

A SNAPSHOT INTO THE LIFE OF 'SUPPORT DOGS' AMBASSADOR AMANDA DAVIDSON, AND HER DISABILITY ASSISTANCE DOG JUPITER!



SALT.IMAGES Event Photography are overly-excited to be capturing the fur-flying action at the K9 Challenge, a 5k running event for dog lovers, returning to Brighton's Stanmer Park on Sunday September 9th (full details below)!

As well as being one of the friendliest dog events in Brighton, the K9 Challenge supports some truly incredible charities, all of whom provide invaluable support and assistance for both dogs and people in need. One of the charities the K9 Challenge are proud to be raising awareness for this year, is the national charity 'Support Dogs'.

Established in 1922, Support Dogs is a registered charity that provides training, and supports specialist assistance dog partnerships to increase the independence and quality of life for those affected by autism, epilepsy and physical disability.

Keen to raise awareness for this inspirational charity, I was fortunate enough to caught-up with ex-police officer Amanda Davidson and her incredible support dog, Jupiter, for a special insight into how the charity and Jupiter's disability assistance training helped restored her confidence, and brought back independence following serious illness and life-changing injuries that ended her career in the Met.

Amanda, thank you so much for sharing your Support Dogs story with us. Looking at the list, you've clocked up some incredible achievements over the last few years including numerous distance events, a team assisted climb of Snowdon, huge hiking distance events and most recently, qualifying as a paralympic-potential for the GB archery team! Achievements you mention Jupiter has helped you to achieve, and that you give him credit for.

How did you become involved with 'Support Dogs' the charity?

I was out shopping when I saw someone with their support dog. At the time, I had no intention of getting a dog of my own, I just wanted to do something positive with the kids and so we started to volunteer and fundraise, which we've now been doing for around 6 years!

So how exactly how did Jupiter come into your life?

I previously had a dog, Hamish, but with two young kids, a husband and a disability, trying to cope with everything and Hamish, was challenging. When my legs stopped working properly I was unable to walk him as much as he needed, so we made the tough decision to rehome him, and he went to live with my Aunt Ann.

After working for Support Dogs I felt empowered enough to realise that I could have a dog again. One of the Support Dogs trainers was *checking out the litter for the charity, and I asked if they could select a boy for me. They chose Jupiter as he was going to be big and stocky.

*Support Dogs frequently visit and source dogs from rescue shelters.

Tell us about Jupiter's Support Dogs training. What did he have to do, and how long did it take?

I trained Jupes up until he was three, this included teaching him to walk next to my wheelchair. It's important that owners and their potential support dogs attend initial assessments to see if both are suitable for the programme. As I'd already had him for three years, Support Dogs knew that they were getting an experienced dog owner with an established owner-dog bond, which helps.

On his 3rd birthday he went into the Support Dogs training programme full-time for 6 weeks. This was the last day they would have considered starting him as the window of age for dogs wishing to join the programme is 18 months to three years.

In the six weeks he was with them (I joined him for the last two) they taught him how to open and close doors, load and unload the washing machine, fetch my stick or the phone, press door release buttons, drag the washing basket through house, take my socks off, and much more. He then continued his training with me at home for the next several months.

So from pulling socks off to climbing Snowdon together! WOW. What does it take to be an athlete with a disability? How has Jupiter helped you?

He is key to me being fitter now at 50, than I think I ever was. When he first arrived I was determined to walk him myself and I didn't want to do it in something electric (wheelchair). It made me think outside the box and I managed to locate a mountain trike, an off-road manual wheelchair.

The ability to adapt to my disabilities is what makes the difference, and what has driven me in every event I have undertaken since getting Jupiter.

Once I figured out how to walk Jupes (I use a bike lead attachment which hooked onto the trike) we were quickly doing 3 miles every morning, which I found was a wonderful way to manage my pain levels.

We then started covering event distances, so it made sense to start fundraising for Support Dogs. I really wanted to make Jupiter cost neutral to Support Dogs by the time



he retires, by which I mean I intend to raise and cover the cost of Jupiter's training over his career through event fundraising. I put together the first wheelchair team to do an 18 mile 'Fright Hike', which raised the funds to buy a mountain trike, which I used to climb Snowdon! We then did a 10k, then a 100 mile-in-a-month challenge last February. We've raised around £4000 so far, and I'm always looking for the next challenge.

Without Support Dogs Jupes I would have sat on the couch and never have achieved any of this.

Climbing Snowdon must have been incredible, what sticks in your memory from that day?

The most memorable thing was the team work. At times my team physically carried me in the trike over huge boulders. It was harder work than I thought it would ever be, but what sticks in my mind is mainly the feeling of intense satisfaction. I had never been up a mountain before so to have done it in a wheelchair, with a stunning team of people was amazing.

You've also been selected as a Paralympic potential for Team GB! How did this come about?

Yes, I have been selected under the Para-Potential programme for archery, which means I am being monitored by Team GB. Unfortunately Japan is not on the cards as the funding isn't available for training at Lilleshall. I am hoping though, that 2024 can be attained. I have only been shooting just over a year and have made great progress, so it's currently a 'watch this space' situation.



Which area of your life has been improved the most by Jupiter and his training?

Practically, I didn't realise how much I dropped things, and underestimated the energy expenditure needed to pick them up. At times I drop things in difficult or dangerous places and Jupes will get them for me easier, safer and faster than I ever could.

Without Jupiters help, the practical stuff would be a lot harder. The energy expenditure would have a knock on effect to my health and I would start to be limited in what I do. This would then result in my independence being limited.

Also I have never wanted my family to be my carers. This year my eldest goes to university and my youngest to college, my husband travels for work a lot and with Jupes there to look after me, there are no concerns from anyone about leaving me. My family get to do what they should be doing, and I don't feel as if my health is restricting them.

Aside from the practical help, it's actually that I'm more active than I have ever been, and I have done things I never would have done, even as an able bodied police officer. With an assistance dog you become more visible to others as a person, not just regarded as someone in a wheelchair. I got recognised whilst competing in 10k event away from home the other year and someone shouted out from the crowd wanting to know where Jupiter was!

You clearly have an amazing connection with Jupiter, and what an incredible life assistant you have...

I am very proud of him. I'm also really proud of the impact he has on everyone we meet. For example, I work with the ambulance service, and one day I turned around to find someone who has just dealt with a paediatric cardiac arrest, lying on the floor with Jupes giving him a cuddle. People seem to calm down just at the sight of him.

Most people feel they have a special connection with their pet dogs. As Jupiter is effectively a working dog, do you feel your connection is different in any way?

He is still my beloved pet, and also an integral part of my independence. He's with me 100% of the time and is trained to allow my family to have a life, as well as assisting me. If you can imagine how devastated we are when something happens to our nonworking pet dogs, it would be that feeling, but magnified.

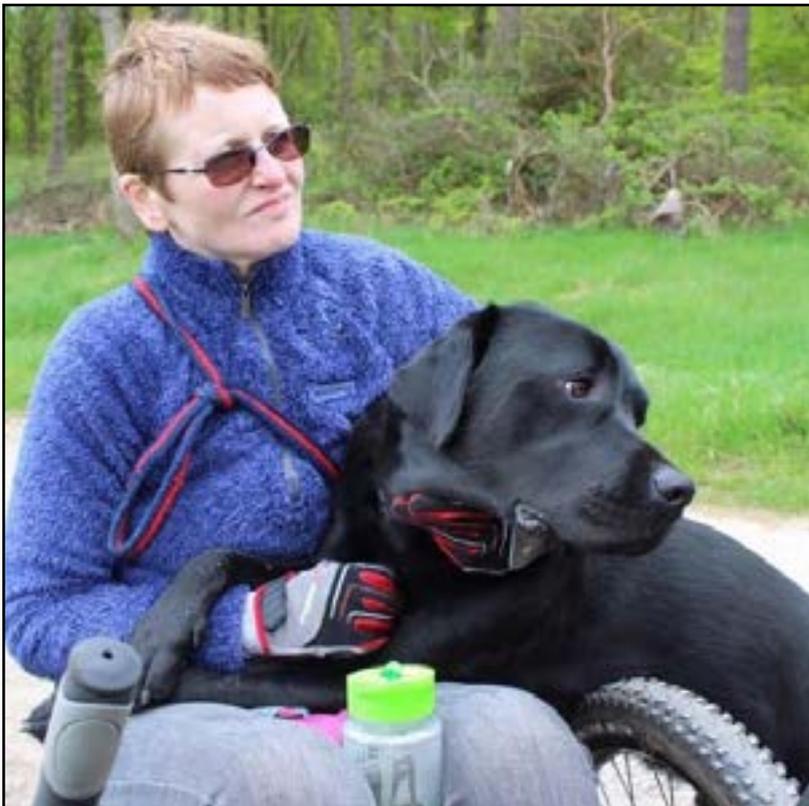
What advice would you give to anyone considering putting their dog through Support Dogs training?

Recognise that it is hard work. It is not the easy option. It takes dedication and patience, and also the understanding that dogs are not machines, and sometimes their inner-dog will come out! Just accept that this will happen. In the end you are a team and chances are that you, the human, are most probably the hardest one to train!!

Jupiter is a handsome boy and you must get a lot of attention when you're out. How important is it for the general public not to fuss Jupiter when he's working? Do you have any advice?

The other day a woman walked ahead of us at the meat section in Sainsbury's, she bent down and started to call Jupiter, actively looking to get him excited. Jupes may not need to alert me like an epilepsy dog, but get him over-excited in a restricted place and I am in danger. He's a highly trained dog and extremely powerful, he could easily flip my wheelchair over.

Kids seem to get it. You don't approach or distract an assistance dog when they're wearing their jackets. Advice wise, I'd like to say please don't get upset if you are told 'no,' if you ask to stroke the dog, and don't take umbrage if we tell you don't whistle or call our dogs. Me saying you can't fuss him is not me depriving the dog or badly treating him, we are a team and we keep each other safe, but he is not just my working dog. He has a normal life when he is not working. He gets cuddles and plays with other dogs, he can even be naughty when his inner-dog kicks in! However when he is wearing his jacket he knows he is working and he will be focused on just me. That is the way it should, and needs to be. Yes, please do ask me questions, comment on what a good looking boy he is, but please do not interact with him.



An incredible charity that trains incredible dogs, and their humans! With specialised training averaging at around £20,000 per partnership, plus ongoing yearly support from the charity, how can we help raise awareness for Support Dogs?

It is a very small charity where every penny, and any marketing opportunity is invaluable.

Anything that gets the word out is great. Signing up and participating in the K9 Challenge on September 9th at Brighton's Stanmer Park is also a fantastic way to show your support, and

of course, it would be brilliant if you can do a bit of fundraising for this incredible charity too!

A huge thanks to Amanda (and Jupiter) for taking the time to share the story of how Support Dogs have quite literally changed her life. We so look forward to watching your progress, and seeing you both in Paris, at the 2024 Olympics!

So, come and show us what you and your pooch have got on September 9th at the K9 Challenge! This 5km fun run brings together people of all abilities – and their pooches – for a fun, inclusive event. Unlike the sport of Canicross (running with dogs), entrants to the K9 Challenge can run, jog or walk with their dog on a normal lead, rather than a specific running harness (as long as the dog is comfortable).

...plus you've just got to check out the finishers goodie bag! See you there!



To book a place, and for more information about the K9 Challenge, please visit:
www.k9challenge.co.uk

For more information on Support Dogs, please visit:
www.supportdogs.org.uk

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Photos courtesy of Amanda Davidson, and David Matthews