helping Paws service dogs, Poohbah and Billy – both goldens. Naturally, she had an affinity for the breed and was on Team Golden. But then Helping Paws sent her home with Aster, a yellow Lab, for a trial weekend. On the first night, Peterson invited Aster onto the bed. The sweet Lab jumped up and rested her chin on Peterson's chest – and has every night since.

"It just sealed the deal," she said. "She's got these big, brown doe eyes and she knows how to use them. The joke is that for some people, I went to the dark side (by becoming a Lab lover). To other people, I got enlightened."

Aster helps by retrieving items, opening and shutting doors, and barking on command. The loyal Lab waits patiently when need be,

but also loves meeting new people or (when her service dog pack is removed) playing and cuddling with Lloyd, the family's pet Lab. Both Labs have helped Peterson work in coaching groups and therapy sessions.

Peterson said she enjoys attending graduation ceremonies and coming together with everyone who supports Helping Paws, no matter their breed preference. As for whether the Labs and goldens maintain a rivalry as well?

Not at all: "The dogs just all love each other. They're like, 'Can we play?'"

Just one more lesson we can all learn from dogs. 

For more information or to make a donation, visit: HelpingPaws.org.

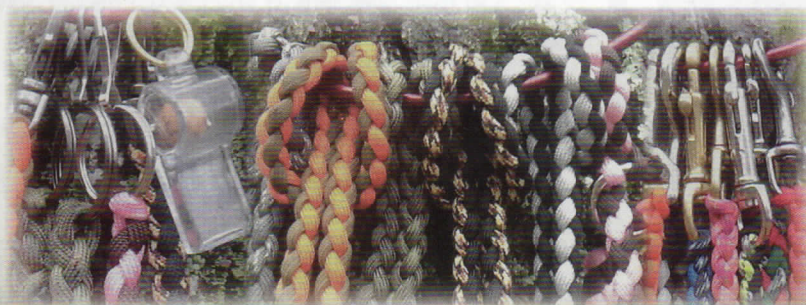
Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.



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