

Extract from:
The Police Dog: History, Breeds and Service

The Bouvier des Flandres

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The Bouvier des Flandres was a relatively massive, athletic, short coupled, rough coated dog consolidated into a formal breed for police, guard and military service in the Flemish region of Belgium in the early years of the twentieth century. The name derives from the age old agrarian foundations, for bouvier is simply French for things having to do with the cattle or the cowherd, and the founding stock was indeed the gruff canine guardians of these Flemish meadows of the coastal region adjacent to the North Sea. The essential function was that of the drover and guardian, sharing a heritage with dogs such as the Rottweiler in the various regions of Germany and other droving and cattle guarding stock which had served in obscurity for a thousand years in the pastoral regions of Europe, all dominant, short coupled dogs with a unique blending of power and agility, in contrast to the fleetness and endurance of the herding dogs of the shepherd.

The creation of the Bouvier as a breed must be understood in the context of these Flemish people from which he emerged, following some twenty to thirty years in the footsteps of another famous Flemish working dog, the Malinois variety of the Belgian Shepherd. The formal emergence of the Malinois as the prototype police dog

from very roughly 1885 through 1905 was the foundation for a century of increasingly sophisticated and refined police dog service, and set the stage for the emergence of the Bouvier des Flandres.

Thus this rustic Bouvier served in obscurity for almost another generation in the remote northwestern regions of Flanders, adjacent to the sea, as the shepherd breeds commenced, prospered and gained worldwide prominence. Although growing interest and a hand full of registrations occurred before WWI this great conflict, fought with such devastation in this entire region, delayed the real emergence until the early 1920s.

Many of the key personalities behind these two Flemish breeds were the same men, and the social and historical forces driving the process were similar. Felix Verbanck, for many years president of the Belgian Bouvier des Flandres club, mentor to many, including Edmee Bowles in America, was not a Bouvier breeder at all but a famous breeder of a principal Malinois foundation line. Men such as Louis Huyghebaert, who was the author of the principle existent history of the Bouvier des Flandres, will be famous as the father of the Malinois as long as men value such dogs. Both of these breeds emerged from among the agrarian dogs of the Flemish people, were ushered into the twentieth century driven by the same societal, agricultural and economic changes and created for the same purpose as guard and police breeds, leaving an obsolete but honored herding heritage in the past.

Beginning in the middle 1800s the sheep in the Low Countries, Belgium and Holland, were disappearing from the fields as wool and mutton was coming for very low prices from places such as Argentina and Australia, where they were evolving their own herding dogs for their own conditions. The sheep dog was on the brink of obsolescence in Belgium, and the cattle dog was not far behind.

Beginning about 1890 in Germany and Belgium men were gathering these native shepherd's dogs, often literally from the fields, with the purpose of preserving this patrimony as the herding style of agriculture was driven from these regions of Europe by the Industrial Revolution the general movement of the people to the cities. By 1905 there were well-established national Belgian Shepherd breed clubs and police style training was ongoing in local clubs in several nations. The Germans were preparing for war on a scale which would define the history of the twentieth century, and as a footnote also the fortunes of these emerging working breeds.

The first modern, formal police dog program had been established in Ghent, Belgium in 1900, and men from Britain, Germany, France and even the United States were coming to learn and seek out these famous Belgian police dogs. This was in the very heart of Bouvier country, and indeed many of the photos of these Ghent police dogs are obviously of the primitive Bouvier type in spite of the fact that another twenty years, and a devastating war, would pass before Bouvier registration began in earnest. The Germans, led by Konrad Most, were right behind, and German Shepherds and a few Airedales, Rottweilers and Dobermans were being established in police units across Germany and then into neighboring nations such as Austria. The police dog had arrived, and was enormously popular both in service and as a civilian companion dog.

In the 1890's an attempt to establish Belgian sheep herding trials in imitation of the British had been promoted, but quickly faded because of a lack of interest in an obsolete function; these men were looking to the future rather than grasping at the past.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the establishment of national police dog working trial systems across continental Europe, including the Ring program in Belgium, the Dutch Police (KNPV) trials and the Schutzhund or protection dog program in Germany. These became immensely popular and influential, and each has prospered until this day.

As the Belgian Shepherd, especially the Malinois, was evolving into a breed in the modern sense from the herding and farming dogs in the Flemish region north of Brussels, further to the East, in the region of Ghent and Roulers, another agrarian dog was serving in obscurity. In the lush meadows from the rivers Lys and Schelde to the North sea coast there was a larger, more rugged, more rough coated native working dog adapted to the cattle predominating in the region. This rustic Bouvier also had his advocates, men unwilling to let him fade into history with a passing way of life, men who would preserve these dogs for a few brief years, extend the twilight before another generation would dissipate this heritage in the false glory of the show ring and allow it finally to pass, to their everlasting shame.

Although there were in Belgium several competing registries and several styles of bouvier were being promoted, amid a great deal of impassioned rhetoric in the various popular magazines, the Bouvier as the breed which came down to modern times was first registered in Belgium with *Societe Royale Saint-Hubert* as the Bouviers des Roulers, after one of the principle cities of the region. To give a sense of the area involved, other cities in the midst of this Bouvier emergence include Courtrai and Ypres. Later the breed was registered by SRSB as Bouvier Belge des Flandres, and then about 1930 as simply the Bouvier des Flandres. The other varieties, a small number of which were registered in both Belgium and France, faded away, a few individuals being incorporated into the Belgian Bouvier des Flandres breeding records.

Although there was written mention of primitive bouviers in the various books and magazines commencing about 1890, it was the twentieth century before Bouviers were

exhibited in dog shows in meaningful numbers, in the Netherlands as well as Belgium, and 1914 before a written standard and registry was established in Belgium. A few dogs, less than twenty, were registered before the war, and then nothing until the Germans had been driven back. In 1922 the Belgian national club was established and very soon thereafter the Dutch club came into existence. Although the Dutch began with Belgian breeding stock and had contact with the Belgians through the 1920s, thereafter the center of Bouvier activity moved from the Flemish speaking land of creation in Flandres to the French speaking areas of Belgium, resulting in a gradual loss of contact between Belgian and Dutch enthusiasts which continued during the second world war and through the 1950s.

To comprehend the Bouvier soul, we must look into the minds and hearts of these men who, in the time period roughly from 1910 through 1915, the eve of the war, were gathering together to preserve their native cattle dogs. Just as in the creation of every breed, a concept of type, physical form, and character emerged and foundation stock was sought out according to these principles and ideals.

How were these foundation dogs to be selected? For their new breed to prosper, it needed to attract advocates, and the police dog was the dog in demand for service and which roused the passion of the common man, the dog which had captured imaginations across continental Europe. The prototype was to be the larger, more aggressive, more gruff dogs guarding the fields, and this is from whence the founding lines emerged.

The draft dog function was ubiquitous in this era, and the fate of these dogs was the subject of the book and subsequent movie *A Dog of Flandres* which had to do with the Flemish or Belgian mastiff or draft dogs, entirely different dogs from the Bouvier in spite of what is portrayed in the movies. Any available dog was under duress no doubt pressed into service to turn a churn or pull a cart, but the preference was quite naturally the native draft dogs, destined to fade into oblivion. These larger mastiff and draft dog types are mentioned in the foundation selections but were incorporated primarily to produce a larger and more muscular breed rather than one with an ongoing draft or carting functionality.

Farms worldwide have their yard dogs, thirty or forty pounds, of no particular breed similar to the old fashioned farm collie dog in Britain. Some would claim that these yard dogs are progenitors of the Bouvier too, but this is absurd, makes no sense at all. These men creating the Bouvier were looking for the foundations of a police dog breed, and would have paid no notice to these nondescript yard dogs, but passed them by without a glance on the way to the fields and pastures in search of the guardian prototypes.

The creation of the Bouvier as a police and guard dog is without doubt; it is what was novel and popular, it is what was in demand for service, it is what they said they were about, it is indeed what they declared in their standard for the world to see. Modern dilettantes seeking to portray herding, draft work or other functions as the purpose of the breed, or as sufficient basis for breeding selection, are profoundly ignorant or purposefully disingenuous; there is no other way to say it. This Bouvier des Flandres was not a random gathering of the local farm dogs, but a rigorous selection from among the elite canine guardians of the region, as bred and passed down from generation to generation.

The emerging new world was that of the police dog, the training and trialing organizations were in place and prospering mightily; and these Bouvier advocates knew they were late to the party and needed to catch up, to put dogs on the police and ring trial fields. And by the middle 1920s men such as Edmond Moreaux were winning trial field fame with dogs such as the immortal Francoeur de Liege. In this era, the Bouvier soon had presence in the Belgian Ring championships and on the KNPV trial fields, was earning his place in this new canine police dog world.

Bouvier popularity grew steadily in Belgium, approaching a thousand in yearly registrations in the 1930s with many active and vigorous breeding programs. (A mere drop in the bucket of

German Shepherd registrations.) Bouviers appear regularly in the records of the Belgian Ring working championships in this era. Although the numbers were somewhat less in the Netherlands, growth was steady there also.

Although France is mentioned as a nation of origin, it is well documented fact that the vast majority of dogs known as Bouviers today spring from the breeding of the Dutch speaking herdsmen of Flandres, which spread first to French speaking Belgium and the Netherlands. Although French records are very sparse, where they can be traced back French roots invariably go back to these founding Flemish dogs, first registered as the Bouviers des Roulers.

The Second World War devastated the Bouvier, not so much by the direct loss of dogs – although this was tragic – as by the damage done to the basic social fabric of Belgium by the second German atrocity in a generation. For five long years in the early 1950s fewer than 100 Bouviers were registered in Belgium with similar dismal numbers in the Netherlands and France. The breed did indeed come very near to flickering out. Justin Chastel and Felix Verbanck were the pillars in this era, and without their iron willed perseverance the Bouvier indeed might well not exist today.

Although a few odd dogs came to the Americas in the twenties and thirties, the arrival of Edmee Bowles from Belgium early in the war, fleeing the advancing German greed and plundering, began her American saga and the growth of the breed in this country. Beginning in the middle fifties and extending into the early eighties her du Clos des Cerberes line was not only the American fountainhead, it was recognized as among the best in the world by men such as Justin Chastel, modern founder of the breed in Belgium.

The work of the Bouvier des Flandres, the reason for which he was created, is police style search and protection work. In his creation, the founders melded the native cattle dogs with the larger native regional guard dogs, a natural response to the population shift to cities and industrial work that the agricultural revolution of the last century was causing all over Europe, and in which Belgium was among the earliest and most strongly affected. The words of the founders and guardians testify to this fact. As Felix Verbanck, primary leader of the Belgian club through the early 1960s, said:

"The breeders do not forget that the Bouvier is first of all a working dog, and although they try to standardize its type, they do not want it to lose the early qualities which first called attention to its desirability. For that reason, in Belgium a Bouvier cannot win the title of Champion unless he has also won a prize in a working competition as a police dog, as a defense dog or as an army dog."

Herding is not mentioned for the simple reason that there was no longer any herding to do in Belgium, that along with draft work, it was rapidly becoming obsolete when the Bouvier was being established in the formal sense.

When our first book was being written in the middle 1980s the Bouvier des Flandres, as it existed in America, was relatively close to the old style European roots and on the whole still a credible working breed. My perception is no doubt colored by our own dogs, primarily coming from the du Clos des Cerberes line of Edmee Bowles and a little later from Dutch working lines – in retrospect sound choices. But in the intervening years the vast majority of Bouviers being produced in America have become diluted show dogs with little remaining of the original working character, or robust physique for that matter. This has been discussed extensively elsewhere; for the purposes of this commentary I refer to Bouviers des Flandres still according to the original working character, a very small and rapidly diminishing population. Those with so-called Bouviers out of contemporary popular lines will likely need to think in terms of a new dog, very difficult to find, if thoughts of serious competition are aroused.

On the whole the Bouvier tends to be slow maturing, strong willed sometimes to the point of stubbornness and tends to defensiveness in the protection work. We have experienced very

little handler aggression in our own Bouviers, and this seems to be a general tendency. (We of course have always been close to our dogs, many born on our kitchen floor or in our whelping room.) As with most of these breeds, the propensity to dog aggression, especially among the males, is an ever-present concern, good management and training are necessary to keep this in check.

There has been a certain amount of variation in sociability among my better dogs, and this tends to correlate to some extent with early socialization. One dog which for various reasons had little interaction with strangers before eighteen months old was decidedly unfriendly when approached closely. In preparation for the introduction to the judge part of the trial extensive acclimation was required, much of it involving walking up to a stranger, shaking hands and then having the stranger throw a Kong. My other dogs with extensive early public exposure have tended from slight enthusiasm to disinterested neutrality to the passive stranger, entirely satisfactory for me. In general the stronger working line Bouviers should be extensively socialized as young pups and then brought into regular contact with strangers in varying situations. The concept of limiting socialization for fear of the dog becoming too friendly and thus not sufficiently aggressive is in my experience and opinion not supported by actual experience. All Bouviers should be socialized as pups and young dogs and be exposed to strangers and groups of strangers as they mature; lack of sufficient aggression will generally be the result of insufficient innate potential, possible in all breeds and all lines, the luck of the draw in puppy accusation.

It is well known that individual Bouviers in European working lines have been very sharp and sometimes less than social; how much of this relates to the preference of the handler is a valid question. In that environment the control for a good score in the trial was sufficient; some of these dogs were primarily kennel dogs with outside contact limited to training and trial days. Those with such dogs take on a great deal of responsibility, but on the other hand every serious working breed needs a reservoir of hard, sharp and aggressive dogs as a breeding resource.

There are aspects of the Bouvier character that can render dealing with him difficult. He can be quite stubborn; there is simply no other way to say it. The correct way to manage this is not to attempt to break him of the characteristic but to use it to your own ends. Once you start something and fail, the Bouvier has the upper hand; the next time around the situation is likely to be more difficult. You must proceed with deliberate caution, one step at a time. Never give a command unless you are prepared to do whatever is necessary to insure compliance if you are sure he understands what is required.

Our earlier dogs had very little interest in thrown objects such as balls or Kongs; when I threw a Frisbee for our first Bouvier, a good dog who went on to Schutzhund III, he brought it back a couple of times without enthusiasm, and eventually just carried it out into the bushes and buried it. In the early 1990s we purchased Iron Xandra van Caya's Home in the Netherlands specifically because he was a very strong dog with extraordinary drive to retrieve the Frisbee or Kong, and this carried down well into his progeny. This can greatly enhance trial preparation, be an aid in creating the animated obedience; but the question remains whether this really relates to the ultimate potential in actual police style service or is a driving factor in the ongoing separation between sport field success and suitability to real world police service.

There is a strong emotional propensity to believe that one's dog is a one-man dog loving you above all others, a belief that your absence would be a great blow, but this often has more to do with the emotional needs of the man than the dog. The reality is that most good dogs can adapt to a new handler or home if sufficient time and patience are provided, and if the new trainer is supportive. While generalities are always treacherous, my observation is that the Bouviers need of a real bond with the handler, tend to strong ties and that while transition is always possible it tends to take a little longer and require a little more effort from the new handler. Thus as a generalization these dogs take significantly longer than some other breeds

to acclimate to a new owner or a new training situation; the training process tends to be longer and to require a patient yet resolute and evenhanded partner.

These are not only my opinions, for in the 1980s we were told by administrators of Dutch Police programs and Dutch KNPV club instructors that roughly about twice the training time goes into a Bouvier as a Malinois, an especially quick dog to train. When asked why, if this is the case, they included a good number of Bouviers in their program, his reply translated as roughly "we have a need for some especially serious dogs in our work, and like the Bouvier for these applications." In general, the Dutch police Bouviers have had over the years the reputation of being especially strong and aggressive, and apparently there is even to this day a need and desire for such dogs. Unfortunately, over the quarter century since these words were written, such dogs have diminished to a few remnants, a tragedy for all of us for whom the Bouvier of old has a special place in our hearts.

The origins of the Bouvier des Flandres as a cattle guardian and herder, as opposed to the Belgian and German shepherd's dogs for instance, have played a role in the creation of the modern breed. The shepherd's dogs were continually in motion, putting great emphasis on fleetness, endurance and efficiency but not generally in direct physical jeopardy, not likely to have a life or working career ended by a kick from a truculent sheep. While the demands for speed and fleetness were perhaps not as extreme for the Bouvier he did need to be quick, cautious and agile in order to avoid injury from a kick. For these reasons, relative to the shepherd's dog, the Bouvier is slightly shorter in back, more square and less angulated. He is thus agile and capable of great acceleration as compared with the German Shepherd grace and efficiency. The rough all weather coat was a requirement of day and night service in the damp cool or cold conditions in the lands of origin, directly adjacent to the North Sea.

There are also consequences of the cattle-herding heritage for the sport dog. The Bouvier learned, no doubt by harsh lesson, to be wary, to respond to a threat with a quick jab of the foot or blow by the shoulder and then duck quickly out of range and decide on a next move. The bite might tend to be inhibited, reserved for serious provocation. This is well and good but a factor to deal with in training for the Schutzhund trial where the correct response to a threat is to take the offered sleeve and then hang on. Thus one must sometimes to some extent overcome by training the natural reactions in order to succeed in the sport.

Unfortunately, the Bouvier des Flandres is rapidly disappearing as a serious working dog in the homelands and the rest of the world. From personal experience I know that the three primary Bouvier des Flandres clubs in Europe – the Belgian, Dutch and French – were under the control of conformation breeders and were never really serious about the working heritage. The Dutch club is in a way the most honest and straightforward; although they pay a little bit of lip service, the typical breeder is oblivious to character or work, and would rather sweep it all under the carpet as an impediment to pet puppy sales. In the middle 1980s and a little later the Bouvier was the fashionable dog in the Netherlands, for several years registering 10,000 pups, often more than 15 percent of the total for all breeds. But this was entirely a show dog and pet bubble, although there was a moderate amount of KNPV activity at the beginning of this wave of show dog popularity, and some growing IPO or Schutzhund activity, by the turn of the twenty first century this had fallen off to a very low level, a trend which continues unabated today. The Belgians and the French would spout noble words, but it was nothing more than lip service.

End Game

The decline of the Bouvier, and other breeds such as the Doberman, was the consequence of many social and historical factors. The popularity of the German and Belgian Shepherds was self-reinforcing, people naturally gravitated to the successful breeds. The enforcement of European bans on ear cropping and tail docking was problematic but not decisive, the decline was well under way when the bans took full effect in the early 1990s. Reliance on character tests for show dogs, designed and implemented by conformation breeders, played a significant

role in the decline of the Bouvier des Flandres in the latter years of the twentieth century. In France and Belgium, where after the Second World War seriously working titled breeding stock became most unusual, the credentials of the Bouvier as a working dog deteriorated to the point where the breed was no longer taken seriously. The French and Belgian temperament tests – generally conducted by show breeders with no real working commitment – exacerbated the situation. Ultimately the shame must primarily descend on the show breeders and national club office holders, but there is plenty of blame to go around.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the only real national reservoir of serious working Bouviers were the KNPV dogs in the Netherlands. It is true that a few Belgians and Frenchmen, such as Edmond Moreaux and Gerard Gelineau, with lines from Moreaux, swam against the tide and maintained working stock in their own kennels. Gelineau took his Bouviers to the French Ring Cup Final several times in the early 1970s. For the true Bouvier advocates these men will forever be heroes, for their struggle was against the sloth and greed of the mainstream Bouvier community as well as for excellence in their dogs. These men were the exception and largely estranged from the overall breeding communities, to the everlasting shame of the pretenders in Belgium and France.

Without exception police style working dog lines are maintained only where a significant majority of the breeding stock obtains a working title as a breeding prerequisite. It might have been possible as late as the early 1980s to recover and preserve working lines, but the people to do the job were not there. But it would have meant earning recognized titles in established systems rather than the invention of special tests pretending to "take account of the special Bouvier character," which always turn out to be a thinly disguised farce, diluted to accommodate the weaknesses of the stock on hand. In particular, credibility would preclude the appointment of special judges specific to the testing programs, usually show breeders essentially ignorant of and uninterested in actual working character.

There is a tendency to focus on the degeneration of the Bouvier in terms of the lack of drive, aggression and confidence. These are of course fundamental components of a useful police style working dog, but only part of the picture. The dog who is strong, brave and confident, but has not demonstrated the willingness to be a working partner is just as much a detriment to the heritage, and the gene pool, as the dog that is willing but not sufficient to perform under the stress of a serious confrontation. The real problem with the Dutch show lines is a propensity for stubbornness, insolence and a lack of trainability as much as the lack of true fighting spirit.

Much more can be said, and has been in our previous book, to which you are referred. (Engel, 1991)

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