

Going to the dogs

Monarch Ski Area turned into K9 training grounds for a few days



Rescue teams from New Mexico, Summit County, Crested Butte, Monarch and the Saint Anthony's Flight for Life attended the Jan. 10 K9 Avalanche Workshop at Monarch Mountain.

Ian Neligh

A labrador retriever named Dusty is bounding across a snow covered slope at 10,000 feet. It's about 10 degrees at the top of the mountain at Monarch Ski resort and a sharp wind is blowing ice crystals into the air.



Rescue dog in training "Dusty" searches for volunteers buried under the snow.

Photos by Ian Neligh

Frost hangs from Dusty's snout as he plunges it again and again into the slope in search of Jim Williams. After a time, Dusty stops, head cocked to the side, and starts digging frantically.

A hole begins to materialize under the dog. Dusty is dead on. Williams is nearly two feet directly below him, waiting in a man-made cave that gives claustrophobia a new meaning.

"I'm doing pretty good," Williams yelled out of the hole, once he's finally uncovered by the dog. The hole is just big enough for him to squeeze into.

Williams, a waiter and aspiring magazine publisher, volunteered for this.

"My feet are getting a little chilly, everything else is comfortable. It gets dark, but as soon as the dog starts digging, I can see light start coming in — it's really nice and reassuring."

Dusty is congratulated, and

teams from New Mexico, Summit County, Crested Butte, Monarch Ski Patrol and Saint Anthony's Flight for Life out of Frisco. The workshop is used mainly to help train dogs on snow rescue.

"Dogs can find humans under the snow, dogs can find humans under the water and dogs can find people lost in the woods," said Purvis, who with her rescue dog, has been called to more than 60 missions in 10 years. "They smell like we see, and a lot of people don't know that's what dogs can do. So until they see them work, they just can't believe they can find somebody buried six feet under the snow."

Purvis is setting up a mock avalanche scenario, for the Monarch ski patrol, by burying a backpack and littering the slope with articles of warm weather clothing. The patrollers race up to the edge in snowmobiles and start skiing down to where Purvis is pretending to be a victim.

About 75 feet away, Sara Fuld of Crested Butte Ski Patrol is burying Williams, once again, under the snow.

Purvis said because of the teams invited up to train, this year's workshop was one of the best she's ever attended. ■

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