

REQUIEM FOR A WORKING DOG

James R. Engel, President
North American Working Bouvier Association
June, 1993

Most enthusiasts of the Bouvier des Flandres were attracted by the heritage of the bold, handsome working dogs of Flandres fields. The appearance -- the agile, powerful body, block like head and rough coat -- is of course striking and impressive. But ultimately it is the character of the dog, the distinctive melding of courage, prudence and stability which in a truly good Bouvier produce a unique and most worthy working dog.

In the words of Justin Chastel:

"You must keep in mind that character is of primary importance, more than type, more than gait. It is only after considering these things in order of their importance that you can turn your attention to lesser specific factors. It is here that the public and the inexperienced always go wrong, first by being anxious about details, such as color and length of coat. Would you have a Bouvier that does not act like one, who does not have all those moral characteristics for which the Bouvier has been chosen for centuries? Obviously the Bouvier no longer has to herd cattle, but does not the new owner want a dog that is courageous, bold, intelligent, and fond of work? It is up to the breeder to deliver such an animal."

Mr. Chastel goes on: "If a Bouvier des Flandres does not have all of the moral qualities of a Bouvier, he is not a Bouvier des Flandres. He must be nothing less than superb!"

But today this working character is in jeopardy. The Bouvier is in fact in imminent world wide danger of emasculation, of being stripped of the working character that is the paramount reason for his existence. The reasons for this decline in character are many and diverse, and are rooted in history, politics and war. The result, quite simply, is that something of immense value will be lost forever if we fail to act on his behalf.

This distinctive, robust character of our Bouvier is in reality quite fragile, can be lost in an incredibly short time when not ceaselessly selected for in the breeding process. The fact of the matter is that much of today's breeding stock has become soft and lethargic, a pathetic caricature of a proud heritage.

Over the past two decades a small but relentless group of Americans have been increasingly concerned about the viability of the Bouvier des Flandres as a serious working dog, that is, a breed capable of serving the police and guard roles that were the fundamental reason for his creation. Although we have achieved a certain amount of attention and success through our working championships, and the emergence of the North American Working Bouvier Association, the breed in America continues to decline.

The situation in the homelands is similar. Very few dogs work in Belgium and France and a Bouvier in higher levels of competition is almost unknown. We have observed the "selection" process in Belgium and find that dogs exhibiting no credible

working potential are routinely declared "select," that is, worthy to carry on the breed. Many more dogs work in the Netherlands, but the number of really good dogs and serious breeders is too low to sustain a gene pool for serious working dogs. Fewer and fewer Bouviers appear in the police trials, and the Dutch continue to hand out "championships" without even the pretense of a concern for working aptitude.

For a decade we have watched this world wide deterioration with increasing distress, waiting for leadership to emerge in the homelands and take steps to restore and preserve the working heritage of our breed. In the late eighties there were international meetings and talk of a world union. We hoped this would evolve into a forum where the future of the breed could be addressed and international efforts would ultimately emerge to preserve and protect our Bouvier as a working dog. But nothing has come of this, and there are no indications that any of the national clubs have the potential to break loose from the death grip of show only breeders and get serious about the character of the Bouvier des Flandres.

When losing a fundamental battle, when something of intrinsic value faces imminent extinction, it is better to take desperate gambles than to lay face down in the mud and die. Because the very existence of my breed is in danger, because the Bouvier I believe in is flickering out, I can remain silent no longer.

What has become apparent is that the Bouvier des Flandres is being destroyed by the American Kennel Club, the American Bouvier des Flandres Club, the Raad van Beheer, the Netherlands Bouvier Club and the original club in Belgium, the Belgische Club Belge Bouvier des Flandres. These harsh words are for me very painful, for many friends and acquaintances -- officers and members of these organizations -- will no doubt take great offense.

But I know these things to be true from direct personal experience and first hand knowledge, and I know that if the Bouvier is to be a working dog then the organizations, people and policies emasculating him must be identified, neutralized and replaced.

(Although I am told that the same basic situation exists in France, I have not myself put a hand in the wound and thus can not comment directly.)

These people and organizations do not believe in working dogs, they believe in pretty show dogs and that every breed should be emasculated so that puppies can be sold as commodities to generate the money that keeps the whole circus rolling on. Individual officers and members sometimes believe in and give verbal support to the concept of a working dog, but on the whole the programs are far too little and too late.

Put most simply, we can not survive within the existing system. No matter how few our numbers, those of us -- world wide -- who believe the Bouvier des Flandres must be a working dog above all else must establish a system free of compromise. If we believe in working dogs, then we must not support conformation shows with an "open" class where adult dogs compete on the basis of beauty and become the wellspring of the next generation regardless of character.

We are on the road to oblivion, and the tide of history is running against us. But, if we have sufficient character and determination, if we are willing to work and sacrifice, it is still possible to not only survive, but to prosper.

My purpose is to propose a program for prosperity.

First, we must know that while we are few we are not alone. In Belgium, a second club, the Vereniging voor Vlaamse Koehonden, associated with names such as Chastel, LeLann and Verheyen, has come into existence to serve the Bouvier des Flandres of the breed founders. Thus I am not the first to speak out, for when a man such as Justin Chastel leaves the Belgian club after fifty years it is time for each of us to step back and evaluate, to see if perhaps we have lost our bearings.

There are believers in the Netherlands, but the Dutch continue to grant the title "Champion" without regard for working character. From the very beginning the Dutch have been divided into the police trainers who did not much give a damn about appearance (or even if a dog had a pedigree) and the show element which has always been ambivalent about the working heritage of the breed.

The situation in the Netherlands is perhaps the key to the history and future of the Bouvier. Our richest working dog heritage has certainly been the big, black Roulers type Bouviers of the Dutch police trials, yet today they are fading, becoming an occasional reminder of another era rather than a commanding presence.

For fifteen years I have marveled at the success of the German Shepherd and wondered why they have been so successful. Certainly these are wonderful dogs, certainly their breeders, trainers and leadership have exhibited commendable wisdom, fortitude and dedication.

But there has to be more to it than that. After so many years of observation, I have come to believe that it is the simple, raw power of the Verein für Deutsche Schäferhunde (SV), the Shepherd club in Germany. By power I mean that they do their own registration and keep their own records and thus are independent of any other entity in Germany or the world. Should the FCI or one of the layers of German canine bureaucracy step out of bounds and make threats, the SV could and would shake them off and go their own way, and everyone knows it.

In America, when the AKC hints that protection sports are not quite the image we want to project, the German Shepherd Dog Club of America backs off like little boys in the woods caught with their pants down. When the Doberman Club starts taking steps to support their working heritage, when it becomes apparent that the membership is ready to move, the AKC comes out and formally bans Schutzhund, much to the relief of the show only old guard.

There is another lesson to be learned from the German Shepherd experience. In America, and in spite of early and persistent efforts to work within the system, the Shepherd rebirth has been driven by new people, new breeders and new organizations. The old "American Shepherd" breeders are still producing their over size, lop eared, low in the rear angulation machines, conducting their shows and giving themselves awards and trophies as if what they are doing is not an abomination, a repudiation of the heritage of the breed. They hardly seem to notice that they are becoming irrelevant, that the public, the people in need of a real working dog and the true enthusiasts for the breed have left them behind years ago.

The same will be true for the Bouvier. We can not and should not try to convert today's show breeders, exhibitionists and pet owners. Rather we must build the foundations for a revival of the breed, and when we do, new people who share our vision and beliefs will come and together we will reestablish the Bouvier as a working dog.

In the Netherlands, the Raad van Beheer was up front on the banning of ear cropping, incorporating it into their regulations before the civil authorities put the force of law behind it. And since the principle canine organization had caved in, were not the politicians on firm ground in assuming it was the consensus of the canine community?

And of course the Netherlands Bouvier Club could do nothing, since it would be impolite to question the Raad van Beheer. The Dutch should have a working requirement for their championship, and move toward a working test as a breeding prerequisite, but the Raad van Beheer is always a convenient excuse, an easy way to have good intentions that never result in action.

I say that the working dog community in no nation can sustain a heritage while they are under the domination of an all breed, pet and show oriented national organization, that sooner or later a committee of little old ladies, dominated by Cocker Spaniel breeders, is going to find a way to emasculate the working breeds. When the time comes, the Raad van Beheer will knuckle under and trivialize the working sports, because they really don't understand, and because, ultimately, they won't take heat to protect the vital interests of the working breeds.

In America there is the North American Working Bouvier Association, affiliated with the American Working Dog Federation and attempting to establish an American working Bouvier heritage. The only for show dogs (the Bouviers des Boudoir) operate under the banner of the American Bouvier Club, a member club of the American Kennel Club, which is hostile as a matter of principle to any serious work for the protective heritage breeds.

So there are in fact supporters of the working Bouvier world wide; but we are isolated and ineffective, lost in a sea of show only breeders and pet dogs and under the thumb of national organizations ambivalent at best about our protection dog heritage. We must now reach out and form bonds among like minded people, encourage working oriented organizations wherever a tiny flame flickers, wherever there are people who share our love of the working Bouvier des Flandres.

Just as we are not alone in the Bouvier world, we are not alone in America. The American Working Dog Federation consists of entities similar to NAWBA banded together for mutual aid and assistance. Our friends with German Shepherds, Dobermans, Rottweilers and the Belgian Sheepdog varieties are standing by to assist us. If we can pull our own weight then there is a place for us in a vital, strong American working dog community.

Second, we must remain true to our convictions. We must cease to glorify show dogs who do not work and the people who breed and exhibit them. Yes, structure, type and appearance are just as important as working aptitude, but we must seek out the dogs who can really work and select those with the best structure for breeding, rather than getting

an occasional home field title on a show dog and pretending that we are breeding working dogs.

Third, we must deal with the "fundamental myth," which is that the days of police style working dogs are long past and modern Europeans and Americans only want pretty show dogs and docile "pets." To kick away this crutch, one need only look across the German border, where for almost a century the German Shepherd Dog has been bred as a working dog. No puppy is a German Shepherd unless his sire and his dam have been tested, that is, passed a rigorous, practical herding test or tracked, trained in obedience and faced up to an aggressive man with a stick and made an effective attack. There is no open class at Shepherd shows; to compete, an adult must have a serious working title.

Sure, there are lots of bad German Shepherds. There are weak or dishonest judges who will grant a fraudulent Schutzhund title to an unfit dog. Trials have been conducted around the breakfast table, with the paper work going in for new titles with no dog stepping foot on the sport field. But these fraudulent acts do not invalidate the system, which is fundamentally correct and vigorous.

God did not bless only the German people with the ability to maintain working breeds, and not every German breed prospers. The state for the Doberman and the Boxer has striking parallels with the Bouvier, and these breeds also face extinction as working dogs.

I say that the Germans are not in any fundamental way any more capable than the French, the Dutch, the Belgians or the Americans. Yes, I understand the hardships of the Second World War. I know that in several years during the early fifties fewer than 250 Bouviers were registered in Belgium, France and the Netherlands together, that the breed stood at the brink of extinction. But this was half a century ago, and we must now take responsibility for our own destiny and resolve to overcome the misfortunes of history, war and politics.

For the past fifteen years, the working Bouvier movement in America has sought to be inclusive, to attract interest and support from the broader Bouvier community. We have run weight pulling, carting, AKC obedience, agility and other events. We have conducted conformation shows for the "show dog only" set. We have been low profile, accommodating and polite. I participated in this policy and would do so again, it was valid in its time and did in fact produce worthwhile results. But this policy has outlived its usefulness. We must now be about the business of survival, make one final effort to turn back the tide of mediocrity and accommodation that is squandering the Bouvier of our forefathers.

Let me propose practical programs and policies.

First and foremost, the traditional enthusiasts in each nation, those for whom the Bouvier must be a working dog, must band together and organize. Whether the appropriate mechanism is an independent organization, as in Belgium and North America, or as cohesive groups in more traditional structures, is a decision to be made in each nation.

Next, we must form strong, direct international bonds beyond the reach and control of the show only elements. NAWBA has always encouraged European membership, and

our Journal is available for international commentary. Now we need to seek out formal alliances, establish lines of communication, encouragement and assistance at every level, person to person and nation to nation.

After all these years of struggle, I have become convinced that there is only one mechanism by which the Bouvier can, once and for all, become the working dog envisioned by the founders: a world union of national clubs whose fundamental belief is that the Bouvier des Flandres is a working dog.

It is not appropriate here to propose detailed criteria for membership, but clearly the candidate organizations must:

- Endorse the concept that a Bouvier can not be a "Champion" until he has passed a rigorous working test appropriate for a serious police or guard dog breed.
- Believe that ultimately no puppy should be registered unless its parents have passed a working test.
- Have as long term goal the elimination of anything resembling an "open" class, that is, the exhibition of adult dogs without a working title.

Obviously, it is very difficult to implement such a program, and reality will demand temporary accommodations. But we must have goals, know what the ultimate situation must be in order to insure long term survival.

In the longer run, we need to establish an international show system where to be a "Champion" or to be rated "Excellent" a Bouvier must hold a serious working title such as the IPO or CQN. In this way, the public could decide for itself whose definition of the term "Champion" is relevant and valid. What we must avoid is any acceptance of the concept of "Show Bouviers" and "Working Bouviers." We must return to the fundamental concept that the Bouvier is a working dog, and that, ultimately, if a dog does not work then he is not a Bouvier des Flandres.

In summary, it has become apparent that a vast majority of those for whom the Bouvier is only a "show dog" and family pet cannot by their very nature be converted, that the salvation of the breed must be found among those with an unshakable belief in the working heritage.

Although they may pay lip service to work, those looking for quick success, driven for a desire to be an "important Bouvier person," inevitably focus on the show ring because anyone with a little time and money can breed from the winning lines, hire the right handler and produce a "champion."

At the other end of the spectrum those seeking sport field glory without regard for breed or the appearance of the dog have long since discovered the easier road and purchased a Malinois or a German Shepherd. Some of these people can be converted if we can make truly competitive stock available to the sport enthusiast with no strong breed preference.

The remainder are those of us whose breed is the Bouvier des Flandres, and for whom the Bouvier must be a working dog. No matter how small our number -- perhaps only a few hundred world wide -- it is from these ashes that the Phoenix must rise. We can

succeed if we are willing to work hard enough and smart enough, and to work together unselfishly.

There is thus certainly no question what course the breed founders have pointed out for us. The time has come to live up to the heritage, to take the steps necessary to preserve and protect the Bouvier as the working breed created by our European founders. We must not render meaningless the efforts of the Belgians, Frenchmen and Dutchmen, men and women such as Moreaux, Chastel, Semler and Bowles, who dedicated their lives to the Bouvier des Flandres.

We must endure hardship, as did Edmee Bowles. We must be willing to turn our back on the canine establishment and strike out on the lonely road, as did Justin Chastel and Alfons and Annie Verheyen. We must know that ribbons and trophies mean nothing if they are produced by a false system. Perhaps most difficult, we must be prepared to give up the most precious thing of all to a human being, the friendship and esteem of his peers, if it stands in the way of what has to be done.

Our fundamental premise is that the correct Bouvier is always of strong working character, sound, and exhibiting correct breed type. Thus we are not and can not be exclusively focused on work, but rather must place proper emphasis on physical type and soundness as well as the essential character attributes. Our reason for existence is and will always be the preservation of the Bouvier as a complete working dog, nothing more and most certainly nothing less.

Every man and every woman, every European and every American, who share our vision of the Bouvier in his rightful place among the serious working dogs of the world, must act on behalf of the breed, must help to forge the alliances and establish or support the organizations in his nation necessary for the preservation of the Bouvier des Flandres.

We must now act boldly, striking out on the course necessary to preserve the Bouvier as a serious working breed. We must be driven by the dark premonition that, should we fail in this noble venture, the destiny of each of us who loved the Bouvier des Flandres will be to live out his life with the cold, stark knowledge that he abandoned him in his hour of need.

James R. Engel
June 1993