

Avalanche-rescue dogs training to save lives

By **CRIS JOHNSTON**

WANAKA man Matt Gunn believes there is no doubt his team of avalanche rescue dogs will one day save a life.

"When that snow and ice starts to slide and then stops, it sets like concrete. If someone is buried, response time is critical. Statistics show that if a person survives the initial trauma, they have up to 15 minutes . . . beyond that, survival time plummets quickly," Mr Gunn, who founded Aspiring Avalanche Dogs 11 years ago, said.

Four avalanche dogs are based at the Treble Cone ski resort, although just one — Labrador Millie, owned by handler Brendan Kearns — is fully operational. Mr Gunn's collie-cross Rocket, Tuki, a Labrador-German short-haired pointer-cross owned by Andy Wardell, and the newest member of the team, Zeffe, belonging to Callum Grant, are in training. Rocket and Tuki are expected to pass final assessments this year and Zeffe next year.

"We are based at Treble Cone because of the area's high avalanche hazard and its proximity to helicopter operators," Mr Gunn said.

This month a shipping container to use

as a base and to store rescue equipment was bought and located on the ski field following a grant from the Central Lakes Trust.

Meanwhile, the Wanaka-based Graham and Olive West Charitable Trust has contributed towards the purchase of a skidoo, which will cost about \$20,000.

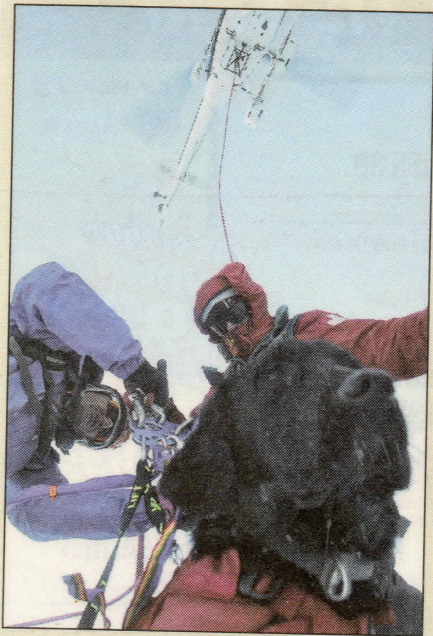
"The cost is high, but it will be used to transport dogs on the mountain. We see it as being essential to any rapid response during an avalanche," Mr Gunn said.

Last week, the dogs and handlers, along with a canine rescue crew from Cardrona Alpine Resort, LandSar, medical personnel, New Zealand Mountain Safety Council representatives and ski-field staff, took part in a search and rescue training exercise initiated by the police.

Volunteers and equipment, including transceivers, were buried in the snow.

"It was a great challenge and all the dogs were amazing, especially Millie, who found both people within 10 minutes of being deployed," Mr Gunn said.

Aspiring Avalanche Dogs now wants to include a bush search dog in its team and is assessing applications.



Game on: Wanaka LandSar police coordinator Aaron Nicholson (left) secures trainee Aspiring Avalanche Dogs crew member Zeffe to a helicopter strop so the dog and handler Callum Grant (rear) could be flown to a mock avalanche incident at the Treble Cone Ski Area last week. Aspiring Avalanche Dogs founder Matt Gunn said the dogs quickly became used to the unusual mode of transport and fed off the focused energy of the handler. "They know it's game on."

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