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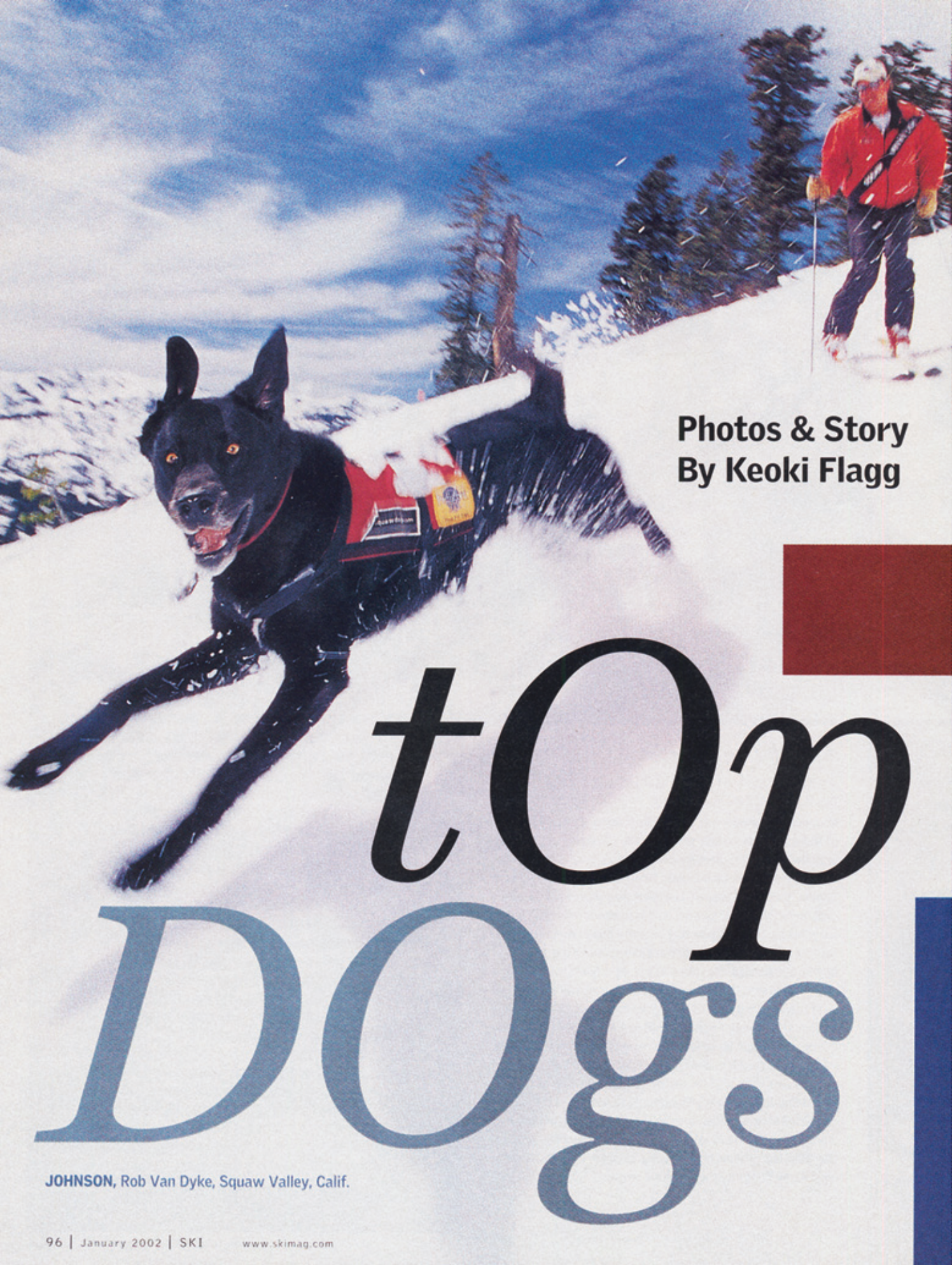
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Photos & Story
By Keoki Flagg

top DOGS

JOHNSON, Rob Van Dyke, Squaw Valley, Calif.



LILLY, Squaw Valley

Next time you ski California's Alpine Meadows or Squaw Valley, you'll likely see some of skiing's best rescue canines dogging it on the summit. Don't be fooled. The life of a patroller and his dog is anything but easy: long days of repetition, brutal weather and exhausting labor. From the human perspective, it takes an unrelenting commitment. From the four-legged view, it takes two vital components: the right attitude and one hell of a good nose.

At Alpine Meadows, the dog patrol has its own trading cards—complete with breeding heritage and favorite activities. Golden Retrievers, often derided as the dumb blondes of the dog world, in reality have the ideal attitude, work ethic and natural detective's curiosity for emergency rescue work.

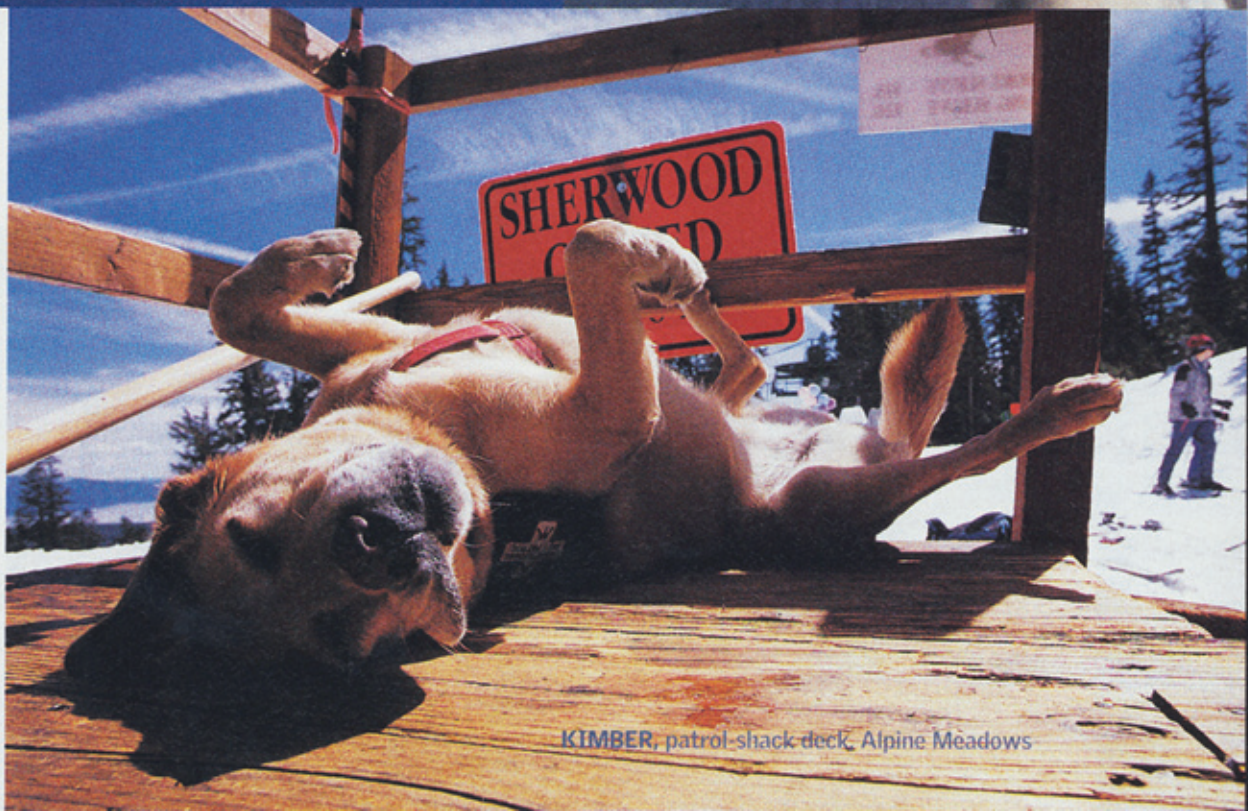


KALVIN, ZACH, Alpine Meadows, Calif.



JOHNSON (ON ROOF), ROSCOE AND FRIEND, Matt Calcutt, Will Payden, patrol shack, Squaw Valley

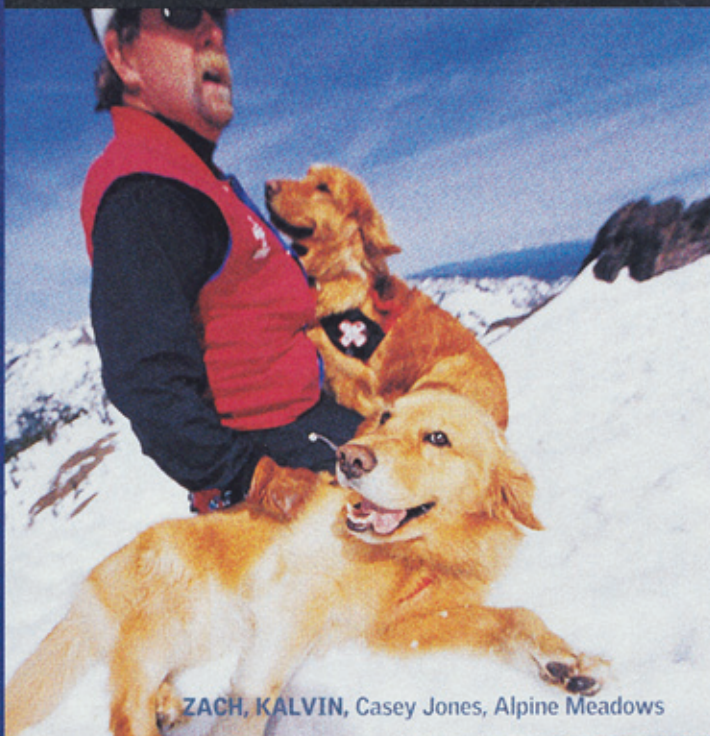
It's not always about hard work and training. Springtime—when the sun is out, the crowds have thinned and the avalanche risk is minimal—is the time to hang out. As with all things in the life of rescue dogs, even the downtime is an exercise in strengthening the relationship between dog and handler, because familiarity inevitably leads to performance in times of crisis. Dog patrols also serve as goodwill ambassadors. They raise awareness of mountain safety and remind skiers how lucky they are to be where they are. And when the dogs aren't working, there's no better place to snooze than on a sunny patrol-shack deck. Of course, there are interruptions in that perfect dog nap, when visitors stop by to give a quick scratch.



KIMBER, patrol shack deck, Alpine Meadows

Dog and handler are a team. Though the training methods are somewhat standardized, the communication between each team is unmistakably unique. Teach the commands; learn your dog's language; bury the glove—again and again. The best search-and-rescue dogs, however, share one common element: "the love of the game."

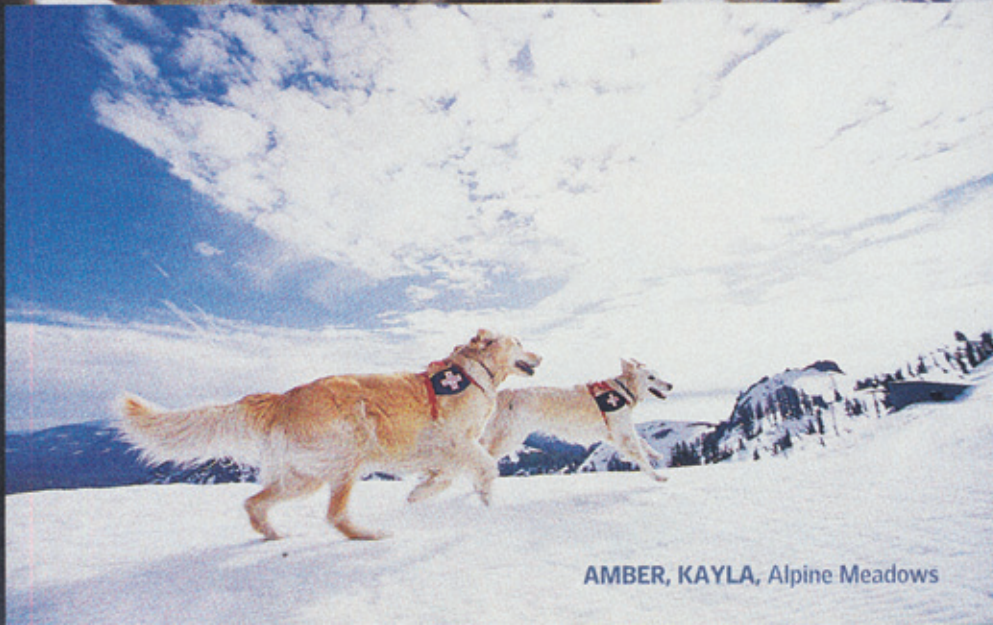
It's 7 a.m., and as the sun shines its first rays over Lake Tahoe, it feels like the top of the world. Nine golden retrievers watch the sunrise from the Summit Chair. Trevor, the largest golden, turns and gives the photographer a knowing look: "You're getting this aren't you?"



ZACH, KALVIN, Casey Jones, Alpine Meadows



TREVOR AND COWORKERS, Summit Chair, Alpine Meadows



AMBER, KAYLA, Alpine Meadows

It takes years to develop a rescue dog. Yet the truth is, only a small percentage of dogs ever get an opportunity to make a "live find" because of an avalanche's quick and deadly efficiency. There are only four documented cases in North America in which canines recovered victims alive. The problem isn't the dogs, but the time it takes to get them to the scene. Often, patrol isn't alerted to an avalanche until long after it has broken loose.



AUSTIN, Squaw Valley

At age 7, Austin was one of the finest patrol dogs in the U.S. As winner of the 2000 Incredible Dog Challenge in the avalanche rescue competition, he consistently clocked the fastest time in sniffing out and digging up buried volunteers. Of course he did get some assistance from his owner, Craig Noble, who is Squaw's chief dog trainer. Austin, however, is no longer a part of the Squaw Valley Patrol. Last summer he was struck by a car and killed.



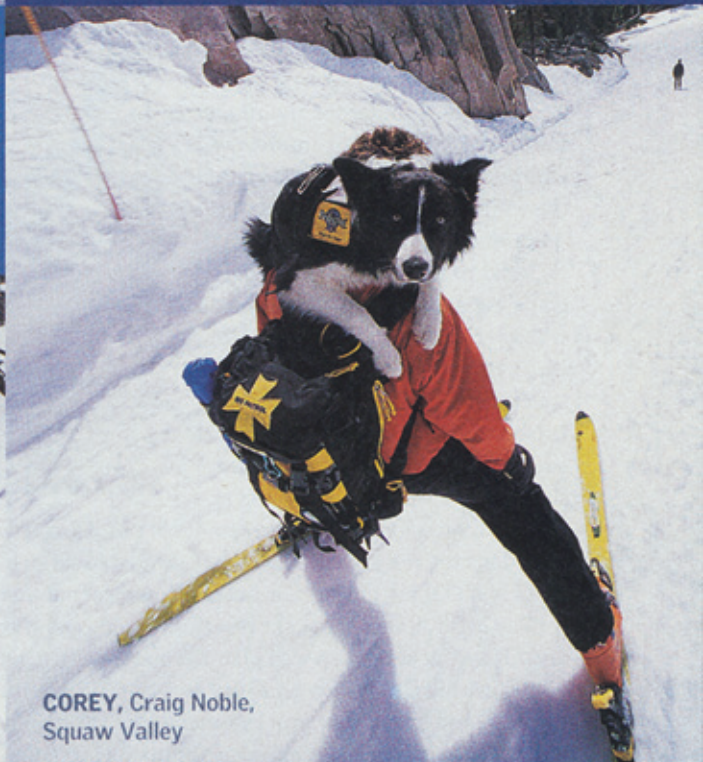
AUSTIN & Craig Noble





Craig Noble, **AUSTIN**,
LILLY, Matt Calcutt,
Squaw Valley

Six-month-old Corey (below) is Craig Noble's new partner, replacing Austin (far left). Noble is sure that Corey has what it takes: "He might not look the part, but he has the heart, a great nose and he will not give up." Corey is younger and smaller than traditional rescue retrievers. In a job where response time determines whether a victim lives or dies, the speed by which the dogs get to the scene is paramount. Add to the equation the harsh working conditions of deep snow and no skis or board for flotation, and patrol dogs have a difficult time getting to the accident site quickly. In many



COREY, Craig Noble,
Squaw Valley



AMBER, KIMBER, KAYLA,
Summit Chair, Alpine Meadows

cases, it takes so much energy that the dogs are exhausted before they even begin the search. Craig and Corey are doing their part to solve this problem. Since his first training day on the slopes, Corey has been practicing the concept of "a free ride." Perched on top of Craig's patrol pack, Corey hitches a lift to the rescue site, preserving his energy. The system takes balance, trust and a whole lot of practice. And though not yet perfected in rougher conditions, it is clear that together the young pup and Noble are heading into new territory. ♦