

A woman in a dark, tactical uniform and sunglasses is walking a golden retriever on a leash through a wooded area. The woman is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, dark pants, and black gloves. She has a harness or vest on her back. The dog is a golden retriever, walking towards the camera. The background consists of many bare trees, suggesting a late autumn or winter setting. The ground is covered with grass and some fallen leaves.

A League of His Own

*Deputy Mary MacQueen
and K-9 Robin, CH. Nitro's
Boy Wonder, SDHF, BISS,
on the job for the Southern
Tier Regional Drug Task
Force, New York.*

A League of His Own

by Behesha H. Doan

As a dog lover, good dog stories are always great. But as a dog *trainer*, great dog stories are golden.

This is the story of CH. Nitro's Boy Wonder, A/K/A "Robin." And that would be 'Mr. Robin' to people like me who are privileged enough to know him.

Robin, the American-Canadian Show Champion. Robin, the Sheriff's K-9 Deputy. Robin, the Narcotics Detector. Robin, the Therapy Dog... And that's just the tip of the iceberg...

But in order to really appreciate Robin's story, let me take you back in time about 30 years and make some introductions. Meet Mary MacQueen, Robin's breeder/owner/handler and best friend to some amazing Golden Retrievers. In 1977, Mary acquired her first Golden Retriever, and the love affair began. In 1988, Mary founded Nitro Golden Retrievers, and began a breeding program that has come to produce a long and stellar line of show-quality, working-caliber Golden Retrievers. Mary loves her dogs. Mary loves *all* dogs. But her deep love for them wasn't

limited to being a breeder; it touched every area of her life. And Mary's life makes almost as good a story as Robin's. But I digress...

Mary's attraction to Golden Retrievers began when she met a Golden mix that belonged to a friend. Believing that a Golden is a Golden, and not knowing any better, Mary checked the newspapers to find Golden puppies for sale. Finding a pup was the easy part; as a teenager, getting her first bank loan to pay for the pup was the challenge. Because of the good reputation Mary's parents had at the bank, her loan was approved, and "Babe" was purchased. Being so new, Mary couldn't see that Babe was far from a perfect specimen, but Babe was a sweet and loving companion and Mary felt rich to have her. Each month, when the loan

payment came due, Mary and Babe would walk into the bank, with Babe carrying the check in her mouth. Babe would place her front paws up on the teller counter to "deliver" the check, and out they would go until that time the following month.

Mary was hired in a veterinarians office and expanded her dog knowledge through practical application. It was during this time that Mary made the conscious decision to stay with the Golden Retriever breed and she decided that she needed to obtain a quality dog. After pursuing many leads Mary met Rhonda Hovan of Faera Golden Retrievers and obtained her foundation bitch, "Lightning."

As time passed and her line of Golden Retrievers progressed and flourished, Mary decided to pursue an avenue that had always been of great interest to her, to become a Search and Rescue Dog handler. Having been a paramedic on a helicopter, an avid outdoor enthusiast, a mountain travel and rescue instructor for the National Ski patrol, and a lover of

Golden Retrievers, Search & Rescue dog training just came naturally to Mary. And, just like everything she has ever done, Mary believed good enough wasn't nearly good enough. Unafraid of asking questions, working hard, and spending money to learn her craft, Mary became a certified Search & Res-

cue dog handler in the New York/Pennsylvania area and still serves to this day.

But even with her lofty goals for Nitro's breeding program, combined with her dedication to Search Dog handling, no one could have foreseen what, or rather who was waiting in her future. The eighth 'Wonder' of her world was closer than anyone could have predicted.

Mary's most accomplished K-9 partner to this point, was Willow, (Search Dog and Am-Can CH. Nitro's Blaze of Glory), a certified Search & Rescue K-9 specializing in Airscent, Human Remains Detection, Snow Burial, and Water Search. Willow



Six weeks in whelp with Robin's litter, Willow was successful in finding the remains of a woman missing for seven-and-a-half years.

is an excellent Search dog, but not as young as she once was. Recognizing her need to carefully select the parents of her next K-9 Search & Rescue/Show prospect, Mary made the decision to breed Willow to CH. Faera's Starlight, "Star."

The breeding took and when Willow was six weeks pregnant, Mary and Willow were called to assist the Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office on a cold-case search for the remains of a woman who had been missing for seven-and-a-half years. Because the search area was not unreasonably large, Mary and the noticeably pregnant Willow agreed to try and help the Sheriff's Office locate the missing woman.

Mary loaded Willow into the truck and drove to the search area, thankful for the mild October weather and overcast skies,



Mary and Willow during a helicopter transport training session.



At 10 weeks of age, Robin is poised and ready for his first search training lesson.

which made for ideal search conditions. As searches tend to do, minutes turned into hours. Providing plenty of breaks for water and rest, Mary observed Willow closely as they meticulously picked their way up and across the densely wooded hillside. The woods were thick and both dog and handler worked carefully and methodically across the rugged terrain.

The conversation between the breeders became passionate the longer they looked. It was unanimous; this dog was in a league of his own.

Willow knew her job. She knew what she was there for – and she was never one to quit. Their efforts were rewarded when Willow successfully located several areas that contained scattered and aged human remains.

Because of their skill as a dog/handler team and their success on the search, Mary was asked to apply for the job of K-9 handler for the Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Office. Her application was accepted; she was hired, and completed the Police Training Academy later that year.

On October 13, 2002, ten days after her successful search, Willow delivered nine squealing little yellow bricks into the

world. Six females and three males announced their arrival to all of Cattaraugus County. Mary is Mom #2 when puppies come, and the house becomes a kennel. Carefully watched, weighed, and nurtured, Nitro Golden puppies live like royalty.

From birth to about 12 weeks, all puppies go through a unique period of development called the Imprinting Window. During this time, puppies learn important life lessons from their Mother about pack social structure and hierarchy. The pup's overall sense of security, psychological stability, and sociability can be affected for the rest of their lives by how effectively the Imprinting Window is handled. Most people (including many breeders) are completely unaware this window even exists, much less how vital it is in the pup's development. It is during this time that Mary takes extra care to make sure her pups are exposed to as much stimuli as possible to ensure their stability in both the show ring and the working world.

As Willow's puppies reached the age of eight weeks, Mary sent two of the pet quality males to their new homes. The remaining puppies were kept behind because Mary and a small team of fellow breeders planned to evaluate them. Having produced, evaluated, and placed scores of pups from numerous litters, Mary knows a thing or two about what to look for in a Golden. But four eyes are better than two, and 12 eyes are better than six, and...well, you get the idea.

When Willow first conceived, Mary and her husband agreed that because they already had several intact males in their home, their pick of this litter would have to be a girl. On the day of the evaluation, Mary loaded all the females into the truck, tossing in the one remaining little male

just for company. At the evaluation site, each of the females was assessed with the collectively critical eye of the breeders. Gathered around an assessment table, they inspected each of the female puppies, set it back down to play with her siblings, and evaluated the next. This was done several times. On a whim, someone reached down and lifted the male up onto the table. The room fell silent as they stared at what could only be described as a real showstopper. The conversation between the breeders became passionate the longer they looked. It was unanimous; this dog was in a league of his own.

Conflicted by her decision to keep a female, and the unsettling feeling that passing on this young male would be a huge mistake, Mary left for home. She spent the four-hour trip preparing an argument to her husband as to why yet another male should be added to the kennels of Nitro Golden Retrievers.

The resulting domestic dispute could have sold tickets, but was settled without law enforcement intervention. That scene-stealing male pup was christened Nitro's Boy Wonder, nicknamed "Robin" – and was home to stay.

With her goal to train Robin in the Search & Rescue disciplines of Airscenting, Mantrailing, and Human Remains Detection, Mary knew she had no time to lose. The very next day, Robin's working career began. While still in the Imprinting Window, Mary took the opportunity to expose Robin to the unique odor of decaying human remains. While this may not be a favorite conversation starter at cocktail parties, it is an essential component for dogs that learn this discipline of search work. And because Robin was still within his Imprinting Window, there couldn't be a more perfect time.

At this age, puppies do not have the ability to search in earnest for scent, but they do have a natural curiosity for the smell of decay. Mary knew she could expose Robin to the training aids and Robin would retain a degree of scent-recognition of these odors for his entire life. Naturally much more training would be necessary, but Robin's early exposures would come to serve him very well in the future.

Robin began to show his true search-dog colors as soon as Mary began doing puppy runaways with him. Puppy runaways are the foundation to Mantrailing and Airscent training. The object of this game is to have the owner restrain the pup, while someone shows him food or



This sleepy little puppy was destined for a home other than MacQueen's because Mary didn't want to keep another male. But after a favorable evaluation by Mary and other breeders, his future was sealed.



After a fast finish that included two specialty majors, Robin won Best of Breed at the Hudson Valley GRC Specialty in 2006, under Carl Liepmann.

toys and then runs for cover. The pup is allowed to see the person run off, but that person quickly disappears from sight and the pup must learn to use his nose to find them. Most small puppies have little desire to find anyone but their master, and certainly not for any great distance. Robin, however, was greatly frustrated at being separated from his favorite toy, and not only ran after the "victim," but he did so in over a foot of snow! Climbing in and out of the footprints in the snow, Robin was on a mission to get to that victim and claim his precious reward.

Mary's love for her dogs, especially her K-9 partners, is well known to everyone who knows her. Mary dedicated herself to being Robin's partner from start to finish, whether that meant handling him for search work or in the conformation ring. Robin has, and continues to be, handled exclusively by Mary, from first point to last.

It was at this point that I came to know Mary both professionally as well as personally. I met Mary and Robin's mother, Willow at a dog-training seminar I conducted in Ontario. It was apparent to me that Mary had both the skill and the will to work her dogs at a more professional level, so I invited her to come and attend our Dog Trainer's Academy in Illinois. A few months later, Mary enrolled, and attended the Academy with an exuberant young pup named Robin. We could not have known how our lives would change by knowing one another.

After her graduation from our Search & Detection Academy program, Mary and I decided to stay in touch. This was

unusual for me because I rarely cross the line from professional association with students into a personal friendship. But Mary and I shared a passion for working with dogs and had similar outlook on life, this made us fast friends. True friends. Lifelong friends.

Mary decided to start Robin's show career in earnest. Much like his early search work, Robin started his show career with a bang by earning Reserve Winners Dog to a four-point major from the 6-9 puppy class at the 2003 GRC of Western NY Specialty show.

Mary and Robin were on a roll and it looked like blue skies and green lights ahead. Mary structured her world so she could do everything necessary to make Robin the best he could possibly be. That was her plan. But life is what happens while you're busy making other plans.

Mary and I stayed in contact and it wasn't unusual for us to call one another quite frequently. So when my Mary's name showed up on my Caller ID screen, I answered the phone with a snappy response, knowing it was she.

Mary told me about a test she had done, and that she had been diagnosed with a serious illness. Mary told me that her doctors said if she fought this illness like she fought for everything else she ever wanted, that she could beat it.

I feared for Mary, my friend. The road to recovery would be long, uncertain, and unquestionably difficult.



Robin's show career culminated with a JAM at the 2006 National Specialty, judge Jon Cole. Robin has been entirely owner-handled throughout his show career.

Mary feared for Robin, her friend. She worried about his training during her illness. She did not want him to languish while she struggled to recover; he was doing so well.

Mary's fear that Robin's training would deteriorate proved to be unfounded. Indeed, his training would not decline, it would improve. Robin's intense drive and boundless puppy energy made him an exceptional search dog, but when Mary's condition began to change, Robin would come to show a different quality. As the weeks wore on, while Mary endured the course of her illness, Robin calmly took his place at her side. Sensing her fragile condition, Robin tempered his energetic style, and replaced it with a slow and deliberate manner when in her presence. Almost as if he had a sixth sense, Robin seemed to magically appear when she felt her worst, laying by her, walking quietly beside her, and picking up what she dropped. When fever rocked her with chills, Mary felt grateful when Robin would curl up warmly beside her on the bed. She would stroke his head and say "Thanks, Robin." Robin would look up at her with soft brown eyes that seemed to say "You'd do it for me."

With Robin at her side, Mary fought her illness with everything she had. Refusing to go down without a fight, Mary gritted her teeth and never took a punch that she didn't give back. With time, Mary's color returned, she grew stronger, and eventually began to feel ready to step back into the ring.

When Robin was eleven months of age, Mary turned a serious eye to his show career, taking third place in both the 9-12 sweeps and the regular classes at the 2003 GRCA National Specialty show. Robin's first points came later that month and there was no looking back. By the fall of 2004, when he was still under the age of two, Robin had completed his American Championship, with two of his major wins being earned at Specialty shows. During this time, Robin also finished his Canadian Championship in just three shows, one of which included a Sporting Group 2 placement.

When Robin finished his Championship titles, Mary decided to start a Specials career. The year 2005 brought many Breed and Sporting Group wins and placements as well as an invitation to the Golden Retriever Foundation's Top Twenty Gala. Robin and Mary accumulated a total of 23 SDHF points that first "special" year.



K-9 Robin on the job during a rural area search. He is trained and successful at human remains detection, article searches and mantrailing.

Coming back to our Training Academy in 2004, Mary began Robin's formal search dog training in Mantrailing (finding the person whose scent matches the human's scent-sample the dog is given), Article Search (finding something lost that bears human scent), and Human Remains Detection (locating the deceased). The indisputable benefit of Robin's early exposure to the odor of human remains during his Imprinting Window paid off in spades during this time! The scent was immediately recognizable to Robin and his training progressed very rapidly. Learning that the odor he was sent to find could be old or fresh, buried beneath the surface, high up in the trees, in water, or just bleached out bones, Robin came to understand the nuances of Human Remains Detection. Robin's desire to work was bursting at the seams.

During one training session in Human Remains Detection, Robin left the training area as if in search of more training aids. Mary asked if they had missed searching any of the areas because Robin seemed to be showing interest further away. When Mary allowed Robin to satisfy his curiosity, she discovered that he had located a very expensive GPS unit dropped by one of the other dog handlers. Robin's Article Search training had paid off – especially

for the person who dropped the equipment!

In 2006, Robin's show career was sharply curtailed due to his Police K-9 schedule, but was noteworthy just the same. With Mary at the top end of the lead, Robin was shown a total of only six weekends, yet he amassed eight Best of Breeds, a Specialty Best of Breed, and five Sporting Group placements. He also completed his Show Dog Hall of Fame title with 29.5 points, qualified for the second year in a row for the Golden Retriever Foundation's Top Twenty Gala, and took three Judges Award of Merit wins at Specialties. His most prized win was undoubtedly the Judges Award of Merit bestowed on him at the September 2006 National Specialty show in Overland Park, KS.

In early 2006, Mary came back to Illinois to introduce Robin to his Narcotics Detection training. Mary's early scent work served as a good foundation, and Robin quickly learned to detect the odor of narcotics.

Mary and Robin stay busy working for the Sheriff's Office. Their work includes jail searches, vehicle searches, and drug raids for the Southern Tier Regional Drug Task Force. They also perform high school, grade school, vocational school



searches, and searches during community festivals. Robin is currently the only narcotics certified K-9 in Cattaraugus County. His is also the first dog in the area

trained and allowed to search people/students due to his easy going temperament and passive "sit" alert when he locates drugs. Robin participates in numerous community public relations events and fundraisers, where he can often be seen in the crowd carrying a donation basket or a

lunch box filled with candy for the children.

But don't let stories of Robin carrying baskets of candy for the kids fool you into believing he is a quiet, stoic, dapper gent that never makes a scene. Robin can make an event out of merely entering a room. After all, cruising through life as one big, hairy smile seems to get a lot of attention. I've always said that Robin is yellow and he's not afraid to use it. Many of Mary's fellow exhibitors can share stories of Robin wallowing on his back, all four feet waving in the air in the middle of the Sporting Group or Best in Show rings.

I laughed out loud the day Mary called me after a large-scale drug raid with the Southern-Tier Regional Drug Task Force. She told me about the day and how over 150 officers met at the city courtroom at 5 a.m. that morning to receive their assignments. As Mary sat with Robin at her side, she listened intently for her assignment to be given by the head of the Task Force. Sensing movement out of the corner of her eye, Mary noticed that a moth flew into the room. At the same moment Robin saw the moth as well. Before she could react, Mary saw Robin jump up and go frolicking through the courtroom on a mission to capture the elusive party crasher. The room fell silent as Robin dashed to the front of the room where the VIP's were seated. Everyone watched Robin leap into the air and gulp down the moth in one fell swoop. He promptly turned to the audience for tail-wagging approval as Mary wilted under her seat. A round of applause rocked the courtroom and Robin was officially and



Robin and Mary conduct a car search for possible drugs. In the first picture, Robin is closing in on the scent of drugs. The middle picture shows Robin pinpointing the source of the drug scent. In the last picture he is giving the trained alert behavior (a sit) and staring at the location of the drugs. Note that in all the photos his tail is wagging continuously.





Robin and a fellow deputy manning the Sheriff's display booth at a local high school career day.

lovingly indoctrinated into this close-knit fraternity.

Robin loves to have fun, but he is a serious working dog that never says die. He has proven his worth many times over in searches for missing persons, as well as for the Drug Task Force, locating drugs in the local jails, schools, on students themselves, and in vehicles. Robin has become Cattaraugus County's secret weapon in the war on drugs.

Today, Mary MacQueen and Robin do triple duty in their careers. Mary continues to show Robin and also works him in law enforcement. She also works with me conducting training seminars all over the United States, as well as serving as an instruc-

tor in our Canine Training Academy in Illinois. Working alongside Mary every step of the way, Robin serves as an immutable spokesman for the versatility of a well-bred, well-trained Golden Retriever.

As Robin continues to progress, his value as a working K-9 and a show dog hall of famer increases. Between his professional training as a working K-9, and his show ring success, Robin has probably amassed more Police and Search and Rescue K-9 credentials than has any other Show Champion Golden Retriever before him. In the eyes of the world, Robin is an amazing, playful, focused, dog with extraordinary beauty and talent. But in Mary's eyes, Robin is that squealing yellow pup birthed right into her hands, the glowing pride of a job done well, and the devoted brown-eyed friend who stands by the one who gave her heart and soul to him. ❖

About the author: Behesha Doan is the owner of the Extreme K-9 Training Academy located in Southern Illinois. She is an internationally recognized trainer, author, and speaker, and is highly regarded for her whole-dog approach to dog training. For more information on Behesha Doan visit: www.extremek-9.com or e-mail her at Behesha@extremek-9.com

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