Smokin’ dog

Area family’s dalmatian starts ninth season as Chicago Fire’s mascot

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Tugger, an 11-year-old dalmatian, gets excited when he sees his owners, Maureen and Mike Deer of Vernon Hills, put on their Chicago Fire soccer jerseys.

He knows he’s about to perform in front of 20,000 spectators as the team’s live mascot, Humo.

In April, Tugger will start his ninth season running the field and pumping up fans during the pre-game ceremonies at Chicago Fire home games.

He wears a red bandana with his name embroidered on it, and occasionally eats nachos, hot dogs and pizza in the skybox seats during the game.

“Tugger is really a special dog,” said Mike Deer, who works for a financial-services firm in Chicago. “You’re asking a lot of a dog to bring him in front of 20,000 people and fireworks. It takes a dog that is very confident and trusting.”

Deer first got involved with the Chicago Fire in 2000 when the team was looking for a dalmatian to be its live mascot — not to be confused with the team’s other mascot, “Sparky,” which is a guy dressed up as a dalmatian.

The team contacted Deer, and asked if he would be interested in bringing one of his dalmatians to a game. As a former cheerleader for DePaul, Deer jumped at the chance. His dalmatians have been going to home games ever since. Tugger quickly stood out as the best dog for the job.

“When he hears people clapping, he perks up and gets a spring in his step,” Deer said. “The fans love him and want their picture with him.”

Tugger also may be the only dog ever to poop on the 50-yard line at Soldier Field — to the dismay of the grounds crew and howls from spectators — when the Chicago Fire played there before the Chicago Fire’s current home field was built in Bridgeview. Deer now gets to the games early enough to make sure his dalmatians have time to go to the bathroom beforehand.

In addition to Tugger, he brings his other two dalmatian puppies, Puppo and Maradona.

He trains them on the sidelines doing obedience drills to prepare them for one day taking over for Tugger. The scene is also a good opportunity to prepare for dog shows, where they’ll have to perform in front of crowds.

Deer thinks the soccer-game experiences helped Tugger win Best of Breed and compete for Best in Show at an American Kennel Club Championship in 2003.

At the games, he’s introduced as Humo — which means “smoke” in Spanish — and then he trots from one end of the field to the other while on a leash with Deer.

At first, Deer was concerned how Tugger would react to performing in a stadium next to Sparky, the guy dressed up as a dalmatian with big eyes that don’t blink. But Tugger wasn’t freaked out.

“Tugger was a natural,” he said.

At Fire soccer games, live mascot Tugger teams up with “Sparky,” the team’s other mascot.