

“Puppy Bowl V” Features Pepper, The African Grey

Pepper will perform tricks and lead the national anthem in Animal Planet’s annual Puppy Bowl.

By Jessica Pineda

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Photo courtesy of Animal Planet

Pepper, the African grey, will lead the national anthem and perform other tricks.

Kicking off the start of Animal Planet’s “Puppy Bowl V” is Pepper The Parrot, who will be “singing” the National Anthem as well as doing other tricks. As an alternative to the Super Bowl, viewers can watch puppies romping around the field as well as the half-time kitten show. The two-hour show premieres on Sunday, February 1, 2009, at 3 p.m (ET/PT).

Pepper, a 12-year-old African grey parrot, is a spokes bird for Phoenix Landing, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that promotes welfare of parrots and adoption. Animal Planet approached Phoenix Landing when looking for a bird that could sing. Ann Brooks, president and founder of Phoenix Landing, said, “We had a series of birds that could sing, and they chose Pepper. She is so well-trained and very well socialized.”

Pepper is owned by Leigh Ann Hartsfield, the Virginia Education and Outreach for Phoenix Landing. Hartsfield taught Pepper a series of tricks that were perfect for the producers. In return, Animal Planet made a donation to the organization, said Brooks.

The show was pre-filmed in November. At the studio, Hartsfield said Pepper had a great time. “Pepper was treated like a star,” Hartsfield said. “We had assistants bringing in juice for her, and they were asking if they could provide any snacks. Everyone loved her.”

Pepper did many of her tricks, including riding a remote-controlled tractor over to a perch and a fake microphone. Other tricks she performed included lying on her back with pompoms and throwing miniature footballs.

One of Pepper’s tricks was popping out of a football piñata. Hartsfield had to teach Pepper the trick a few days before the shoot. “I went and bought a piñata, and I cut a Pepper-sized hole inside. After removing everything, I placed Pepper inside and then covered the top with a bag. When she had her cue, she would pop out.”

Pepper isn’t new to show business. She was on the television show, “PetStars,” in September 1994. She has also been featured in an article in BIRD TALK magazine and BirdChannel.com, called “The Top 3 Smartest Birds.”

While Pepper stayed away from the puppies and kittens, everyone was kept safe and the show earned the American Humane Association’s “No Animals Were Harmed” ® end-credit disclaimer.

American Humane Certified Animal Safety Representative™ Sandi Buck was the on-set authority to make sure that the action was safe for all the animals involved. She has been monitoring “Puppy Bowl” for American Humane’s Film & TV Unit since the show’s premiere season. The main action consists of puppies just being themselves — roaming around on a miniature indoor football field and having fun with toys and each other.

“Because of five years of experience and planning, this year’s “Puppy Bowl” was one of the smoothest, most fun programs that we’ve ever done,” Buck said. “It was a busy day, with more than 60 animals in the same place at once, but it worked out perfectly!”

All of the dogs and cats came from shelters and rescue groups that can be found on PetFinder.