

living

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{Animals}

Nathan Woods,
owner of Loose
Pooch Dog Club

PAUL WELLMAN

Hound Haven

Nathan Woods is stunningly assured in his passion and profession. “My purpose in life is to help people bring out the best in their dogs,” he said confidently, watching a dozen pups romp around the back room of his downtown business. As furry tails and ears flashed past the viewing window, Woods leaned on the storefront’s counter and mused, “Everyone is capable of greatness. It’s the same for dogs.”

Owner and operator of Loose Pooch Dog Club and Santa Barbara Pet Services — a canine daycare center and dog-training business, respectively, run out of the same location (1925 State St.) — Woods is one of those rare and lucky souls who heard their calling as a kid, and he has, like the hounds he works with, kept his nose to the scent of success since.

Woods, 32, discovered his knack for molding dogs and their owners into happy and productive pairs when he was only 10 years old, training his family’s poodle at a Virginia clinic. By 12, he was schooling adults in dog training, and he soon went on to sweep obedience competitions by bringing notoriously headstrong breeds — like Dobermans and pharaoh hounds — up to the highest level of compliance. After moving to Santa Barbara in 1999 and starting Pet Services two years later out of his van and apartment to pay for college, Woods recently took over Loose Pooch with his wife, Caiti.

This palace for pups is a newly renovated, temperature-controlled building on State Street where owners drop their companions for a few hours or the entire day. The idea, explained Woods, is that when owners are at work or simply out and about, their dogs are kept busy playing (and catching up on gossip, Woods joked), so they are tired and mellowed by the time they’re picked up. “People enjoy their pet more if the dog is satisfied,” noted Woods.

Overseen by Woods and a rotating staff of 10 handlers, the location features a front retail and reception area, the main romp room with platforms of different heights and a collection of toys, a separate smaller room for the more petite breeds, and an outdoor bathroom run frequented every 10 minutes by the pack. Woods estimates they cycle through an average of 40 dogs a day; when I visited, 55 had hung out off and on throughout the day, and the last few were leaving, Woods bidding them farewell by name and offering a parting Milk-Bone.

As Woods and I talked, a big Bouvier named Java came bounding out of the play room to the waiting owner. “He’s learning his ABCs,” she smiled, then pointed to Woods: “Best dog trainer in the world right here.” Woods looked down shyly as the ears of a young Burmese mountain dog perked up in the next room. The dogs typically know when their owners have arrived, said Woods. Sure enough, the Burmese’s owner walked in moments later. “This place is phenomenal,” she said without solicitation. “They really care here.”

Left in the playroom was Woods’s boxer, Tora, and two rescues he’s working with to shake them of their aggressive and neurotic behavior so they can be adopted. One dog, a poodle mix, is still in the early stages of rehab and will be confined to a cage until he’s more used to the room. But Bo, a Pomeranian picked up as a stray, trotted happily at Woods’s feet with a bandanna around his neck as the owner closed up shop. Bo was such a biter, explained Woods (who’s on the board of directors at DAWG), that he was forced to pick him up with oven mitts in their first few weeks together. Now, he gets along with people great and will soon be stripped of his “unadoptable” title. “A neat thing about rescues is they’re able to pick up and move on,” said Woods. “Shelter dogs just seem more grateful.”

—Tyler Hayden

BY THE NUMBERS

3 DAYS

The amount of time it took to make the 30-mile trek from Big Sur to Monterey by wagon up until the early 20th century.

SOURCE: wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Sur.