



*In Their Debt*

by Shelley Bueche

# Zeke (III) the Wonderdog

Thrilling Michigan State University Fans  
with Frisbee Catching Stunts

Photos by Colleen Otte



My dog opened more doors for me than my college degree,” declares Zeke the Wonderdog I’s owner Gary Eisenberg. In the mid-1970s, Eisenberg was tossing a Frisbee to his college roommate when his yellow Lab, Zeke, ran toward them and joined the fun, an activity that many athletic breeds such as Labrador retrievers are prone to do. But apparently Zeke had a hidden talent and interest for chasing Frisbees, and what began as a mellow pastime became a full-fledged occupational sport, with the duo ultimately entering the World of Frisbee competition.







at Michigan State. The duo became so popular at subsequent games that Zeke received a varsity letter from football coach Darryl Rogers, who said Zeke “was the best receiver in the Big Ten.” In awarding a football letter to the dog, Zeke achieved the distinction of being the only non-human to ever receive the award. The original Zeke died in 1987.

After almost a two-decade period of dormancy, the Zeke program was reintroduced and Zeke II charged onto the football field with steely determination. Dexter (or Zeke II as he was later called), a black Lab and pointer mix owned by Jim and Terri Foley, was selected to take over the mantle and lead the halftime brigade for Spartan fans. The couple worked closely with Eisenberg in training for the performance that would once again become a tradition for Spartan fans and alumni.

Unfortunately, Zeke II had a few health complications during his Frisbee-chasing career, particularly one incident involving ingesting carpet in the Foley household. As time marched on, old age and

Zeke the Wonderdog has a long and storied tradition with Michigan State University’s football players, fans, and students. From Zeke I’s early days in the 1970s to today’s Zeke III, the tradition is alive and thriving as eager fans flock to Michigan State University’s stadium to see not only football players running for touchdowns, but to see Zeke the Wonderdog chase a Frisbee and perform athletic tricks during halftime shows.

### Early Roots in Spartan Stadium

After winning accolades in the national disc-catching championship at the Rose Bowl in California, Zeke I and Eisenberg were invited to resurrect their performance at a home game





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cataracts caught up with Zeke II, and Zeke III (or Boo Coo), a purebred yellow Lab owned by the Foley's, was being groomed to become the heir. Zeke II officially retired on September 8, 2007, with his last performance set to the marching band playing the "Zeke the Wonderdog Medley" (including tunes by the Baha Men "Who Let the Dogs Out?," "Black Dog" by Led Zeppelin, and long-time favorite "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?").

### Zeke III Takes the Lead

Early on, the Foley's realized that Zeke III was a rambunctious dog with an abundance of energy. "When I first saw him run, he ran like a Banshee with boo coo power," Jim recalls of early days.

Training for Zeke's halftime performances runs the gamut from running in open fields, to being part of a duo in a skijoring rig with Jim Foley circling their neighborhood block, to swimming and diving, to jumping off of Foley's back used as a springboard to retrieve a Frisbee (to the delight of the crowd) – and of course, hours of practice chasing and catching *lots* of discs.

In addition to performing for football fans, Zeke makes appearances at a variety of community events, both MSU alumni-related and otherwise, throughout the state. In fact, Zeke is sponsored by the Farm Bureau Insurance of Michigan. Jennifer Miller, communications manager with the agency, says that "he [Zeke] is an icon here at the University and the Farm Bureau, and our partnership is a good alignment" for the insurance agency, the state of Michigan, and Zeke fans and friends across the country.

### Zeke at Home

Terri Foley has a home office and spends a lot of time with Zeke and

three other dogs. "At any given time we will have fifty to a hundred Frisbees in the house," she explains. When Jim comes home, he grabs the Frisbees, gets the dogs, and heads outdoors to begin training with Zeke and a game of fun and exercise for the others. Terri describes, "Sometimes Jim will throw two Frisbees, and they will split and two dogs will chase the discs and catch them."

Zeke is very food-motivated, as any typical Labrador. In fact, his favorite snack is apples. At home he munches on apples and during games, members of the Spartan band bring apples to feed their favorite disc-catching canine.

### Zeke On the Field

Zeke enjoys his performances, and once he steps onto the field, he is ready for action. He is a show dog in every sense of the word! His athletic physique is obvious to the crowd and he has no trouble running, chasing the disc, and leaping off of his handler's back as a springboard to dazzle the crowd and catch a disc in mid-air.

Although Zeke has been performing for crowds since he was a young pup, he turned nine years old in December 2014. He is as exuberant as ever, but the Foley's are planning for the inevitable day when Zeke is no longer capable of performing. Fortunately, according to Terri, "Zeke IV is in the works!"



Shelley is a canine journalist living with her family and three dogs, in Austin, Texas. She enjoys writing about working Labrador retrievers and related programs

and is eager to read your tips for future columns. Please contact her directly – [SHBueche@aol.com](mailto:SHBueche@aol.com) – with your ideas.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### America's Frisbee Dogs

<https://americasbestfrisbeedogs.com/Zeke.html>

Facebook: [facebook.com/ZeketheWonderdog](https://facebook.com/ZeketheWonderdog)

### Michigan State University Athletics Department

[www.msu.edu/athletics/index.html](http://www.msu.edu/athletics/index.html) • PH: (517) 355-1855

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