

House Divided

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From: The Police Dog: History, Breeds and Service, Chapter 1

From the beginning these robust police breeds became immensely popular with large segments of the civilian population, grounded on the common propensity to identify with the robust, masculine, powerful persona. Many of these people were and are perfectly capable of such dogs, taking on the responsibility to manage them, integrate them into a world of children, neighbors and others requiring a certain amount of responsibility, control and discipline.

The advent of these breeds is reminiscent of the performance cars coming out of Detroit in the 1960s and early 70s, many virtually racetrack ready. But such cars were temperamental, quasi track level cars often less than entirely suited to the street, and in need of being driven with restraint and control, generally far below their potential. A few notoriously required as much time tinkering as driving to keep them running under the tight rein of the street. This presented a problem for the automotive executives, for there was immense money to be made. The solution was quite simple: bring out models with racing stripes, spoiler wings and evocative trade names such as *Gran Turismo*, *Charger* or *Grand Prix* but with only modest enhancements under the hood; they sold by the millions and were enormously profitable.

In a similar way, many supposed working dog breeders began to produce softer, less demanding dogs for those desiring the persona but not quite up to the reality. Just as there is immensely more demand for pretend racing cars than real racing cars, there have always been many more homes for pseudo police dogs than real police dogs; and people ready to pay good money. The result has been the division of these breeds into the serious working lines and the show and play lines for the less sophisticated and able segments of the public. The major exception to this has been the Belgian Malinois, which has never had any real popularity as a companion or show dog.

Nothing could illustrate the debasement of these show and play lines more surely than the AKC conformation show ring, where pathetic creatures presented as German Shepherds slink around the ring, hardly able to stand upright when brought to a trembling halt. Those attempting to train such dogs invariably find them deficient in the confidence, enthusiasm and fortitude that were the hallmark of the breed, the very reason for its creation. Even though the German Shepherd is known as the police dog in the common vernacular, it is difficult to find a specimen from American lines capable of serving credibly in a police role or passing a Schutzhund trial, and they are not prominent at a competitive level in AKC obedience.

Even more egregious, over the past thirty years this debasement has also become increasingly apparent in the German show lines: rather than the Germans gradually influencing American breeders to take on higher standards the American disease, in the form of American money, has corrupted much of Shepherd breeding in Germany. In stark contrast, the German Shepherds coming from the better European working lines, often from other nations such as the Czech Republic or Belgium, regularly produce individuals with the potential for excellence, exhibiting trainability, working willingness, suitable aggression and confidence.

Many find all of this contrary to ordinary common sense; quite naturally believe that since the dogs look alike the character and the adaptability for work or training must also be present throughout the breed. Show breeders, European as well as American, encourage this mythology, minimize the fact that the working potential is

primarily a function of the genetic makeup. Their sales pitch is to the effect that if one is going to expend so much money and work in training he might just as well have a beautiful dog out of their champion lines, implying that genetic background is a secondary factor in training success. None of this is true, but it is the foundation of the breed sales propaganda, to the overall detriment of these breeds.

This kennel club propaganda is so insidious that most of us insist upon learning from direct personal experience. Many years ago, in the later 1970s, we bought a young German Shepherd male, mostly because like so many others I had grown up with a fascination with police dogs and because my wife Kathy wanted a better dog for obedience training. The dog came from a show breeder, at a time when we had absolutely no idea that such distinctions existed, and would likely not have believed had we been warned.

According to the plan Kathy started tracking the dog, and I became the chief criminal suspect, to be searched for in the fields and woods. Normal tracks became much too boring, and the dog tended to go fast, so I took to trying to throw him off by taking big jumps to the side, doing acute turns, going over fences and through ditches and anything else I could think of. The only rules were that I could not cross back over the track or walk on the rail across the ditch, because the dog would try to follow and slip off. The more I challenged this dog the greater his enthusiasm and drive in finding me.

By the time the dog got the AKC tracking title he had become essentially my dog, so my wife gave him to me and went off to find the Bouvier she wanted in the first place.¹ So this young German Shepherd and I, knowing absolutely nothing, started going along on obedience training night, and the dog progressed remarkably. It was not all that long before we took the dog to a big Shepherd obedience trial specialty where, much to my surprise, we came in third overall and took home a huge trophy. We got the CD with more impressive trophies, and shortly thereafter the dog died from Parvovirus, which we had never heard of, within twelve hours of the onset of symptoms; a truly sad story.

We of course went looking for another Shepherd, ran into some of the German lines which were just beginning to be promoted, and decided it was bunk and went back to the original breeders for another dog. The new dog was much more expensive, was promoted in terms of high-level show potential and was impressive in appearance.

The problem was, when we went off to training nothing happened. In obedience, on the recall, he would get up and amble toward you, had no interest in tracking and basically was a mild mannered, laid back, fairly dull dog. When he was in the van with the doors open on one side and something of interest on the other, he could not figure out he could go out the door behind him. We were just looking into Schutzhund and the Kathy's new Bouvier replacement dog, Tory, did just fine, but the Shepherd would kind of bite like he was doing you a favor and could we please go home now. The Shepherd people in the Schutzhund club tended to show a pained look on their face, which I did not understand at the time, but to their credit said nothing negative about the dog, which was sold shortly thereafter.

What is the morale of this little story? We started to look seriously into lines and discovered that the first dog was mostly out of good recent German import working lines, and the second dog was of the best American show lines, meaning he was bred incredibly tight on then currently fashionable American conformation winners.

This experience was my introduction to working dogs, and has served me well. Why was a novice trainer able to come in third out of a hundred or so German Shepherds at a well-established Shepherd obedience club with many experienced

¹ I have never quite known how premeditated this was.

trainers? This was a real mystery, for I was a very ordinary novice as a trainer, could see that there were much better trainers at our obedience club. It took a certain amount of time to realize it, and even longer to believe it. But the fact was and is that the trainers at the obedience club were working German Shepherds out of American show lines, competing with one hand tied behind their backs, and that their dogs were on the whole of very limited potential compared to what the Shepherd was intended to be. So that is the story of how I wound up taking home the big trophy at my very first obedience trial. And this was just the preview of coming attractions, for we had yet to venture forth to see the perverts that we had been warned about at the local Schutzhund club.

In reality the vast majority of dogs going into police service, regardless of breed, are imported or bred out of European working lines, today mostly German Shepherds and Malinois. The reasons for this are that, overall, such dogs are much more trainable and reliable than dogs out of show lines, European or American. The most fundamental truth of working dog breeding is that when working intensity and willingness is not incessantly a factor in breeding selection, it quickly withers.

My observation over the years is that twenty to twenty five percent of Americans seeking a purebred companion or family dog are looking for some sort of protection or police style dog to project the desired image. The German Shepherd, for many reasons, good as well as bad, has been the most popular of these, and the rise, and subsequent fall, of the Rottweiler went hand in hand with the decline of the Doberman. On the whole these people have been mostly satisfied, found friends and neighbors sufficiently impressed and the dogs on the whole relatively easy to deal with. Breeders found that dumbing down and diluting the character of the dogs reduced customer problems, made good business sense and made their breeding stock much easier to deal with. Nobody seemed to notice that they had been given replicas, like the macho man cars with racing stripes and nothing special under the hood.

Thus the vast majority of police breed dogs offered for sale are not in terms of character and drives working dogs, in spite of the reassurances of breeders. On the whole they are perhaps not yet as deficient as the American Shepherds, but they are a long way down the dismal road. Most dogs coming out of show lines today, in Europe as well as America, are seriously deficient in the fundamental attributes of intelligence, working willingness, confidence and courage. They are this way for the same reason that the American Shepherds are so deficient, because they have been bred without regard for character, or often in fact selected for a low intensity character.

There is a tendency to think this perception of the divergence of the lines to work and show is recent, and an esoteric concern of those with an over the edge or extreme in insistence on working character, of relatively little relevance to the normal or rank and file breeders and trainers.

But no one could be more in the mainstream than those involved with Dorothy Eustis in the famous Fortunate Fields breeding and research program in Switzerland, leading up to the American Seeing eye movement and the guide dog for the blind school at Morristown, New Jersey. In their 1934 report summary, Humphrey and Warner, leaders of the program, comment:

"It will be remembered that at the turn of this century the German Shepherd as a breed began to split into two strains. The one produced beautiful dogs, including *all* the show winners. The other produced working dogs, including *all* the working champions. No dog of the championship strains born since 1909 has produced winners in *both* show and working classes. Thus the cleavage is complete."
(Humphrey & Warner, 1934) p226

Even in these founding years, with the ringing words of von Stephanitz, still alive, demanding character and working capability, the prestige and money gravitated to those who did the minimum for work, sought glory in the politics of the conformation ring. Ultimately, excellent working dogs are only produced by those whose highest personal priority is working excellence. In the early years of the American awakening many, even I, endorsed slogans such as "We can have it all," "One breed" or "The Golden Middle." But thirty years of experience, during which my breed approached ever closer to the abyss, has shown these slogans were and are blatant falsehoods, for in the end such programs always lead to mediocrity, at the very best, in working character.

Mediocrity is not enough.

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