



Touch Tones

The puppy was born blind and deaf. How did he manage to scale the heights in an AKC titling program?

Presenting Koa—star of the Wild West Tricks Dog Show! Koa is the lead actor of this performance that tells the story of his day on a dude ranch. The 3-year-old dog weaves through barrels, plays a game, turns on a lantern, rolls out a welcome mat, hides from a storm and then emerges to give a hug and kiss to his leading lady.

He accomplishes this without a single verbal cue.

The Catahoula Leopard Dog—Australian Shepherd mix was born blind and deaf. But thanks to the dedication of owner Morgan Gross, he has learned many skills, including dozens of tricks.

In February, he earned the top level of AKC Trick Dog title—Trick Dog

Elite Performer (TKE)—at the Keystone Canine Club in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,

after performing his dude ranch act. It took less than two years of training to



Top: Courtesy Linda Irwin; bottom: courtesy subject



reach this pinnacle.

“Working on new tricks with him is especially fun because he enjoys learning new things. He is so happy and wiggly,” Gross says. “I felt that as long as he is having fun, we would continue. It was challenging, but by the time we devised the routine for TKE, he had learned 40 tricks.”

Koa was a tiny 5-week-old puppy when his breeder turned him into rescue after discovering he was blind and deaf. Gross volunteered to foster the pup for the Ohio organization Speak for the Unspoken, which specializes in special needs canines. She adopted her other dog, Sal, who also has hearing and visual impairments, from the same group and wanted to give back.

“When we brought Koa home, Sal took him under his wing. It was heartwarming to see the two dogs bond

instantly; it was clear that Koa was his baby,” she says. “Their connection was

so special that what was supposed to be a temporary foster arrangement was turning into a permanent one. Touched by their bond and knowing how much it meant to me, my husband adopted Koa on Valentine’s Day.”

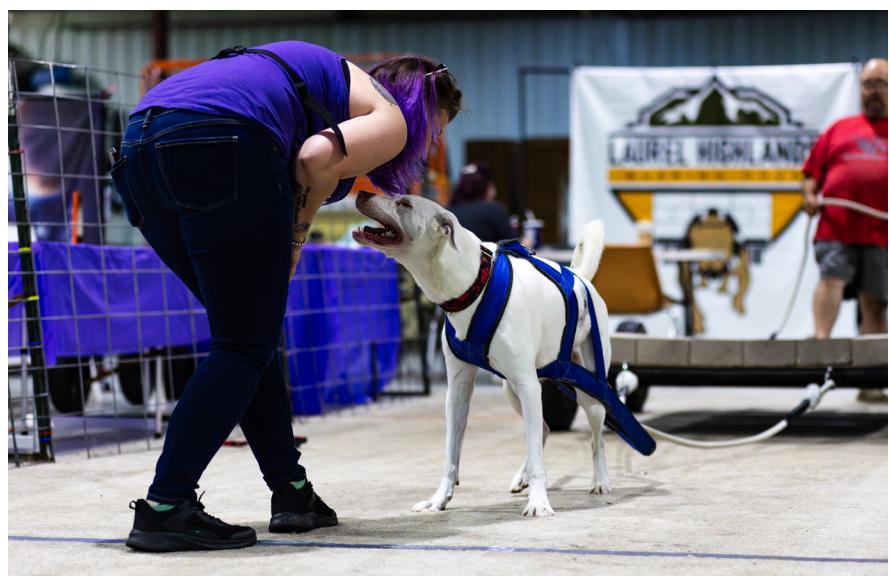
FINE FINGERWORK

All Koa’s training cues are administered through touch. Gross has developed different taps to signify actions. The “marker” that lets him know he’s correct is touching the back of his neck, followed quickly with a reward, usually a food treat.

“Finding a system that worked, especially with a lively puppy, took a lot of effort and patience. For example, tapping his paw with a hand or foot signals him to lie down. I blow on him to call him to *come*, and he moves forward,” Gross says. “For the *sit* cue, I tap twice near the base of his tail. These methods have helped us communicate effectively with Koa despite his impairments.”

Knowing that socialization was crucial for Koa’s development, Gross enrolled him at age 7 weeks in a puppy preschool class with trainer Susan Wetherell, who helped her with Sal as a young dog.

“I suggested that Morgan bring Koa



Training for weight pull events helps build Koa’s endurance and muscle strength.



Koa is all smiles on a blue-ribbon day.

into our training center to let him familiarize himself with the space before the class started. ... We allowed Koa to explore the room, and it was amazing

to watch him navigate and find his way back to Morgan by sniffing and making smaller and smaller circles around her, then receiving a treat when he found her,” Wetherell says. “I was impressed by how in tune she was with Koa.”

Koa graduated from the class with the AKC S.T.A.R Puppy Award and received a class honor for being the “Most Brave.” With Wetherell’s coaching, Koa went on to earn the AKC Virtual Home Manners title and his first AKC Trick Dog title—Trick Dog Novice (TKN).

“Koa is a willing and capable learner, and Morgan is a dedicated pet parent who wants to give her deaf/blind dogs the best life possible,” Wetherell says.

DAILY CHALLENGES

But some necessary parts of life have been very difficult for Koa. The unexpected touches at veterinary visits scared him and created anxiety. After a traumatic experience at an appointment, Gross asked for help from canine behaviorist Rachel Crown. She is an Elite Fear Free Certified Professional who works with dogs and their owners on improving trips to the doctor through low-stress handling techniques.

“Using the knowledge that dogs don’t necessarily need their sense of hearing or sight to learn about the world around them, I knew Koa could learn skills that involved using the senses he did have and used daily—his powerful sense of smell and heightened sense of touch,” Crown says.

Koa was trained to perform a cooperative care technique known as a chin rest. They used high-value smelly food treats to lure Koa to touch his chin to a soft piece of fabric.

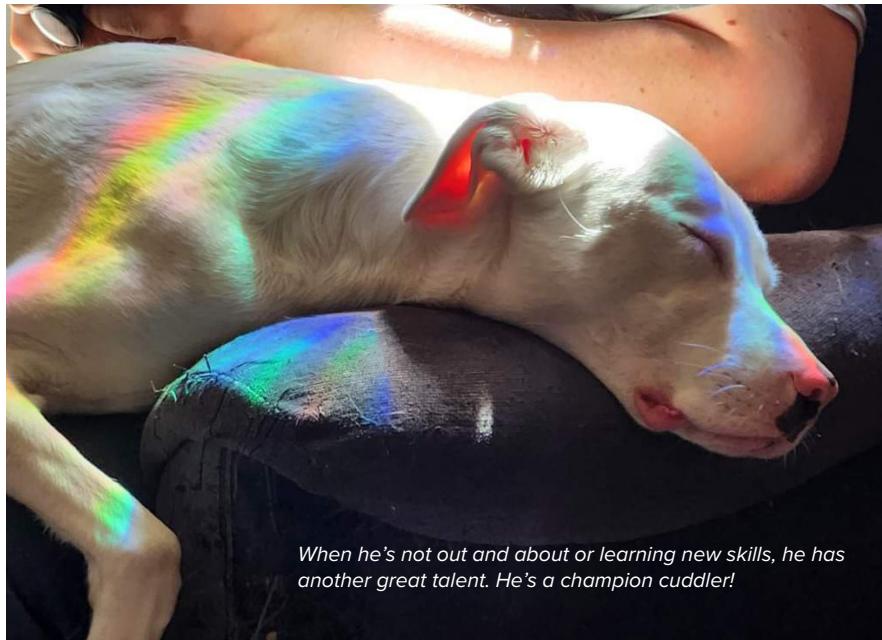
“Once he learned to rest his head on this fabric for longer durations of time before getting the food reward, I had Morgan gradually incorporate touching his body in various ways before giving him the food. If he lifted his head from the fabric target spot, she simply removed her hands from his body,” Crown says. “Over time, Koa chose to place his head on the fabric and stand still, giving his consent for us both to do things like lift his ears, wipe his face with gauze, place both hands around his abdomen, use a soft brush on him, and place a stethoscope on his body. Our hearts jumped for joy!”

In addition to doing tricks, Koa is training in rally and scent work, and does weight pull and AKC FIT DOG to keep in shape.

“When we aren’t training, Koa is the biggest cuddle bug you’ll ever meet. He could spend the entire day snuggling,” says Gross, who lives in Perryopolis, Pennsylvania.

While she is incredibly proud of Koa and all he has accomplished, she hopes that her work highlights special needs dogs and what wonderful companions they can be. She hopes others will be inspired to adopt dogs with sensory or other disabilities.

“I say, ‘Do it!’ These dogs are just like any other, and you’ll be surprised by how much they can do. Their impairments don’t define them. ... It’s a little more work than a dog without special needs, but it’s immensely rewarding.” **FD**



When he's not out and about or learning new skills, he has another great talent. He's a champion cuddler!