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DON'T GET YOUR FEATHERS RUFFLED

Niceville man and his pet Sammi develop Insta-fame

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Pigeons flap around behind Sammi the chicken and her owner Dave Cox at the beach on Okaloosa Island. Cox bought Sammi at a feed store in Crestview in 2017 when she was 3 days old. PHOTOS BY

MICHAEL SNYDER/DAILY NEWS



Sammi the chicken struts around in the sand on Okaloosa Island.

NICEVILLE — Sammi is a man's best friend — Dave Cox's best friend to be exact. She is at his side 24-7.

They have been surfing in Georgia, snowboarding in Colorado, seen the Mexican border in El Paso, Texas, attended the Kentucky Derby and recently stopped at the Canadian border — Sammi doesn't have a passport.

Cox, a Niceville resident, doesn't get his feathers ruffled when someone stares a moment too long at him and his pet on the beach, snaps their photo from afar or asks a probing question about their lifestyle.

Cox and his Rhode Island Red hen are best friends.

"Many, many times people see us as they're passing by and make a quick comment, and I say, 'She's my dog on two legs,' " Cox said. "That's the way I treat her, and that's how she acts. She does not identify as a chicken, and I say that very tongue in cheek."

Since Cox purchased Sammi at 3 days old from a Crestview feed store, the pair have become famous. Heck, Sammi has her own agent in L.A.



Sammi the chicken and her owner Dave Cox pose at the beach on Okaloosa Island. “Many, many times people see us as they’re passing by and make a quick comment, and I say, ‘She’s my dog on two legs,’ ” Cox said.

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Their Instagram profile @sammichicken has more than 42,000 followers and features photos and videos of them traveling and playing, along with paid collaborations with everything from the Kellogg Company’s plant-based meat alternative line, Incogmeatous, to Okaloosa County’s marketing campaign to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Sammi’s bio reads “Chicken of the Sea.”

But Cox never set out to become Insta-famous.

A heartbroken Cox purchased Sammi in 2017, a year after his blue heeler died. He wasn't ready for another dog; still isn't.

"When he's 17 years old, you've had him for almost half your life," Cox said. "They become apart of your family. Please forgive me, I'm not a fan of cats. So I thought, 'Let's just do something different.' Pun intended, let's go with a whole different animal. Boy was I right."

And, while Cox isn't a cat person, it is the animal to which Sammi is most similar, he said.

"If she wants attention, she will find me and not leave me alone until she is in my lap," Cox said. "If she doesn't want attention, she will sit about 10 feet away from me and just look at me like, 'Don't even touch me.' You know how cats are. It's a bit ironic. I do have a unique pet."

Sammi's celebrity happened organically.

"We would go to the beach, 'Let's go in the water and hang out,' and she was totally calm and content swimming with me in the water and folks would take videos and pictures and always want to tag us, so I was like, well I guess I'll set up an Instagram," Cox said.

A few weeks later, the two were mentioned on a syndicated radio program.

"I get a lot of messages from kids online and in person that say, 'Can you please give me some pointers? What can I do to get Insta famous?'" Cox said. "For one, I feel bad for them that that's what they're after. But I tell them, 'Just be you. Just do your thing and if the world enjoys it, the world falls in love with it, I guess you become Insta famous.' That's exactly what happened with Sammi."

There isn't a question about Sammi that Cox hasn't already answered.

Her diet is typical for a chicken — save a scrap or two from Cox's plate — chicken feed in pellet form.

"I get comments on my social media sometimes that Dave has a purse," Cox said. "It's not a purse; I call it my diaper bag. It has wipes for cleaning up if she poops somewhere on the sidewalk or something. I have water. I have her harness and her leash that I do put on her quite often when we're traveling. I have her food. I also try to give her what I am eating, like blueberries. Right now she's on a big kick with blueberries."

Sammi will eat meat on occasion, too, Cox said. She will beat a lizard into a hamburger.

And, no, she does not sleep in the same bed as Cox. Her bed chamber is far more primitive.

"I do get a lot of comments and messages from folks, 'Sammi's so sweet and she's so famous, she oughta have a much more luxurious bed,' " Cox said. "Not really. I tried to give her that and she had a fit. She did not want it."

Sammi sleeps in a large dog kennel with an inch-and-a-quarter diameter stick.

"When it's time for her to go to bed, she goes in, gets up on the roost," Cox said. "I cover her and it's pitch black and that is where she sleeps all night. The thing about chickens, their activities are based on sunlight. When the sun goes down, they're ready for bed. The sun comes up, their day starts. When I cover the cage, to her, it's nighttime. She doesn't make a peep. I could sleep in until 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock and (she) wouldn't make a sound until I uncovered her."

Having a pet doesn't come without obstacles, though.

A year ago, Cox saw Sammi swallow a pointed wooden screw. He could feel it through her skin.

He took her to Niceville Animal Clinic, where an X-ray showed the screw had made it to her gizzard, a muscle that if constricted in the right position could send the screw right through it. In the process, they discovered she had swallowed seven other metal objects.

Cox was sent to the University of Florida in Gainesville.

"They ended up doing an endoscopy and they were able to pull it all out," Cox said. "What they also found is she had apparently swallowed some lead fishing weights."

Because lead pulls calcium out of the bones, two days before taking her to Gainesville, Sammi jumped off of a stool and broke her leg and hip in four places.

Cox was shaken. But he knew he needed to share Sammi's news with her fans. The health scare actually canceled a potential Netflix series featuring Sammi.

"When things happen in your personal life, you're like, 'I just want the world to go away and let me deal with this myself,' " Cox said. "Being that she had become so well loved by so many, I felt, 'I need to share with everyone this situation.' As I was telling them, I got very emotional. I feel bad when I go back and watch those videos. I can't

believe I cried on camera for how many thousands of people.”

The audience saw how much Cox loves her. Overnight, fans raised \$10,000 for Sammi.

“I was shocked at that,” Cox said. “But then I found out, medical bills for a chicken — an exotic animal — are not cheap.”

But he would’ve paid anything.

“So I amazingly have fallen in love with Sammi, where I did not think it was possible,” Cox said. “So much of the time, when she looks at me, she does not have those puppy dog eyes. She does not have that face that melts my heart. It’s more a matter of, ‘Does she want to peck my eyes out or does she just want to snuggle?’ She has a very intense stare in her eye. I really had a hard time when she was going through that. It’s tough when we’re separated because she literally — no joke — she goes everywhere with me.”