

I Smell Fun! Valkyrie and Emerson, just two pals hanging out

By a Nose

An experimental program introduces children to the joys of scent work.

COURTESY CANDICE CROSS

The October morning air was crisp when 12-year-old Emerson Cross and her training partner, a Golden Retriever named Valkyrie, checked in for the three-day AKC scent work trial hosted by the Oklahoma City Obedience Training Club (OCOTC).

After picking up her competitor's number, Emerson took Valkyrie to the potty area one last time. Then the bouncy, vibrant youth handler excitedly approached the start line with her happy, energetic dog.

"You can start when you're ready," the judge said. Emerson replied, "Thank you," and reached down to pet Valkyrie's head. Softly, she said, "Are you ready, girl?"

Then Emerson gave the *find it* command, and they crossed the start line.

Once they entered the search area, a striking transformation occurred—the bubbly preteen became a focused professional. At the end of a long leash, Emerson took up her role as a follow-along observer, letting Valkyrie take control and lead the way. She exhibited all the dog-handling skills and finesse of a top-level handler.

Within seconds Valkyrie gave a solid nose hold, freezing at the source of the odor to show she had found it.

Emerson yelled, "Alert!" and the judge said, "Yes!"

Suddenly, the bubbly 12-year-old reappeared, the exhibitor transformation coming full circle. Emerson rewarded Valkyrie with a high-value treat and her canine pal wagged her tail while jumping up and down. It was the happy dance of success.

As they bounded out of the search area with a green qualifying ribbon, Emerson had tears of joy. The scenario repeated all weekend as Team Valkyrie earned 11 Q's, two titles, and placement awards.

WHIFF OF HOPE

Emerson and Valkyrie performed like a seasoned team, working through the

The scent work internship grew out of a successful experiment that brought therapy dogs into East Lubbock Elementary School. It started before the pandemic and resumed when schools opened two years later. The dogs played an important role in helping children adjust to the new normal.



complex, choreographed searches as if they had been best friends and partners since Valkyrie was a tiny pup. In reality, Valkyrie is not Emerson's dog. They were brought together through a unique program designed to help children recover and regain self-confidence after two years of isolation during the pandemic.

It all began in 2018 when Emerson's mother, Candice Cross, the principal at East Lubbock Elementary School, in Texas, contacted her friend Jolynn Payne, breeder and trainer of Rocking Paw Goldens, about starting a weekly therapy dog program with Payne's Golden Retriever Ember. The program was an enormous success.

Then, in 2020, everything came to a

screeching halt as COVID-19 developed into a pandemic. One by one, like a line of falling dominoes, schools nationwide shut their doors for months to in-person instruction, holidays—any and all face-to-face contact.

By early 2021, the schools began reopening for in-person instruction and the therapy dog program restarted. Ember had an added mission this time: to heal the students and staff affected by the extended shutdown.

Witnessing the positive interaction between students and Ember, Cross wanted her students and daughter to experience other dog-related activities. Payne suggested hosting an AKC scent work trial and contacted the Heart of the Plains Kennel Club (HPKC) in



Emerson's first trial inspired her to learn and practice more, efforts that clearly paid off for the team.

Lubbock. Cross arranged for the school to be the trial site, and they set a date in July 2021.

After months of planning, the trial weekend arrived. Cross watched as teams prepared for their runs and celebrated their successes. "I couldn't believe the beauty unfolding in the hallways. The world of AKC sports was opening before me."

NO DOG? NO PROBLEM!

Soon after the successful trial, Payne announced on social media that she was launching a scent work junior handler internship program using her young Golden Retrievers. She wanted the internships to go to children who didn't have a dog or to those whose current dog's temperament didn't fit with doing dog sports.

Payne put together a plan and met with the parents and their children. The internship had a couple of critical elements. First, the dogs would live at the training center. Next, Payne would cover all dog-related expenses, including trial entry fees, transportation, food, and hotel costs.

While Cross already had a pet dog at home, she hoped Emerson would earn a spot in the program.

Emerson was thrilled when she learned she was one of five youths chosen for the internship. She was partnered with a young fluffy Golden named Valkyrie, and the duo started learning together.

"We didn't really get the point of the game until a couple of visits later when we finally realized how much we loved



Passing the AKC Canine Good Citizen test was another triumph.

getting to do a ton of awesome games together!" she recalls.

The parents drove the young handlers to the weekly training center for one-on-one sessions with Payne. "Jolynn always brightens the mood and Valkyrie, being as fun and exciting as she is, also made the thought of going a lot more exciting," Emerson recalls.

Three students withdrew from the program because of other commitments and summer vacations, leaving Emerson and another student named Grant.

Payne taught them the basics of scent work—terminology, preparing scented Q-Tips, learning about competition routines, and competing in Handler Discrimination (HD). For HD, the dog has to find an article like a glove, sock, or Q-Tip scented with the handler's odor.

That meant Emerson had to wear the scented article before asking the dog to find it. “This is so weird because I had to put a glove in lots of smelly places and then keep it in a jar, Yuck!” she recalls. Payne fostered each handler’s skills individually. When the training sessions expanded to twice a week, they combined their lessons into one class. The young handlers encouraged each other and celebrated each other’s successes as they worked through the practice searches.

After months of training, it was time for the July 2022 Lubbock scent work trial. Team Valkyrie was ready to put their skills to the test. First-time trial excitement and nervousness set in. “I was a bit unsure until I first finished my first search,” Emerson recalls. “I realized how much I loved the activity with Valkyrie!”

They earned a qualifying ribbon—an exterior search on their first run together.

Over the next seven runs, the green qualifying ribbons were elusive, leaving Emerson frustrated and emotional. Then, as the tears flowed, other handlers wrapped around her with encouraging words.

Those tears, combined with support from other exhibitors, fueled a fire. She was determined to make Valkyrie and Payne proud by ensuring all runs had positive reinforcement and celebration.

PRACTICE MAKES ...

After the trial, Emerson and Valkyrie leaned into all the extra practice opportunities. To prepare for the OKC October trial, they worked through class after class on scent work and attended practice on days when she didn’t have school or when Payne set up several hides at places around town. She audited a search seminar and learned even more about how she could support Valkyrie.

Their hard work paid off in October when Team Valkyrie walked away with 11 Q’s, two titles, and multiple placements.

Emerson and Valkyrie have added obedience training to their weekly



“I love how she tackles me!” Valkyrie has a particularly joyful way of showing her feelings for Emerson.

schedule and graduated from the Canine Good Citizen class. Soon, they will embark on urban canine classes to earn Valkyrie’s therapy certification. This summer, they plan to compete in dock diving.

Grant has continued as well, splitting his time among baseball, football, and scent work training with his new Golden Retriever mix.

When asked what her favorite thing is about Valkyrie, she busts out an infectious laugh and says, “I love how she tackles me whenever she sees me! I brace myself, but we’re going down together!” Emerson loves participating in dog sports, but her true love is Valkyrie. Those ears and sideways, tongue-out smile make her melt.

Like any preteen, Emerson loves taking selfies; her favorites are photos with Valkyrie. When they aren’t engaged

in a class, Emerson frequently asks Payne to send new pictures of Valkyrie or asks if they can arrange playdates “just because.”

Cross knows when Emerson feels low because she requests time with her dog, Valkyrie. The spunky Golden Retriever fixes everything and sets Emerson’s world right again. In the future, they are hoping that Valkyrie will be able to become a member of the Cross family. **FD**

David Gallant is an Oklahoma-based freelance writer and AKC scent work judge. He competes in scent work, Barn Hunt, and agility with his Australian Shepherd, Stevie.

For more information on AKC scent work, visit akc.org/sports/akc-scent-work.