



Ski patroller Ben Stone and his rescue dog Kaya have been working together all of her life.  
PHOTO/GABBY DODD

## Puppy love

### Avalanche dogs

**Avalanches are unpredictable and deadly.** It's important to be prepared by knowing the forecast, the signs and having the gear. Even so, avalanches still kill.

Avalanches have claimed the lives of 14 skiers and snowboarders during the 2018-2019 season, according to [avalanche.org](http://avalanche.org). Two occurred inbound—inside the boundaries of a ski resort—at Taos, New Mexico. These kinds of avalanches are especially dangerous due to the fact that most people riding inbound are not prepared with the proper gear. The best bet of being found in this scenario is often being sniffed out by an avalanche rescue dog.

Nearly every resort across the United States and in Europe has some furry, tail-wagging staff. At Squaw Valley, avalanche dogs have been a part of ski patrol for around 22 years. A dog's usefulness in avalanche rescue goes above and beyond that of human patrollers. Dogs have better searching skills.

"One rescue dog can cover the same amount of ground as 10 humans in a fraction of the time," Squaw ski patroller Ben Stone said.

The dogs can also quickly determine if there is any human scent within the

snowpack, so that both dogs and the patrollers know where to dig.

Stone and his 8-year-old, carrot-loving Belgian Malinois partner, Kaya, have been working together for all of Kaya's life as a part of the one dog, one handler approach at Squaw Valley Ski Patrol.

"It's all a game for these dogs," Stone said. "Yes, she's been involved in real rescues, but the dog doesn't know when it's playing the game and when it's doing it for real."

Since they train every week, Kaya is always in search and rescue mode, finding people regularly. Puppies that will become rescue dogs are selected very carefully and start training at eight weeks old. They first learn hide and seek, teaching the puppies how to look for objects. Then they move on to shallow burials, and learn something called "victim loyalty," so that even if their handlers walk away, they still search no matter what. In order to pass the final test, a dog must find two to three wool sweaters that have been buried 70 centimeters under the snow for over 24 hours simulating a faint scent and a very deep human burial. The training is extensive and happens in a progression that takes two years.

Upon completion of training, rescue dogs live an eventful life that includes riding chairlifts, snowmobiles and skiing down slopes on the shoulders of their handlers. Kaya loves the day-to-day activities and is always ready to work. Stone and Kaya have even traveled to Canada for trainings together.

"If she sees me pick up my backpack in the morning, she knows I'm going to work, and she immediately wants to come, too," Stone said. "Seeing the stoke in the dog helps bring out the stoke in the human and we feed off of each other in that way."

Although Kaya, Stone and their team train hard, inbound avalanches are rare. Avalanche dogs spend much of their time training and serving as resort mascots. Many even have their own baseball cards as a type of souvenir for children. Even more important, avalanche dogs are often a way to educate the public about skiing safety.

"This is a really special workplace that not a whole lot of people get to experience," Stone said. "Coming into work every day in my ski boots with my dog is what keeps me coming back to this job."

The bond between the two is so strong that Stone has Kaya's image tattooed on his left arm. □

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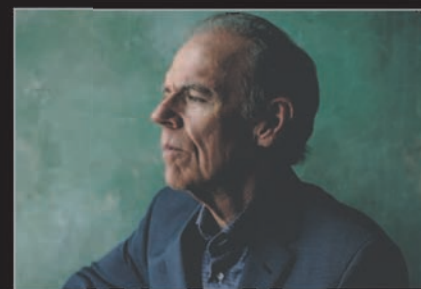
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