

*Extract from:*

# **The Police Dog: History, Breeds and Service**

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## **Chapter 9**

## **France**



Leon Destailleur

France is a nation with an ancient history, a culture that was a foundation of western civilization when the Normans invaded England and made French the language of court for several centuries. Their language is melodic and beautiful, a foundation of western literature and for many centuries the international standard of diplomacy, science and culture; if you could not say it in French it did not really matter, for you were not really worth hearing anyway. In the countryside today this is a nation of physical beauty and tranquility, in many ways the French really do know how to live. The rest of the world does not always love the French, but it is very difficult not to admire them, perhaps even with a touch of envy.

### **French Herding Breeds**

But when it comes to dogs, at least among the Americans, French meant Poodles and not much else. Much of this was perception, for the farmers and herdsman of the French countryside evolved their indigenous herding breeds, the Picardy Shepherds, Beaucerons and Briards. But among the French population as a whole the perceptions and preferences were much more akin to the Americans than they might like to admit, for the popularity went to the German dogs, the Shepherds, Rottweilers and Dobermans, while the native French herding breeds withered on the vine. Even in France, the exotic import seems to have its allure.

The Beauceron is a French herding breed of north central France and the best represented French breed in Ring sport. It is a relatively large, muscular dog of short coat, reportedly part of the foundation stock of the Doberman Pincher.

The Picardy Shepherd or Berger Picard is a medium sized, rough coated shepherd's dog of Northern France, similar in size structure and function to the more well-known native Belgian Shepherds.

The Briard or Berger de Brie is a relatively large native sheep herding and guarding dog with a long and rough coat suitable for year round service with the flock, often working without supervision as with many of the flock guarding dogs of the more mountainous and rougher regions of southern Europe.

## French Ring Sport

Everything French eventually evolves a unique flair and character, and their national protection dog sport is no exception. French Ringsport emphasizes exquisite control, quickness, finesse and speed; and favors dogs with the same attributes, the Belgian Malinois. And not just any Malinois, but their own lines, evolving for their demanding sport with relentless, driven selection.

The men who stand in as adversaries to the dog, the Hommes d'Attaque, use full body suits, allowing the dog to bite anywhere but favoring the leg bites because of the tactics and quickness of the helpers, who take pride in their skill, agility and ability to finesse or deceive the dog into missing a bite. To this end, decoy suits are light and flexible in the extreme. Larger and more powerful dogs are at a distinct disadvantage, and those who favor such breeds need to look elsewhere or accept being on the sidelines each June when the elite men and their dogs vie for the Cup of France.

My introduction to serious French Ring was in 1987 in France, first at a local club trial and then on to Lorient for the famous cup final, on the Atlantic coast where many of the German submarines were based in WWII. Each dog coming to compete had been through a demanding series of regional selection trials, the *sélectifs*, and thus represented the best the sport and the nation had to offer. This culminating event is known as the *Coupe de France du Chien d'Utilité*, that is, the French Ringsport Cup. This Cup, as it is known for short, is among the most demanding and respected canine events in the world today, every man and dog that walk onto the field become forever part of the elite of canine sport.

My recollection is of two warm, sunny days late in June, with moderation in temperature insured by the nearness of the ocean. As is typical of such events, the trial was in a medium size sports arena, a soccer stadium in this instance. In my catalog are 17 Malinois, 7 German Shepherds and 2 Terveruren, all male and with male handlers. Finally, to represent France among these dogs of Flemish and German origin, there was a remarkable Beauceron, Saphir du Grand Maurian in the 25th place of honor in the Cup final.

Scanning the entries in my catalog, certain things snapped into focus, for instance the kennel *de la Virginie* was represented in first place by Tino, fourth place by Titus and 14th place by Torck.

The kennel *de la Virginie* was the life work of Daniel Debonduwe, by far the most successful Ringsport breeder and trainer of all time, author of the famous book *L'art du ring*. On this day, Tino & Mr. Debonduwe went on to win both the Cup and the Championship. (The Cup goes to the dog with the most points on this day, while the Championship goes to the dog with the highest combined total from the *sélectifs* and the Cup trial.)

I am told that the German Shepherd in the thirteenth place, a certain Sorbonne trained by M. Gorse, is regarded by many as the greatest of his breed, nearing the end of a long career in the Ring and at the Cup, but on that day I do not remember him specifically among so many exceptional dogs and their trainers. A first attendance at such an event, if you understand even in a small way the significance, flows together in your recollection, with so many extraordinary people and dogs.

Unlike Schutzhund, where the dog is taught to only bite the padded arm, the complete body suit is used, and the dog may bite anywhere. In practice, most dogs are trained to go for the legs and thighs. On command, dogs must instantly release their hold, explode off the suit. Simultaneously agitators cease aggressive behavior. According to command, dogs must then either return or stay and guard. Handlers must also, for the *attaque arrêtée* exercise (stopped attack), call the dogs off before

they quite reach the agitator, certainly a most remarkable demonstration of control and discipline.

Perhaps the most fascinating of the exercises is the guard of object. The handler places an object, such as a wicker basket, in the center of a ring of perhaps eight or ten feet diameter on the ground. The handler then goes away, out of sight, no doubt to quietly worry. The agitator then approaches from the distance, making no overtly aggressive move. The dog more than anything wants to attack, but knows he must stay at his station. The agitator circles, shows disinterest, but moves continually closer. Finally, when he detects a moment's lack of attention, he will reach for the basket, at which point the dog must bite. When he does, the agitator must freeze and instantly put the basket on the ground. If the dog leaves the basket, or allows the man to remove it from the circle, substantial points are lost.

It is a fascinating battle of wits between man and dog, between agitator and trainer, played out mostly in slow motion with an occasional flash of action.

Among the elite names, the most revered in France, are those of Leon Destailleur and his kennel *Du Mouscronnais*. Born in 1920 in Mouscron in the Walloon region of Belgium, he is generally regarded as the father of modern French Ring Sport and the introduction of the Malinois to the French working dog world.

The location of the small brick house, where this man Destailleur lived his long life, was to have a profound influence on the evolution of this sport and this breed. The French border, with the French village of Wattrelos, was literally a stone throw away.

Furthermore, Mouscron is at the very tip of the intrusion of the Walloon province of Hainaut where this province, Nord France and the Belgian province of West Flandres meet. Destailleur could literally walk out of his door to the next street and be in France. But he could also take a short walk to the North and cross another kind of border, into West Flandres and be in the same nation but where the language and culture were fundamentally different. In many ways the separation of peoples across this boundary between the Flemish and the culturally and linguistically French portion of Belgium is greater than the national boundary where one could walk across and share a drink or meal among those of his own language, perhaps his own relatives and friends. (Hilliard, 1986)

This story is deep in irony, for his early training was in the Belgian way, and until about 1960 Destailleur was among the very few men training the German Shepherd for the Belgian ring.

But it was a different kind of dog that would lead to fame, for after the war, in 1946, he began with a bitch of the kind in those days known as *Le Petit Berger Flamand* or the little Flemish Shepherd, somewhat better known today as the Malinois. The war had decimated the canine population, and recovery was a matter of taking what could be found to begin again. This bitch, acquired literally from between the rails of a cart, was the foundation of what would establish the Malinois in France and redefine French Ring sport.

In the earlier days, French Ring was for the German Shepherd, and all the dogs went to the arm for the bite, for the Belgian ring in that era was the only venue where the dogs went to the leg. Training for the Belgian Ring, Destailleur, who believed that biting to the leg was founded in a genetic predisposition, selected and trained his dogs in this way, and by the 1950s had established this in his lines.

In 1962 the winds of change were blowing in Belgium, for the backbone of the Belgian ring trainers were forming a new organization, the NVBK, in the region of Antwerp. Going forward there would be four ring organizations in Belgium, the increasingly prosperous NVBK Verbond focused in the Dutch speaking Flemish region which would predominate. *Societe Royale Saint-Hubert*, the FCI national club, carries

on, but its ring program became a shell of what it had been, a dwindling list of old judges and trainers. *Kennel Club Belge* (Belgian Kennel Club) was focused the Wallonian provinces to the south and greatly in decline after more than a half century of service. The fourth organization was German Shepherd oriented in the more German speaking far eastern end of the country, and not a factor in this story, or much of anything else.

For Destailleur the handwriting was on the wall, for the Wallonians were being marginalized in Belgian ring and the future was uncertain. In one of those pivotal moments of fate his eyes turned south to France and the rest, as they say, became history. Destailleur focused on the French Ring, then German Shepherd dominated and with dogs going entirely to the upper body. Since Ring clubs needed to be French based, he established a club in Wattrelos, although actual training apparently commenced on Belgian soil. On this base he would revolutionize the dog sport of France.

The irony is deep, and on many levels. A group of disgruntled Flemings in the vicinity of Antwerp broke off from the SRSB, the FCI Belgian national canine organization, and launched an independent structure, the NVBK, to run their own trials and registry, which has gone on to remarkable success. But there was a collateral effect, for this also set in motion a chain of events in which French Ring would be turned on its head by a Belgian breeder and trainer.

In this way the NVBK revolution in Belgium was the proximate cause of something even larger and more world transforming, the establishment of the modern French Ring Sport. But of course leadership from beyond their own culture was not a new story for the French, for Napoleon Bonaparte was in a cultural and original linguistic sense Italian.

Over time Destailleur became established as a competitor, breeder, agitator and judge. A likeminded circle of friends evolved, most especially a young agitator, fast, creative, passionate, André Noël, whose kennel was *de la Noaillerie*. Through the influence of these friends he began to produce articles for the canine magazines and promote a new style of helper work, one based on evasion and demanding that for success the dogs go to the legs. This began to take hold, and Destailleur was ready with the new equipment for the new sport. Before long those Frenchmen not content to be relegated to the club trials went north for dogs, for the Malinois, and to learn these strange new ways. By the end of the 1970's the transition was well advanced, the German Shepherd was on the way to being just another secondary breed scrambling for scraps of glory at the club trials, while the Malinois went on to yearly drink deeply from the cup.

Destailleur, like all great men, was a man of luck, under the protection of the gods. For at the very moment he chose to literally walk into a neighboring nation and rearrange their national dog sport to his convenience and liking the advent of very light, strong, flexible materials was making possible the ring suits on which this revolution was founded.

With these new suits, and a strong emphasis on quickness, evasion and agility in the work, the decoy became the dog's adversary, expected to detect and exploit any weaknesses in the individual dog, rather than to present a uniform picture to each dog. And, of course, a star in his own right.

Over the past several years the Malinois has in increasing numbers been predominating at high places of international IPO, Schutzhund and other competition, sneaking in and eating the lunch which had always been set out for the German Shepherd. I note this with a certain gratification, not only on behalf of the Malinois, but also for the long-term benefit of the German Shepherd, which has in many lines lessened in intensity and physique because of the influence of the show ring, because the brothers of Judas held power in the SV. Schutzhund and IPO were

created by and for the German Shepherd, and Malinois domination can only mean that this noble breed is in decline.

To what shall we attribute this change, this transformation of the working dog scene in France, the first among many advances of the Malinois into territory always the private domain of the German Shepherd?

There is a temptation to speculate that a factor in this tide of Malinois enthusiasm reflects a disinclination to things German as a consequence of centuries old animosity and two devastating world wars. This would not be the least bit remarkable for a man such as Destailleur, who spent the war years evading the Nazi police, where only one inadvertent incident could have meant capture and being sent to the front or forced labor and never returning, as was the fate of so many of the young men of Belgium, friends and neighbors, and so many working dog lines created through such sacrifice and devotion. In my own personal experience, Edmee Bowles, pioneer of the Bouvier des Flandres in America, driven out of her Belgian homeland with but one dog, the rest abandoned to the mercy of the German invaders, came to despise the Germans and everything German throughout her long life. While this sort of thing has faded away over time, this was not the least bit unusual in this era.

But there is much more to this. The general view of the German Shepherd community would be along the lines of the Malinois coming to the forefront because the French, with some help from a clever Belgian, more or less stacked the deck, not because the Malinois is necessarily superior. The Shepherd is from his foundations a more massive and powerful dog, so the best Malinois are always going to beat the best German Shepherds at French Ring. And to breed German Shepherds to win in this ring would be to abandon their heritage, to try and make them something they are not and were never intended to be.

Michel Hasbrouck – a well-respected French trainer, writer and advocate for French Ringsport – has a slightly different view. This is not in any way the rant of some rabid Malinois fan boy, for Mr. Hasbrouck is a man with passion for the German Shepherd, which he took into the Ring for many years. This is his commentary, by private communication:

"The Malinois wins because the breed selection is different, based on the German created 'Confirmation' way.

At the minimum age of one year, German Shepherds are evaluated by a conformation judge who eventually dismisses them for breeding if they suffer from determined and sometimes minor-in-the-eyes-of-trial-trainers problems (missing teeth, long hair for GSDs, saddle backs, and so on).

But, in 1983, the French Berger Belge Club president decided that a Ring III dog was worth a 42 teeth dog, and conformation judges were compelled to grant the Confirmation to all excellent working Malinois. This way (working) champion dogs could produce registered dogs, the only ones allowed at French Ring trials.

In the same time, world GSD clubs went on refusing Confirmation to trial champions GSDs, arguing about their hair, legs or backs. As for other shepherd breeds, working lines died away.

More than this, GSDs suffer from hip dysplasia, and lots of premium rate working dogs die from bloat.

When you spend 3,000 hours training for Ring 3, and you discover your dog can no longer jump, you start thinking Malinois...

It is now far easier to find a working line in Malinois than in any other breed. The main advantage of Ringsport Malinois bloodlines is their ability to sustain training. To stay burning, witty, obedient, even after a severe punishment or a long training session."

An in depth understanding of this requires knowledge of the structure of the French canine world, where each national breed club sets up a system under which young dogs can be "confirmed " and thus become eligible for breeding by meeting standards for structure, type and character, similar to the Koer classification system for the German Shepherd in the mother land. In order to participate in the French Ring, a dog must have a valid national Registration, which means that no matter how great a dog is his progeny cannot go on to compete unless the national breed club grants its blessing.

But in France, and in Belgium, this took an ugly turn. I will mention the situation for the Bouvier des Flandres, of which I have some experience, but which is typical of all the other breeds but one. The French Bouvier club is in the hands of conformation dilatants with only lip service to character. Their character requirement is a "unique to the special qualities of the Bouvier" character test in which all dogs pass, no matter how timid, except those who show any real aggression. In Belgium I was present in person to see a famous Bouvier breeder – not Chastel – take a bitch in for such a test. The requirement is that the dog engage the man in the suit, make actual contact, and this bitch simply would not engage. Finally, this famous man simply picked her up and touched the suit, and thus passed. The helper averted his eyes, and to this day I wonder whether it was to avoid threatening the poor animal, or out of personal shame for what he was participating in.

Under this system, many exceptional working dogs, including imported dogs with perfectly good registration in their country of origin, can be and are denied by a self-centered cabal of breeders in control of the national club, who prefer to go on pretending that their dogs are of working character.

But there is a major exception. In France, where the gate to the Ring requires the blessing of the breed club, the national Belgian Shepherd club, which includes the Malinois, club broke ranks and dictated that the successful Ring competitors be confirmed automatically, which is most certainly a major factor in their success.

In numerical terms in 2008, of 2640 dogs competing in French Ring, there were 1583 Malinois followed by 661 German Shepherds, 128 Tervuerens, 63 Beaucerons and 55 Rottweilers. But numbers can be deceptive, for the 128 Tervuerens were likely in many or most instances long hairs from Malinois litters or lines with heavy Malinois influence.

The reality is that French Ring is two sports, where the top level Malinois strive for glory in the various qualification events leading to the Cup finals, leaving the scraps, titles in the less demanding club level trials, for the lesser breeds.

A vaguely patronizing feature of the Cup rules reserves one or two places, of the thirty, to an alternate breed. But on occasion an exceptional dog of another breed, a Beauceron or Bouvier des Flandres, will defy the odds and qualify in the selection trials on their own merits rather than through a patronizing exception in the rules. Even here, there is a certain place for irony. The Bouvier des Flandres Tulasne de la Genesis, owned and trained by Jean Marie Denece, was such a dog. Now one would perhaps assume that the French Bouvier community would take heart, and perhaps encouragement. But the fly in the ointment was that this Tulasne was a dog of pure Dutch police breeding, from lines looked down upon and despised by the French elite – they actually like to call themselves by such words – as low class and foreign. These French dilatants paid a little lip service and went right back to pretending that

their dogs really were capable, and proving it in their pathetic character tests and breed certifications. Although I have not experienced it for myself, my impression is that things are pretty much the same in the Beauceron world, both breeding communities produce a few specimens that can squeak through at a club level trial but fail to take the steps necessary for real working credibility.

The 2008 French Ring trial results listing has a little over 500 events, with popular dates indicating ten or fifteen concurrent trials across the nation. There is no doubt that French Ring is a vital, thriving community with a strong heritage and ever increasing levels of performance.

In spite of a lot of publicity, smoke and mirrors, French Ring has failed to gain any traction in the rest of the world. There are no doubt a number of factors for this, but the primary one would seem to be a simple matter of breed recognition.

Schutzhund prospered in America because the German Shepherd Dog has always been hugely popular here, based primarily on the image of the strong, noble canine police service. Americans could easily relate to the German Schutzhund, take pride in the roots of their own dogs in this background, regardless of the reality of their actual potential. If they became interested and found their dog wanting, the Schutzhund judge from the last trial or a breeder with German lines was quick to offer an upgrade.

Rottweilers, Dobermans and to a lesser extent Boxers and Giant Schnauzers also benefited from and contributed to this enthusiasm. And you could go to Germany and buy a run of the mill titled dog and become an instant player and authority on American Schutzhund fields.

But very few Americans owned a Malinois and even fewer were inclined to buy a funny looking dog, suspiciously like a really run down, inferior German Shepherd, to play in a novel sport. I mean, what does the Malinois have to compare to the appeal of Rin Tin Tin? In addition, there were a lot of Germans living in America and traveling from Germany to promote the sport and the breed, and not incidentally themselves.

On the whole the French have been at best lukewarm about the whole thing – at one point there were grand announcements about becoming the "International Ring," but a year or so later the words French Ring reappeared on the various web sites.

When you inquire as to the nature of French Ring with an advocate the likely response is to compare it to the martial arts, is done for itself alone, wherever higher levels of elegance, power and skill are sought for their own intrinsic worth. But in the real world there ultimately is a need to produce dogs capable of excellence in police work, and this is increasingly a matter of the olfactory capability, the search, tracking and substance detection applications that are more and more the foundation of police applications. I will not pretend to have answers to these dilemmas of the modern world, for ultimately it is more relevant to identify the crucial questions and hope that men of sincerity can find relevant answers.

In addition to the French Ring sport, conducted on an enclosed trial field, usually some sort of stadium, there is also a similar trial system conducted in more open and natural settings, that is, Campagne, which translates as "country."

Although currently much less popular than Ring, Campagne has a long history. In 2009 their website listed 41 clubs distributed across France and 17 judges, compared to 85 for Ring sport and 51 for Mondioring, with a lot of overlap.

France on the whole has played a relatively minor role in the evolution of the police dog. Their native herding dogs, such as the Beauceron and Picardy Shepherd, have withered on the vine, while foreign breeds, early on the German Shepherd and later the Malinois, have been predominant on their sport fields.

Although French Ring was for many years dominated by the German Shepherd, beginning in the 1960's the Malinois came to own the upper echelon, which is a world unto itself with perhaps the most purely sporting character, in the good sense, of any modern system. Perhaps because they have had no native breed to promote, and the consequent national pride, they have been much less successful in projecting their dogs, trial system and canine culture beyond their own borders. The French people as a whole have been disinterested, preferring the German Shepherds and later the Rottweilers, over their own native breeds and the Malinois, which has never been popular outside of working circles anywhere in the world. While the sporting spirit of French Ring is in general admirable, the world also has a need of well-rounded lines of police dogs, and increasingly this means dogs capable of searching, tracking and substance detection, that is, dual or multipurpose dogs. The fact that French Ring ignores this olfactory capability is a serious limitation in the evolution of functional police capable lines. For these historical reasons, the French have had much less influence on worldwide police deployment practice than the Germans, Belgians or Dutch.