

# Joint Forces K-9

**From pets to protectors to competitors, training dogs is a fun day's work for these fur-loving professionals**



Hannah Keith, a canine behavior specialist at Joint Forces K-9, with her two personal dogs, Valko and Willow, at the Bentonville square.



Rob Shewmake, owner of Joint Forces K-9, with his Belgian Malinois Ado

**H**anna Keith may best be described as a dog whisperer.

The vibrant K-9 behaviorist is one of five certified dog trainers — and one of two master's level trainers — on staff at Joint Forces K-9 Group, Northwest Arkansas' largest dog-training facility. She specializes in the rehabilitation of dogs, especially those who were on the cusp of being euthanized because of their aggression. She has been able to work with them and save their lives.

That is just one example of the unique services provided by Joint Forces and owner Rob Shewmake, a U.S. Army veteran and former law enforcement officer who started the company four years ago primarily as an importer of top-bloodline puppies from Europe. He purchased 20 acres along Arkansas Highway 16, between Fayetteville and Siloam Springs, and in February 2018 opened an all-encompassing training facility that includes a 4,000-square-foot, climate-controlled building to comfortably accommodate up to 30 dogs.

Shewmake currently employs the five trainers, in addition to five kennel technicians, to help care for the animals 24 hours a day. For him, it's a labor of love.

"I have always loved dogs," says Shewmake, a native of Hot Springs. "I got my Belgian Malinois about six years ago to potentially pursue sport work, but then I found that it began helping with my issues of anxiety and PTSD. Matter of fact, the VA was quite impressed with what the dog had done for me, eventually helping me get off all my medications.

"What attracted me so much was seeing how dogs could be trained for so many things and could have such an impact of changing and saving lives. That was very intriguing for me."

In addition to service dogs, Joint Forces offers general obedience training for pets, as well as personal protection and group training classes. The specialists on staff also have the capabilities for dog-aggression training, scent detection and tracking.

"This is the only base location, but we will travel anywhere in the country if called upon," Shewmake says. "We draw trainers from some of the top K-9 training schools in the country and are very fortunate to have the trainers that we have here."



Joint Forces K-9 also specializes in obedience training for pups.



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Shewmake says he spared little expense in his effort to attract elite trainers, some from as far away as New York. Keith graduated from Purdue University in Indiana with a 5-year degree in animal behavior and sciences. She is also certified from the Starmark Academy, one of the top dog-training schools in the country, located near Austin.

“The training is science-based. We use all of the sciences to train the dogs to do certain things at certain times and to communicate best with the dogs,” Keith explains. “As a trainer, you have to be very patient, because sometimes the job takes a lot of problem-solving. It’s not always a very linear success rate. Some days you may struggle a little more, and sometimes you think you may have a breakthrough. Then the next time it may seem like they have regressed. It’s good to be calm as you work with the dog, but also show some excitement when the dog does have a breakthrough. Different people bond with certain dogs better than others. But the calmer and clearer you are, the better the dog is going to be.”

Keith reflects on a case that is special to her – when she traveled to Dallas to evaluate a pit bull who was deemed too aggressive and was recommended to be put down immediately. “I went down and picked him up, brought him back to our facility, and we did behavior modification for four weeks,” she recalls. “We worked on a lot of impulse control around other dogs and slowly were able to get him to where he could co-exist with other dogs peacefully.”



Showing off and having fun is a big part of training dogs, even shepherd puppies with top bloodlines.



Shewmake and his sport dog, Pike, training for Protection Sports Association. Pike has his Protection Dog Certification and is working on his PSA Level 1.

Shewmake estimates that 85% of his clientele are pet owners seeking basic obedience training, but says they get requests for just about anything and everything. “We have had all kinds of requests for training, from training a dog to find antler shed or things such as morel mushrooms,” he says. “There is no real set time limit to training a dog. Every dog has its own pace. But on average, we can have a dog doing your basic on-leash obedience in about two weeks.”

They can also train dogs for competition and trial prep, or for sport hunting, which, Shewmake says, generally takes a little more time. Each dog boarded at the facility has its own 5x10-foot run and is monitored around the clock. The facility also offers straight boarding for optimal care while owners are out of town.

Joint Forces offers an exceptional variety of puppies, green dogs and titled dogs for purchase. These are primarily top-rated bloodlines in Belgian Malinois and Dutch shepherds.

“We are committed to raising and training only the best working and sporting dogs,” Shewmake says. “All of our Malinois and shepherd puppies have direct links to the top bloodlines out of Europe. The dogs have to have the proper genetics to be trained for working purposes.”

Although Keith says that all dogs have the capability to be trained, she says that

it is much easier to train a puppy, who has not yet learned a lot of bad habits. There are also some more challenging breeds to train, such as huskies, beagles, Chihuahuas, and many of the bulldog breeds. The easier adaptable breeds include Labradors and shepherds.

“I’ve done private lessons with an 11-year-old shepherd, and I’ve done lessons with dogs as young as seven or eight weeks, as long as they have shots,” Keith says. “A lot of it really boils down to the owner really putting some work into it once they leave the facility. Part of our training is teaching the clients how to communicate properly with the dog.”

Joint Forces offers a free 45-minute evaluation process for handlers to come in and discuss what their goals are and what issues they are having, and then go over targeting training recommendations.

The crew also attends various events throughout the region to demonstrate how the dogs are trained. The trainers perform demonstrations on obedience training and protection work with the dogs.

“That’s the great thing about getting up and coming to work every day,” Shewmake says. “I love what I’m doing, so it doesn’t feel like work. It really is just a labor of love.” ■

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