

Australia's new export: puppy police

*Paul Bibby
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Do not be fooled by their cute faces and floppy ears - these puppies from the Australian Customs dog breeding centre are genetically superior, crime-fighting machines.



And they are fast becoming our hottest law-enforcement export - hounding drug importers, suspected terrorists and money launderers across the globe.

The detection dog development program run by the Australian Customs Service and the Australian Federal Police is stretching the science of dog breeding and training to its limits,

drawing on genetics research and behavioural psychology methods that would not be out of place in a science fiction novel.

So successful has the program become that more than 330 of the super-pups have been adopted by governments and law enforcement agencies in 14 countries - for tasks from explosives detection at Heathrow Airport and narcotics investigation with the LAPD, to weapons searching at the upcoming Beijing Olympic Games.

The dogs are the outcome of a genetics program developed in the wake of September 11, 2001, by the Customs National Breeding and Development Centre and Melbourne University scientists, to produce animals with exceptional olfactory abilities and fitness levels akin to that of an Olympic athlete.

"The Melbourne University research was about determining how far you can go with genetic development of detector dogs and what you need to do with their environment to express that genetic potential," said the breeding centre's manager, John Vandeloo.

"We were the first program in the world to really seek to answer the nature versus nurture question in terms of detector dogs. We're into the sixth generation of the program now. We're looking for an enormously strong hunting drive, a physique akin to an Olympic athlete, mentally well-balanced and fearless."

Ahead for these pups is a move to Canberra for a 13-month training program, which costs about \$55,000 per animal.

The training facilities include a purpose-built three-bedroom house which is used to simulate warrant searches.

"We're seeing how far we can push the basic instinct to hunt and retrieve," said Brendan Lamb, the officer in charge of the Australian Federal Police's dog training centre in Canberra.

The next generation of techniques being trialled by the police include the use of heart-beat monitors on dogs to better gauge their reactions to suspicious substances, and even the monitoring of brain activity to test reaction times.

They are also training dogs to sniff out large quantities of Australian currency to combat international money laundering.

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/07/21/1216492357359.html>
More information on the program at <http://www.customs.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=4304>*