

Dog Star Licks the Competition

Meet the canine star behind Maya, the hero of "Eight Below."

Maureen Kochan

Koda Bear films a scene with actor Bruce Greenwood.

You could call Koda Bear, the breakout canine star at the center of the hit film *Eight Below*, the Jennifer Aniston of dog actors.

She's appeared in numerous films and TV shows, including *Snow Dogs* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. But like any A-list actress, Koda Bear still has to fight for the best parts.

Initially the filmmakers behind *Eight Below*, the story of eight loyal and tenacious sled dogs stranded in Antarctica, wanted an all-white dog for the lead character of Maya. But after a few meetings, Koda Bear, a 7-year-old silver Siberian Husky, won over director Frank Marshall. She has a very noble stature, which was perfect for the motherly Maya, the Grand Dame of all these dogs, he says.

The demanding film, which used more than two dozen animals to portray the eight sled dogs, required the animal actors to learn how to crawl over ice, slip out of their collars and even fight with an animatronic leopard seal.

But where was Maya, whom trainers nicknamed The Princess because she wouldn't go anywhere without her special blanket, during the most grueling scenes? Enjoying the action from a safe distance. Kalista, an experienced alpha sled dog and veteran of many long treks, stepped in during the most difficult scenes to serve as the top dog actors stunt double.

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