

Police Dog Requisites

Jim Engel

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

Dogs serve so well in so many diverse roles because of the enormous range and pliability of physique and character attributes inherent in their genetic heritage. Men have for innumerable generations and centuries been creating, through breeding selection, intentional and inadvertent, dogs that are massive and powerful, lean and swift or small and appealing according to the requirements of a specific service, be it hunting, guarding or lap dog. This is not selection in the classic evolutionary sense of random genetic mutations bringing forth novel attributes, for that process is much too slow; we have done this sort of thing over and over during the past ten or twenty thousand years. Little or nothing fundamental has been created by mankind; breeding selection brings forth latent attributes, present in the original canine genetic base even if not evident in the phenotype, to produce dogs with the potential at birth to excel in a specific role. The genetic potential is there, all we do is adjust parameters through breeding selection.

Over much of history selection was not in the sense of physically isolating the in season female and providing access to a human selected male, but rather a process of females breeding to the available dogs, as in a herding environment, and men selecting from the pups according to utility and preference which are to be valued, protected and fed preferentially and which are to be treated less favorably, pushed out or selectively culled.

Thus we are able create specialist lines and breeds in relatively short time spans because the essential canine propensities and characteristics are and were latent in the rootstock, available to be brought forward and stabilized, be it directly from the wolf or through an intermediate species. As an example, all dogs have potential for instinct driven hunting or prey seeking, but this can be latent and submerged as in the Toy Poodle or active and intense as in the better specimens of the herding or police breeds.

Nobody trains a Mastiff and takes it to the Greyhound track, but people sometimes are foolish enough to train dogs of hunting breeds or lines whose progenitors left the hunting field generations ago or German Shepherds from American lines not tested in the crucible of the trial or service since the ancestors were imported from Germany, perhaps disposed of because found wanting in the home land. Yet the one is just as absurd as the other.

Sports cars and dump trucks are both vehicles with an engine, four wheels, or at least wheel sets on four corners, a steering wheel and a driver's seat. If you have enough money for fuel you can drive any of them to Las Vegas, at least if you start in North America. But if you go to the gravel yard and have the nice man dump a yard of road bed gravel into the side seat of your sports car or enter your dump truck into a sports car rally you are going to be disappointed, and all of the driving skill in the world is not going to make one bit of difference. The same principle applies to dogs. One can train the right German Shepherd to sort of point or retrieve, and an occasional Chesapeake Bay Retriever will pass a Schutzhund trial, but on the whole this sort of thing is going to be a lot of work, a little flat and mundane once the novelty wears off and very unlikely to provide the personal satisfaction of top level competition or service.

The typical domestic dog is in general smaller, less aggressive and much less suspicious than the wolf, all necessary adaptations for integration into human social structures. Skull and teeth are diminished in terms of relative proportions and

absolute size. The creation of the police or protection breed demands that some of this be recovered, that is, there was a need to produce candidates in general larger, with the more robust teeth, a more powerful bite and more dominance and aggression than the typical house or farm yard dog. Such dogs are of course more expensive in terms of maintenance – require more food, room, exercise and discipline – than the village scavengers and thus by nature are less well adapted as pet dogs or dogs in the hands of the population at large. Most of the problems ordinary people have with police style dogs today have roots in these breeding enhancements creating the more robust and aggressive dog necessary for police service. This is the fundamental paradox of police dog breeding: in spite of all the propaganda in support of pet sales only limited segments of the population are willing and able to effectively deal with strong specimens from such breeds. This is why these breeds are so often emasculated and why they are inexorably divided into pet lines, replicas if you will, and those truly capable of high level police service.

By adapting lines of dogs through breeding selection as sheep guardians, herders or police dogs the useful propensities are selected for and enhanced and those that are deleterious are suppressed, first through selection and then through training and conditioning. But this is an age-old process, likely commenced informally by selecting, encouraging and supporting the better workers among random breedings and neglecting, pushing out or culling the less useful dogs, a process operational for generations and centuries before men began making specific breeding selections and then later the invention of formal breeds and studbooks.

When the need for police and military dogs in the modern sense was becoming increasingly compelling in the middle to later 1800s the use of the herders was not preordained, for they were still in the fields and pastures, did not yet exist as breeds. The various mastiff style dogs, massive estate guardians with roots extending back to ancient war dogs, would have been obvious candidates. Diverse breeds including Airedale Terriers and English Collies had their advocates and were worked with before the various northern European herders were even in existence as formal breeds.

But ultimately the tending style herders had the right stuff, the requisite combination of moderate size, agility, stamina, trainability, olfactory acuteness and especially the restrained aggressive nature necessary to defend with vigor, but resist being drawn away in the chase, leaving the herd or flock unguarded. The massive size and more overt aggression of the Molossers, the ancient style of war dog, was not what was needed for police patrol in expanding urban factory and working class districts at the turn of the twentieth century.

The emergence of the practical police dogs and the formal police breeds, such as the German Shepherd or the Malinois, was concurrent; these trends were opposite sides of the same coin. But almost from the beginning there was a disconnect, once formal breeding began increasing majorities of these incipient police breeds were being selected for the show ring rather than according to the actual needs of the police officer. The political structures – the establishments – of the breed clubs were increasingly in hands which saw money, prestige and power in show ring glory. These men, these brothers of Judas, were right about money, prestige and power; but they were and are wrong about police dogs.

Even today Malinois of the Dutch police community are often without formal pedigree – are what they do on the trial field and in service. This community is quite willing to blend in an overly aggressive dog to reinvigorate a line or a larger mastiff style dog for more size; the trials and training decisions inevitably serve to discard what does not contribute to working excellence. Just as the Scotsman with his Border Collie is not concerned about the purity of the lines, if it can herd, get along

with the other dogs and is healthy and robust it is a Border Collie and all of the scribbling on kennel club record books means exactly nothing.

Just as the cowboy of the American west could be light or dark – Negro, Caucasian or Hispanic – dogs throughout time have been what they do, not who their ancestors were. The breed in the kennel club sense, with the closed gene pool, is a European invention less than two hundred years old, a twinkling of the eye in the time scale of genetic evolution. As can so clearly be seen in the plague of genetic defects and structural absurdities in the show breeds, and all of the medical screening tests, this is evolving into a self-limiting genetic fiasco.

American Doberman and German Shepherd advocates, particularly the show elements, tend to disparage what they like to refer as mongrels and half-breeds, such as the lines of the KNPV trainers. But the Doberman is a genetic disaster no longer even considered for serious police or military service and the useful German Shepherds are increasingly from working lines on the fringes of the mainstream, increasingly distinct from the show lines. This is true not only in North America but in Germany as well. Where thirty years ago most of the Schutzhund podium places were reserved for the German Shepherd, today the Shepherd predominates only in his breed specific trials; in open competition increasingly the Malinois is enjoying his lunch, and police departments, even in Germany, are looking to this Flemish breed.

Ultimately the pragmatic concept that a dog is what he does on the field, and especially in actual service, will prevail. The incessant demand for the exported KNPV dog worldwide, and the increasing price, demonstrates this and belies the kennel club concept of the purebred, the pseudo purity of the arbitrarily closed gene pool. This does not mean that we cannot or will not have breeds such as the German Shepherd or Malinois with commonality of appearance and demeanor as well as working character, but it does mean that in the long term it will be necessary to bring whatever is needed from wherever it can be found into the lines to maintain vigor, working drives and genetic diversity. This is how men have bred serious dogs according to real needs for untold centuries, and will continue to do so in the future. The concept of the purebred and the closed gene pool and conformation beauty shows of the pseudo elite kennel clubs will wither in the face of practical reality, the performance of the dog in service. Mankind has always selected dogs according to performance and only later thought of the resulting body of breeding stock as a breed, and those in need of actual working stock will always select in this way.

In an earlier era of Greeks and Romans, before the advent of firearms and armored knights on horseback, the war dog as an actual combatant, where the power to bite and attack was the inherent reason for the dog, was at least to some extent of practical battlefield utility. At the turn of the twentieth century, about 1900, the police dog was introduced for urban patrol, often in factory or working class districts, where, especially at night, the police officer was alone, often unarmed, and out of touch, with only his baton for defense and his whistle to summon help. In this environment the patrol dog as a partner for the officer on foot patrol served primarily for his aggressive capability, to fight beside the officer if necessary, to change the dynamics of the street encounter. Even a pistol was neutral, could be taken and used against the officer; but there was no way to turn the well-trained dog, injury to his partner was only likely to enrage him further. There was very little mention of substance, drug or explosive, detection in this era, although the ability of the dog provide timely warning of an adversary through his olfactory capability, hearing or sensitive night vision was of fundamental importance.

Today the police officer patrols in a radio-equipped squad car with a high capacity side arm and often a virtual arsenal in the trunk or on the gun rack. Sophisticated computer driven portable radio networks extend officer communication beyond the vehicle to the streets and wherever else duty calls. The dog is confined in the back

area an SUV or squad car, and while available for officer security, and sometimes important in this role, it is no longer the primary purpose. When the Navy SEAL team went in to take out Osama bin Laden they were heavily armed with devastating modern weaponry, the Malinois was not there to bite or fight, he was there to intimidate the civilian population outside the compound, to control the field of action with minimal risk or resources. In the Iraq or Afghanistan engagements, carried out primarily on the streets and against a foe indistinguishable from the civilian population, the primary function of the dogs was search, warning of potential adversaries and explosive detection. Winning hearts and minds among a civilian population much less sympathetic to the dog as a personal companion renders the use of aggression for intimidation and control problematic, a double-edged sword.

Beyond the technical advances in firearms, vehicle use and modern radio communications the scope of police responsibility has expanded enormously because of societal demands for the suppression of recreational drug traffic and the necessity of countering increasingly sophisticated organized crime operations with international reach and expanding terrorist threats, also sophisticated and international in scope.

Thus in modern police service the olfactory potential – the ability to search, track and for substance detection – has come to predominate, to be as or more important than the ability to fight and bite. For this reason it has become increasingly essential that these olfactory capabilities be emphasized in breeding, selection and training, along with the aggressive potential.

Police canine structural and character requirements have evolved over time, influencing training doctrine and methodology, breed preference and the expectations of control and restraint of the dog. In the early years physical intimidation in support of the foot patrol officer was a primary purpose and in surveying surviving photos and descriptions we see a great deal of variation in size and appearance. The modern dog in general needs to be agile and small enough to get in and out of standard patrol vehicle configurations, healthy and durable enough to provide a reasonable service life in return for increasingly large investments in the candidate dogs and training, and stable and social enough to function in the presence of civilians, diverse police personnel and other dogs.

The predominance of the tending style herding breeds, especially those of the Low Countries and Germany, in contemporary police service is a consequence of the age old guardian role with the flock or herd, discipline in the aggression, the propensity to break off the engagement and remain with the livestock when the marauding predator withdrew and the olfactory competence inherent in the need for predator detection and seeking out lost animals. These powerful, agile dogs of medium size, developed over centuries in the livestock tending role, live on in spite of the fact that their age-old herding function has largely passed into history.

As we have seen, good police or protection dogs must be born and then made. The founders of these breeds have created, through a long process of incessant selection and testing, lines of dogs with good expectation of the robust, athletic physical form and moral attributes such as aggression and courage necessary in a serious police patrol style dog. Just buying any dog of a particular breed, that is, any German Shepherd out of the newspaper or off the internet, is not sufficient, indeed in many situations is little better than going down to the pound and picking out a dog who looks like he might like to bite.

The problem is that all of these breeds have many litters produced casually for profit, for show ring results or simply to make money. In all breeds – with the exception of the Malinois – the typical or average puppy is simply not very good because it is not out of a real working line.

And every puppy is a gamble, for some pups out of the best combinations are, through the simple random processes of genetic diversity, going to be born without

the basic physiological make up to become good protection or police dogs. Much can be done by observing and testing the puppy, but this only enhances the likelihood of a suitable adult dog, does not produce certainty. At the end of the day, every puppy is a gamble, a roll of the dice and all we can do is load the dice in our favor. It is for this reason that many advanced trainers and police training programs purchase young dogs from fifteen months to two years of age, so that they can see a hip X-ray and other physical and medical conditions and can accurately evaluate the character of the dog. There is a much bigger price for such a dog, but generally it is a worthwhile investment for those with sufficient experience and need.

When my personal canine involvement commenced in the latter 1970s there were a number of breeds – including the Doberman Pincher, the Rottweiler and the Bouvier des Flandres – that had been intended historically as police and military service breeds, were generally perceived in these roles and had honorable service histories.¹ Although it was not obvious at the time, and advocates of each of these breeds did their utmost to preserve and protect the legacy, all were rapidly declining as serious police dogs in terms of number in service and the vigor and prominence of serious working lines.

In the early years of the American working movement, primarily Schutzhund, advocates for each of these breeds emerged, determined to create an ongoing American tradition and community, each represented at the foundation of the American Working Dog Federation in 1986. Over the years these early aspirations faltered, and these breeds are in decline as service and working dogs. Today's reality is that actual police dogs are German Shepherds and increasingly the Malinois, the others falling by the wayside.

It is true that there are individuals of these secondary breeds in service here or there, but these are fading exceptions, transient occurrences: often little more than a photo of a dog with a man in a police uniform, portrayed as a police dog but upon in reality not actually deployed or making street engagements. Sometimes trained dogs are donated, and there is more diversity among the single purpose detection dogs, a noble service but not the image projected by the concept of police dog. Today the American military deploys only German, Dutch and Belgian Shepherds – the Malinois – and most mainstream police programs worldwide have similar practices. No one could regret this more than I do, but at this point in history it is beyond any possible rational denial.

Although the focus of this discussion has been on the protection aspects of the dog it cannot be emphasized enough that the olfactory capabilities and willingness for the tracking, search or substance detection are also a product of breeding and must be part of the selection process, for there are 100 tracking points in Schutzhund and most police dogs must be capable of dual service, that is able to search and capable of substance detection. And it is understood that working willingness to become an obedient partner is the foundation of all useful work.²

Copyright 2014 James R. Engel

[Angel's Lair All Breed](#) [Angel's Lair Schutzhund](#) [Police Dog Book](#)

¹ As a point of personal reference, I have been active in Schutzhund training for many years and have trained and titled one German Shepherd and numerous Bouviers, and also have observed other dogs and breeds in training over many years. Much of my commentary here will relate to my Bouvier des Flandres experience, but the same general trends have unfortunately prevailed for the other secondary breeds.

² This is not entirely true of the old style military sentry or guard dog, or the proverbial civilian junkyard dog, where acclimation to one handler and raw aggressiveness was enough, but such dogs and applications are now increasingly obsolete.

