

A Whole New Ball Game

NFL player Jarrod Cooper trades Broncos and Jaguars for pooches and kitties

BY ALEXANDRA KLEINKOPF

When Oakland Raider Jarrod Cooper couldn't just "walk it off" last November, he decided to walk it around the block instead ... on a leash. A knee injury put Cooper out of commission late in the NFL season, but allowed him to invest more of his time in volunteering at Oakland Animal Services (OAS).

"When he first started, we had no idea who he was," confesses OAS director Adam Parascandola, who met Cooper last August when the football player first walked through the shelter doors. At the time, Cooper had been suspended from the NFL for testing positive for steroids, so he turned to his childhood passion for helping animals as a distraction from his volatile football career.

His rippling muscles and fancy car piqued staff curiosity, says Parascandola; but it wasn't until Cooper began showing up for four hours a day that the volunteer coordinator asked him what exactly he did for living.

"It's been amazing for us; I mean, we were so lucky that he chose to come in our doors," says Parascandola, citing the publicity, the funding, and the unpretentious elbow grease the pro athlete brings to the shelter.

Cooper does tours of OAS once a month so people can meet him and get involved with the animals. He also goes to schools to help teach humane education.

The recently completed (and appropriately named) "Coop" was another fruit of the celebrity's dedication. The set of outdoor kennels was constructed for OAS in less than a month, and entirely on Cooper's dime. According to Parascandola, the "Coop" lets dogs stay outside longer and frees up kennel space for new admissions. The outdoor space is a particular boon for hard-to-handle



Oakland Raider Jarrod Cooper huddles up with his pal at Oakland Animal Services.
ADAM PARASCANDOLA/OAS

dogs, those whose strength, energy, or lack of training makes them too difficult for volunteers to walk.

But Cooper does more for the shelter than sign autographs and write checks. "He also does the work of all the other volunteers that come in here," adds Parascandola. "He takes the dogs out every day; he cleans kennels for us"—far from the glitz and glamour of the NFL.

Cooper's humility speaks for his genuine desire to help the animals he loves. "What's good about the volunteer work is there's no one down here with an ego; there's no one down here trying to prove anything to anybody," explains the Oakland Raider. "It's just all positive work, and you really meet genuinely nice people."

And while Cooper is following their fine example at OAS, he's also doing work beyond shelter doors. Cooper helps finance Code 597—an education program and financial resource named after the California animal cruelty statute. The group intervenes in borderline cruelty cases by educating pet owners on proper animal care. "It provides people with charitable services, such as doghouses ... deworming, flea medicine, microchip, licensing—anything the dog needs that [the owner] may not be able to provide for," says Cooper, who hopes to eventually extend the program to other cities.

He is also funding OAS participation in GAP Dogs, a Texas workshop that turns overactive canines from unsuitable pets to successful working dogs. OAS selects dogs who would make good candidates, and sends them to training.

Needless to say, Cooper's animal welfare experience has changed him. "I always used to put the blame on the animal," he confesses. "I always thought, 'That animal has a bad attitude,' or 'That dog is mean.' But now that I started volunteering here, I know that somebody *did* that to that animal."

According to Parascandola, "Now he sees them all as very individual animals that need a lot more than just to be fed and given shelter." And Cooper puts it into practice. Having learned the merits of spay/neuter, he promptly sterilized both his own dogs, whom he once considered breeding. He also convinced several of his friends to adopt pets from OAS.

"He's a really, really nice guy—very together, very responsible," says Parascandola. And the animals are perhaps the most appreciative of this, blind to the fame that impresses many humans. For the residents of Oakland Animal Services, Jarrod Cooper is just another kindhearted guy to play ball with. **AS**