Meet Jem, UNH Football’s Premier Tee Retrieving Dog

Students at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) are excited about football season for many reasons; tailgates, touchdowns and most of all, Jem the dungeon dog.

_Rory Schmidt, Contributing Writer_

Jem is a three year-old Black Labrador whose owner is Steve O’Neil of Hampton, New Hampshire. Jem’s job during the game is to grab the tee after every kickoff by the UNH team. This 2023-24 football season will be Jem’s first full year as UNH’s Tee Dog, after being introduced to the turf of Wildcat Stadium in 2022.

O’Neil had pitched Jem’s skills to other colleges in New England, however UNH was the first school to give Jem a try. Jem’s first official retrieve was against North Carolina State University.

O’Neil raised Jem to retrieve hunted ducks, along with O’Neil’s four other labs, named Tootsie, Lulu, Atticus and Scout, whose names, like Jem, were inspired by the main characters of Harper Lee’s _To Kill a Mockingbird._

_Rory Schmidt_

Jem, the dog who retrieves the football tee at UNH home games, waits on the sidelines for her time to shine.
Throughout O’Neil’s house are various pictures of his dogs, some of which hang above the spot where Jem was born. That basement room is adorned with certificates and awards the dogs have earned from various retriever clubs, along with impressive bird taxidermies.

“I could tell you the weather conditions and the retrieving dog for each duck off the top of my head,” said O’Neil, with pride for his collection and the work of his dogs.

Jem initially learned how to pick up the tee at the first practice she attended, a piece of cake in comparison to the work she does when hunting, where she encounters many obstacles like water, bushes and ice.

“Jem is a hunter. And when she sees ice, she adapts. She knows to go slow,” said O’Neil.

One of UNH football’s biggest games of the season is during family weekend, where many students and their families show up to the tailgates and football game. This year, UNH played Towson University, and on the sideline, behind the UNH football team, sat Jem and her sister Lulu.

Although the game was high-scoring, UNH lost by a field goal in overtime. Even so, UNH had plenty of kickoffs resulting in eight tee retrievals.
Midway through the game, Jem was greeted by Amanda Weddleton, a Junior at UNH and marketing intern working for the Cats Crew, a team that focuses on fan engagement during athletic events.

Weddleton spends every home game on the sidelines with Jem, helping with fan engagement activities. When asked her opinion of Jem from an engagement perspective, Weddleton remarked on the community Jem has behind her.

“I think she's able to connect to not just a little kid, but also an older adult. She's kind of bringing all ages together, just being able to see her go out on the field,” said Weddleton.

In the third quarter, there was commotion on the field when Jem was cued to retrieve the tee. Some of the Towson players were still on the field as she ran out, and they attempted to call her over to the opposing side. Ignoring the players’ calls, Jem weaved through them, retrieved the tee and made a beeline back to O’Neil. As a sideline staple of the UNH football team, Jem understands her job and position as a fellow wildcat.

By the end of the game, the tee dog lay flat on the sideline. After having napped between kickoffs, with Lulu resting her head on Jem's belly, she could finally rest after a very eventful day knowing her job was done.
In other parts of the country, other schools also use tee retrieving dogs, such as University of Mississippi and their yellow lab, Juice, and North Carolina State University, whose black lab, Ripken, has received considerable attention from ESPN and was even featured on their Tiktok and YouTube.

“Jem is developing a brand, so she’s gonna branch out to other athletics,” O’Neil said.

“Eventually, product will be sold. Maybe stuffed animals and coffee cups. Everything is still in the works.”

He explained that aside from football, Jem participates in other UNH events and game rituals such as the ceremonious draw, a ball drop for women’s lacrosse, or the delivery of the Rookie of The Year envelope to UNH’s 2023 WESPY winner, UNH’s play on ESPN’s ‘ESPY’ awards show.

Jem’s future is bright, and as long as there are home games at UNH, she will be there, sitting proudly on the sideline below her adoring fans, watching the game and waiting for the next kick.

Jem’s Instagram is @dungeoondogjem.