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CHAMPIONSHIPS **P. 20** | DETERRING
DRUGS **P. 46**



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Q-RACING STALLION ISSUE

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Added PROTECTION

This unique drug dog is helping keep the racetrack safer.

Story by Andrea Caudill

Photos by Bee Silva

IF YOU'VE RACED AT RUIDOSO DOWNS IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, you've likely experienced random inspections conducted by teams of safety personnel. One of the most prominent members of the team is Chini, a German Shepherd-Belgian Malinois trained drug-detection dog, handled by Ruidoso Downs Horseman Liaison Luis Alvarez.

With speed and an almost unbelievable level of accuracy, Chini can locate the scent of a number of things related to prohibited equine medications, like clenbuterol or the plastics of syringes, and alert her handlers to conduct a search. She is, says Ruidoso Downs General Manager Jeff True, just the point of a spear in a concerted effort by the racetrack to deter the use of illegal medications in racing. Chini is the first such dog to be used full-time at a racetrack, but the ability of dogs to help police is well known.

Detection Dogs

SCIENTISTS ESTIMATE THAT A DOG'S SENSE OF SMELL IS AT LEAST 10,000 times greater than a human. Canine researcher Alexandra Horowitz in her book "Inside of a Dog" gave this example to help understand the difference: If a human can notice one teaspoon of sugar in a cup of coffee, a dog's ability would be to notice a teaspoon of sugar in two Olympic swimming pools' worth of water.

This ability, combined with the dog's intelligence and willingness to work with humans, means they can be used for incredible work. They can be trained to detect not only drugs, but also explosives and firearms, endangered animals (to combat poaching and the ivory trade), tracking live humans or locating human remains, bed bugs or other invasive species, and human health conditions like low blood sugar and cancer.

They can find what they're searching for even when it's hidden – there are numerous examples of drug-detection dogs that find illegal drugs sealed within packaging sealed within gas-filled tanks, dogs able to locate scents from more than a mile away, and dogs that can find the presence of cancer cells before doctors or medical testing identify it.

The dogs used for professional drug detection are bred for it. They are selected not only for their scenting ability, but also for their intelligence and their drive, which is a term used to explain their desire to work relentlessly.

A dog does not have an interest in, for example, the drug it is trained to detect. The dog is trained to associate finding the drug with a highly motivating reward, such as getting to play with their favorite toy. The work is a game for them, and these high-drive dogs revel in the searches and the successful hunt.

Chini arrived at Ruidoso through K9s4COPs, a foundation dedicated to helping law enforcement agencies acquire dogs, which are very expensive, starting at \$15,000 per dog. With the generosity of private donations, the foundation acquires, trains and grants dogs to law enforcement agencies. Its sister program, K9s4Kids, supplies trained K9s to school campuses that have a school resource officer. To date, the organization has placed more than 250 dogs in 30 states and one foreign country. The dogs have assisted in seizing more than \$500 million in illegal contraband and more than 14,000 arrests. Currently, K9s4Kids protects more than 2.2 million students in schools.

"Since 2011, K9s4COPs has been committed to making this world safer by granting four-legged K9 officers to law enforcement agencies and schools," said founder Kristi Schiller. "K9s4COPs fights daily to make a difference in safe-

guarding our law enforcement officers, our children and our communities by donating trained K9s to agencies in need. We gift K9s not only to keep our communities and loved ones safe, but to help make sure those wearing the badge and working toward that goal go home to their families at night. K9s fight crime by locating narcotics, explosives, firearms, and patrolling neighborhoods and schools. K9 partners help officers do their jobs safer and faster, and have saved thousands of lives."

Ruidoso co-owner Stan Sigman became familiar with Schiller's foundations when he worked with them several years ago to place a drug dog at a school district that had a drug problem near his home.

"They rooted out the problem in the schools and cleaned it up," True said.

Seeing that effectiveness first hand was the motivation to bring the deterrent to Ruidoso. The racetrack uses it in conjunction with its many other efforts.

"In my view, we're in a very high-profile position because of the races we run, the level of purses we pay," True said. "In racing, without a line of defense, we don't have much of a game. We have got to continue to bolster our defense against cheaters at every opportunity, and we have to continually improve on that. We can't sit on our laurels, or our current practices. We've always got to be pushing forward coming up with new tools, new methods, new ways of prosecuting offenders. We've got to constantly be growing and improving our capabilities. The dog has been a great addition to our toolbox."

Handling Chini

LUIS ALVAREZ GREW UP AROUND HORSES. HIS FAMILY OWNED and rode charro horses, studied bloodlines and worked to improve their horses.

"It has been part of our culture and our life as a hobby my whole life," he said.

When he was in his early 20s, the family met racehorse trainer Jesus Enriquez, who introduced them to racing; they sold their charro horses and never looked back. They got a few broodmares and bred their own horses, and raced horses at Los Alamitos.

As a lifelong horseman, Alvarez held different positions in the racing industry, headlined by his work as a bloodstock agent where he helped broker Corona Cash, Last Shall Be First, Be Peacefull, Desirio and Tac It Like A Man, and helped manage major stallions Separatist and Tres Seis.

He and his family found their way from California to New Mexico, where a few years ago he got a call asking if he was interested in a position with Ruidoso Downs. Alvarez knew racing and had a good working relationship with horsemen, and settled into his job, which requires a great deal of coordinating between horsemen, the racetrack and the racing commission to make sure the important work gets completed.

Chini began work in 2018 and was trained by expert handlers. When she was ready to begin her work full-time at Ruidoso in 2019, Alvarez stepped up to take over as her handler. He trained with a mentor who had a lifetime of experience training and handling detection dogs in the military and law enforcement. It is important that a dog and its handler click and work as a team, and Alvarez and Chini passed their first test.

"He said, 'This is too easy.'" Alvarez said of the first time his mentor watched them work. "The dog listens to you,

you're soft handed. You can read a horse, you just have to learn to read a dog."

Alvarez has formed a good partnership with the dog, who lives full-time with him and his family, including his wife, Doris, and their two children, Emily, 15, and Alejandro, 12. Alejandro assists his dad in caring for Chini whenever Alvarez has to travel and can't take her along.

Alvarez compared the dog to a racehorse that requires routine and training.

"You have to make sure they're sharp and ready to go, just like a racehorse," he said of doing a search. "They're focused, they know what they've got to do. You hype them up enough so they're excited but not too excited. I have to make sure she's focused on what the job's going to be."

He adds that, as the handler, he also needs to be kept sharp by completing continuing education with his mentor.

While the dog is fully trained, they still conduct practice searches about five hours per week.

"The relationship between the dog and handler, there's a lot to it that people may not know," Alvarez said. "It's having a partner. If you guys clash, you're going to have issues and you're not going to be able to get the job done. But if you guys get along, you guys connect, the job is easy."

The track security forces conduct random checks, including checks at the entry gate. While security officers check paperwork, Alvarez and Chini search the vehicle, including horse trailers. If the dog alerts, the vehicle is pulled over and searched by another team of officers.

They also do checks in the stable area. Again, conducted in a team, they will make a sweep of a stable.

"Obviously, I want to be respectful of the barn," Alvarez said. "I want to be treated respectfully and I treat them how I want to be treated, but when I'm doing my job, I expect them to let me go in and do it without any issues. As of right now, I have had not one incident with anyone."

They conduct the search with the dog on-leash. The knowledge Alvarez has of the inner workings of a stable helps him understand how to assist Chini's search for maximum success and efficiency.

"The first advantage of having an equestrian-savvy, drug detection K9 at a track is the deterrent factor," Schiller said. "Having the dog readily available and conducting random checks keeps people honest. Secondly, it provides an efficient way of screening all persons involved in racing aspects. The dog can sweep vehicles and stables thousands of times faster than any human or team of people could physically search. This keeps the track staff efficient and ensures that trainers and owners are not delayed in their race preparations."

The searches have been successful in finding contraband material, including prohibited medication and paraphernalia, helping make the racetrack safer. While Chini was the first drug dog, New Jersey racetracks are now utilizing a dog from state police to help them. Ruidoso has also been generous in lending its detection team to other entities and racetracks to keep the entire sport safer.

"We think it has been effective as a deterrent, as a way to push back on guys who would bring stuff onto the racetrack," True said. "We're not out to bust people on human drugs. We're trying to keep the equine medications from making it into the back side in the first place. So when Chini (alerts) on albuterol or clenbuterol or plastics, it's a no-brainer that we're having an effect." ■

