

Working dogs / Once trained, they offer families protection

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He's Mr. Mom and he's alpha male.

Just ask Damion, a 105-pound Cane Corso mastiff that can either smother a face with kisses or devour it with one chomp of his huge, fierce jaws. It's all at the command of Mike Caporicci.

Or ask Caporicci's daughters, Ashlyn, 14, and Sydni, 11. They count on dad to be there after school, to tote them to and from school practices, sometimes to give them advice. They also help him train protection dogs like Damion, valued at \$15,000 to \$18,000 once they are taught in the home.

"In the beginning it was tougher, and I still have a little problem with it," Caporicci said about his Mr. Mom role. "Society thinks males should be out of the house at 7 and home at 8."

Like his ideally-selected alpha male canines, Caporicci is rugged on the outside, capable of gentleness on the inside.

He and his partner ran Golden State K-9 Training in California, buying and training dogs of unique blood lines, some purchased from Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. They were sold to sports celebrities like San Francisco 49ers' Ricky Watters and Oakland Raiders' Sebastian Janikowski, to people with huge estates, like the California entrepreneur with a 12,000-square-foot home on 15 acres.

Two went to the Thoroughbred Corp., owned by a Saudi prince and home to famed racehorses like Point Given.

"Victor Espinosa drove up in his Diablo Ferrari," he remembers. "He rode Point Given. We went to dinner."

When wife and mom Teresa's job with Ross Department Stores offered a series of promotions, the family moved to the York/Clover area when the company opened a store at Manchester Village.

"We came 3,000 miles from home," he said, "and I was the kids' support system during the day."

He gives the dogs initial training at their home, sometimes assisted by Ashlyn and Sydni, and the dogs live both in their kennels and in the home to learn family bonding.

"They both work with the puppies and younger dogs," he said about his daughters. "It's important that the dog respects a female. The fact that they are children is just a bonus."

The girls enjoy their canine responsibilities. Ashlyn hopes to become a lawyer or marine biologist, but always wants to help train dogs, and Sydni said she wants to become a veterinarian.

The dogs are culled from litters for temperament and personality in addition to other qualities. An overly aggressive dog is no more suited for protection than an overly passive one.

Damion, for example, is descended from the Italian mastiff that accompanied gladiators in ancient Rome. They were bred to hunt wild boar, and Damion is pure muscle with a head and neck nearly the size of a basketball and teeth to match.

But Damion is most contented lying on his giant pillow in the living room, his nose next to a rawhide bone, having his tummy scratched. That would not prevent him from risking his life for his family in a split second if necessary.

Caporicci trains Czechoslovakian German shepherds, Cane Corsos, Belgian Malinois, rottweilers and Doberman pinschers from Yugoslavia and Presa Canarios, a huge dog from the Canary Islands that looks similar to a Cane Corso/boxer mix.

"Dogs that get popular can be ruined by overbreeding to meet American Kennel Club standards," he said. "It can

cause physical problems such as hip displasia and temperament problems. I prefer the rare dogs."

Dogs trained at Caporicci's home begin at \$5,500, but he prefers follow-up training in the home. And he does not like turning two dogs loose on an estate; he says they ideally reside in the home as companion bodyguards.

Once a dog is placed in the home, bonds with the family and learns its territory, Caporicci and his partner fly to clients' homes at points around the country to train them in home territory and to see their owner as alpha. The value of a trained-in-the-home dog starts at \$12,500, depending on the extent of training.

"I have no problem shaving the price for a person who really needs it," Caporicci said. "I would sell to someone like that before I would to an athlete or entertainer."

Take for example Lois Maddux, a therapist for adolescents in residential treatment in Springfield, Mo. Maddux was raped at gunpoint by someone she knew and went into hiding for a month with her son, commuting to school at 4 a.m.

She began looking for peace of mind by seeking protection dogs on the Internet. Golden State K-9 was one of several she contacted. She soon discovered she couldn't afford them on a social worker's salary, but Caporicci trimmed his price and sold her a male, Balli, and a female, Jessie, both Czech shepherds. They will be bred each year, and Caporicci will get half the litter.

"He's an unusual man in that he says what he means and means what he says," Maddux said by phone. "He genuinely wanted to help me."

He trained, then shipped the dogs to Missouri by plane with a video on beginning the bonding process. Three weeks later he flew to Missouri for three days to begin on-site training.

"It was very interesting," she said. "He couldn't let us have the dogs together because they had to bond with us rather than with one another. We had to give them equal time so they wouldn't compete."

"He wanted to make sure I was the alpha female," she chuckled, "but I didn't want to upset my babies. He made sure I corrected them the first time. He said, 'Do you want a protection dog?' I said yes. He said, 'Well, you're acting like you want a pet.'"

The dogs naturally respect her son more because he is male, so she has to work twice as hard. She laughs when she remembers the day she was grounded while Caporicci and her son took the dogs to the park. Her handling skills were not sufficient to lead the dogs to an area filled with distractions.

But Jessie and Balli have enhanced her peace of mind. Recently a group of teenage boys stopped to hang out at the end of her driveway.

"Balli decided that they needed to move on, so he barked at them," she said. "They moved."

She and her son will move into a larger home soon, and Caporicci and his partner will return twice for three-day visits to train them further in protection. Caporicci considers training in the family's home environment essential to developing a good protection dog.

"No matter how well-trained a dog is, it's only as good as the owner," he said.

In 16 years, he said he's never had a dog bite a child, be returned to him or display misplaced aggression. And despite all the protection training he's done, he's never been bitten.

"I attribute that to having the dog's respect," he said, "and respecting the dog's ability."