

## Dog Scouts of America honors Milpitas dog Jasper

[Steve Rubenstein, Special to The Chronicle](#)

Saturday, October 16, 2010

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At long last, the paperwork has gone through and the merit badges have been issued for Jasper, perhaps the most amazing dog in all Milpitas.

"Woof," said Jasper proudly, but not arrogantly.

There are a lot of good dogs in Milpitas, but only Jasper has the merit badges to prove it. [Merit badges](#) for dogs are the latest thing. They are something like merit badges for Boy [Scouts](#) and Girl Scouts, only considerably harder to get your paws on.

Jasper is the first dog in the [Bay Area](#) to earn five merit badges from the [Dog Scouts of America](#), which turns out to be a real organization that has quietly been issuing merit badges to deserving dogs for 11 years. The other day, it had a big ceremony for Jasper at the Humane Society of [Silicon Valley](#), by invitation only. A half dozen of Jasper's pals were there, drooling at either the sight of the merit badges or the bowl of biscuits that was beside them.

"You have achieved a very high honor," said Beth Ward, the troop leader, with as much solemnity as can be mustered in a room full of dogs that, at present, were sniffing each other's hindquarters.

On a table were Jasper's badges, each an embroidered disk about the size of a half dollar. The orange one is because Jasper can jump in a lake and come out when he's supposed to, not when he feels like it. The turquoise one is because Jasper is obedient enough to fetch his master's shoes and not chew them up. The other badges are for negotiating an obstacle course, understanding sign language and following instructions.

### **Beyond biscuits**

Jasper and his owner, Robert Verdahl, waited quietly in the back row, taking in the accolades. Jasper was eating cold macaroni out of Verdahl's hand. It's his favorite reward. With five merit badges, Jasper is above biscuits.

"Now you've had your first taste of Dog Scout skills," Ward said to Jasper, loud enough so the other dogs could hear. "You're on your way. You're working toward more badges. I am your troop leader and I will help you."

"Woof," said Jasper. Jasper is a black-and-white dog of uncertain lineage that Verdahl, a hospital nurse, picked up last year from the pound. Over the past months, the two have plunged into the Michigan-based Dog Scouts of America program, which is just catching on in [California](#). Plenty of other doggy outfits run dog award programs, but Dog Scout fans say the [American Kennel Club](#) is too snobby, the therapy dog program is too therapeutic and the certificates handed out at neighborhood obedience schools lack sufficient pedigree.

And then it was time for Jasper to put on a brief show for his many fans. He did tricks, he weaved in and out of Verdahl's legs, he danced, he jumped, he rolled over and over and over, he backed up on command and he fetched Verdahl's shoes and dropped them, soggy but serviceable, at his master's feet.

"Good dog," said Verdahl, something of an understatement, all things considered. For his many efforts he was rewarded with a single piece of cold macaroni.

Five merit badges, it turns out, are not very many badges in the Dog Scout world. There are no fewer than 76 badges - Frisbee catching, herding, canoeing and bicycling are all badges (the dog doesn't actually bicycle, he must run alongside the human cyclist, sensibly and without making the typical dog-versus-bicycle fuss).

Disaster preparation is another dog merit badge, although some might say that preparing for disaster is what you do before you get a dog. Verdahl, who is going after merit badges the way some kids go after baseball cards, said he is just getting started. The next badge he and Jasper are shooting for, he said, is the badge for fundraising, and Jasper would try to qualify for it that very evening.

### **Video evidence**

To qualify for a dog merit badge, you shoot a video of your dog performing the required tasks and send it off to Dog Scout headquarters in Michigan, along with \$35 and a prayer. Verdahl turned on the camera, and this reporter placed a penny on the floor. To qualify for the fundraising merit badge, the dog must pick up the penny in his mouth and deposit it in a nearby bowl.

Jasper, like certain other mammals, sees little point in pennies. He nosed the penny, he licked it and he batted it with his paws and, at last, he picked it up and dropped it in front of the bowl, behind the bowl, to the side of the bowl and, at long last, into the bowl.

Verdahl said he could edit the videotape to show only the last penny attempt before shipping it off to Michigan but that it wouldn't be right. Dog Scouting is all about integrity, and the humans must uphold their end of the leash. "We're not ready for that badge yet," Verdahl said.

"Jasper has a little more work to do."

This article appeared on page F - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

