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A dog's life

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Furmanathletics

A dog's life

Football team's honorary mascot is top canine on campus

Furman has a strict policy when it comes to animals on campus: No pets allowed, unless they're on a leash.

But when Blade, a fox-red Labrador retriever, makes his early-morning rounds near Timmons Arena and Cherrydale, Public Safety officers look the other way. They understand that Blade, a well-trained 11-year-old, is the exception to the rule.

Impounding the beloved canine, in fact, could cause a minor riot.

As the unofficial mascot of the football team, Blade is the top dog on campus. Football equipment manager Spear Sedgley, who has worked at Furman since 1989, says the team adopted Blade shortly after he brought the puppy to work in 1992.

"He really belongs to the players," says Sedgley. "I just house and feed him."

Trained to bark at the mention of "Furman football," Blade has not missed a practice in more than a decade. Dutifully, he remains beyond the painted sidelines, waiting for the coach's long whistle that signals the end of practice.

Then, like a puppy, he bounds onto the field to join the squad. Blade likes to fetch, as most Labs do, and he loves the water. So after retrieving the drill cones from the practice field, he joins the team for a much anticipated hot shower.

It's a strange sight, admits Sedgley. But it illustrates the affection the team has for Blade.

"He is probably the most loved dog in the world," says Sedgley.

In 1998, after the athletic department received complaints about the on-campus behavior of other staff-owned dogs, John Block, then the vice president for inter-collegiate athletics, issued an edict: Leave your pets at home.

But soon after Blade stopped coming to campus, the football team circulated a petition to have the Labrador "reinstated." Every player signed it.

The dog's reunion with the team was like a scene out of a Disney movie.

As practice ended one afternoon, Block called the team together to announce that Blade would be allowed back on campus. The players erupted in applause — and the celebration grew louder as Sedgley's truck



Blade's pride in Paladin football is evident in his choice of apparel. Below: Blade takes a break after helping equipment manager Spear Sedgley prepare for spring football practice.

turned onto the road separating the stadium from the Lay Physical Activities Center and came into view. In the back was Blade, barking at the sight of the team.

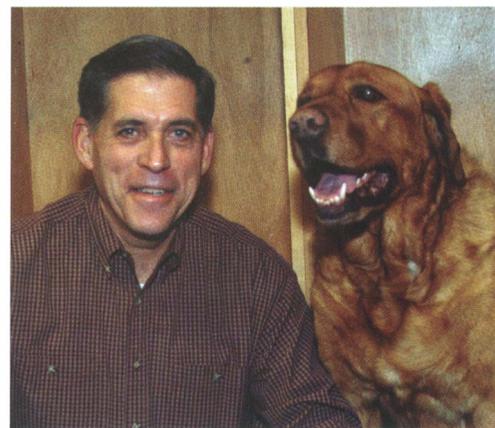
"He never barks when he's in the back of the truck," says Sedgley. "But he did then. I guess he knew what was happening."

Barreling down the hill leading to the field, Blade was reunited with the team. Since then, he has seldom left the players' sides, except for football games when Sedgley is too busy repairing and replacing equipment to supervise him.

Not that Blade really needs to be watched. Word is that the dog has misbehaved only once.

During a scrimmage in Paladin Stadium several years ago, Blade spotted a stray dog wandering along the opposite sideline and darted across the field to chase off the trespasser. Former head coach Bobby Johnson, a stern, no-nonsense taskmaster, went ballistic. "Get that dog off the field!" he bellowed.

Now that Johnson has moved on to



Vanderbilt, Sedgley jokes that he and the coaching staff can laugh at the memory.

During the off-season, Blade spends most of his days shadowing Sedgley and napping. Although advancing arthritis and colder weather have limited the dog's activity in recent weeks, Sedgley says Blade is counting the days until March, when spring drills begin and the players return.

— John Roberts