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After surgery, drug-sniffing dog returns eagerly to duty

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Francine Sawyer
 Sun Journal

Deda, the drug-sniffing dog who works for the Craven County Sheriff's Office, had to be out recently for surgery. She was eager to return to duty.

Deda had a blown-out joint and ligament on the top of her right rear leg. In medical terms, she had a ruptured cranial cruciate ligament (similar to a human's anterior cruciate ligament, which is often injured in athletes). She also had torn cartilage in the joint. Deda had surgery to correct the problems.

"She loves to work, and while she was recuperating for eight weeks from her surgery, as she got better each day, you could tell she wanted to go back to work. She is high-strung," said her handler, undercover officer Christopher Drake.

Deda has been back in service for several weeks.

She was so eager to please after her recovery that she made a hit on a suspected drug dealer and her alert led to the Sheriff's Office seizing \$81,000 in cash from the man.

"She has more than paid for herself," said sheriff's Capt. Joe Heckman.

Deda is a 7-year-old spayed Belgian malinois.

She is bilingual. She takes her commands in Dutch and English.

These trained police dogs do not come cheap. Fully trained dogs such as Deda can cost \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Being a handler is no walk in the park, either.

Deda goes home each day with Drake.

On Drake and Deda's day-off, Deda continues to be trained. Often there are all-day training sessions. Deda has to stay certified.

If there is no training, Drake exercises with her, bathes her and spends time with her.

"You know, a dog handler has to keep his clothes and his car

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Byron Holland/Sun Journal
 Deda has been crucial in several key arrests for the Sheriff's Office, including a recent arrest that led to more than \$75,000 being confiscated.



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clean; dogs shed a lot of hair," Heckman said.

Heckman said Drake has to clean Deda's kennel and the car if Deda makes a bathroom break, keep track of her routine medical appointments and be sure the dog is in good shape.

Heckman said all the work by the handler and the dog is worth it.

"I wish we had a dog on each shift. The dogs are the first line of offense in drug cases. Dogs can start a case quickly. When a dog alerts on a car (with drugs inside) we have probable cause to search the car on the spot," Heckman said.

And when Deda goes into a house and continues to alert in a certain room, drugs are usually found, according to Heckman.

At one time, the Sheriff's Office had at least four trained dogs and handlers.

Heckman said the office could buy qualified dogs when there are officers who are interested in becoming handlers.

"Right now, no one has come forward," he said.

Heckman explained that a dog and handler must always be in tandem.

"The handler can see the dog alert. However, each dog indicates on an object or substance in different degrees.

Dr. Gary Spodnick, chief of surgery at the Veterinary Specialty Hospital of the Carolinas, performed the surgery.

The Cary veterinarian did not charge the \$3,000 surgery fee.

Drake said the veterinarian offers free service to work dogs, including military dogs.

Heckman said if Deda was in pain and there was no money for surgery she would have had to be put down.

Now the dog has at least one and a half to two years to work before going into retirement.

The working dog has a maximum of nine to 10 years service.

Often handlers will adopt the dog when its working life is over.

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