

Schutzhund in America, the Early Years

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Across northern Europe the emergence of the formal police breeds went hand in hand with the evolution of the police dog trial, which was essential for ongoing breeding selection and as a means of evolving and perfecting training doctrine and practice. The police dog role emerged in the social mainstream, and vigorous protection components to these trials were accepted as a matter of course, as generally necessary and unremarkable.

American culture – under British influence – was fundamentally hostile to actual working dogs: protection applications especially were disparaged as low class and of questionable propriety, most certainly not something the respectable person would want to become associated with. Thus even though the European police breeds such as the German Shepherd and the Malinois were created and maintained through working trials, including vigorous protection exercises, in America the AKC never allowed performance requirements for breeding or the conduct of such trials by their breed clubs, nationally or locally, either as sporting events or as the prerequisite for breeding and registration.¹ Yet, in the spirit of the forbidden fruit, police style dogs were enormously attractive to a wide and diverse segment of the American population, as illustrated in the enormous surge in popularity of the German Shepherd following WWI.

As a consequence of this dichotomy the typical American breeder, marketing his dogs on the basis of their implied robust police persona, of necessity became the consummate salesman: when questioned as to whether their Shepherds or Dobermans had the potential for protection or police work they were somehow able to calmly and with a straight face claim that of course their dogs could be fearless defenders or exemplary police dogs, it was just a matter of a little training; which, of course, they never did quite get around to actually doing. The truth is that most of them had little or no idea what the original working dogs behind their watered down lines were capable of, for breeding such dogs without selection based on performance rapidly degenerates into passive, soft dogs, particularly when they discard breeding stock a little difficult to manage or which produced pups coming back as too much to handle.

While America always had a small cadre engaged in informal protection work and self-styled guard dog training, often with a drop off junkyard style protection dog service, and sporadic police department programs, often dying out within a few years of initiation, there were always among us those with a sense of something missing, the desire for better understanding and a more sophisticated approach. Thus a serious interest in the training, trialing and breeding began to gain critical mass in America in the 1970's, largely because of a growing interest in the Schutzhund trial.

¹ Shortly after the year 2000 the AKC began to realize that police style working trials and breeding were becoming well established, and began to relent, to seek to control and profit from what they could not prevent.

The Germans stood ready to help, for the enormous popularity of their protective breeds provided a natural outlet for the desire of individuals and breed communities in expanding influence and sales overseas. In addition there were significant numbers of Germans and people with a German heritage from neighboring lands, such as Czechoslovakia, in America, many having emigrated in the years after WWII, with personal knowledge of European ways, European contacts and the desire to recreate elements of this working culture in America.

Gernot Riedel was the self-proclaimed father of American Schutzhund, and there is little doubt that he was correct, or that he was a man of very little false modesty. Mr. Riedel was born in Czechoslovakia where he began training Bavarian border police dogs in 1946 for the American military. He was an active German Shepherd breeder and trainer, emigrating to the United States in 1955, settling in the San Francisco area. (Riedel, 1982) By all accounts, including his own, he was an outspoken and aggressive man who seldom bothered to look before making a leap, characteristics not especially unusual in a founder.

In 1958 Riedel was instrumental in the founding of the *Peninsula Police Canine Corps*, which was a group of bay area police trainers destined to become the oldest still existent American Schutzhund club. Riedel was active in procuring European dogs and the introduction of their training methods. From the beginning the focus had been on police training, but in 1971 there was a transition as Riedel put the emphasis on Schutzhund, bringing over the first German judge. Most of the police department trainers wanted to go on in the old way, and there was a split, with the word police being dropped from the name to reflect the new reality. In a 1982 Dog Sports magazine interview, Riedel was sharply critical of the departing police trainers, characterizing them as not interested in control, reliable outs, tracking or the other aspects of police service, but only in biting dogs. (Riedel, 1982)

In retrospect, this split in a seemingly minor training group was of enormous symbolic importance, for the separation of police canine activities from Schutzhund and other civilian training into two worlds more than anything else has retarded progress in America, predestined us to be second rate in breeding, training and especially police deployment even to this day.

Dr. Herbert Preiser in the Chicago area founded the *Northern Illinois Schutzhund Club* about 1969 and also a short-lived National Schutzhund Association. Preiser was instrumental in calling a meeting in Illinois in 1970 with the purpose of exploring national level organizations, which bore fruit in the next year. We, my wife Kathy and I, were members at *Northern Illinois* in the early 1980s, although by that time Preiser had become estranged from the group. We have fond memories of working with people such as Betty Sagen and Mike Lichtwalt, true pioneers in the sport, before the commercialization of recent years. I suppose everybody thinks in terms of the good old days as they become older, but I wish there were still places where young people with limited financial resources could be introduced into the working sports in such a congenial environment.

In 1971 Alfons Ertelt, Kurt Marti and a few others launched the North American Schutzhund Association. Although they almost immediately changed the name to the *North American Working Dog Association*, the NASA abbreviation was maintained. NASA's goal from the beginning was to differentiate themselves from the Europeans and work toward mainstream acceptance, with AKC affiliation a goal of many. The American Doberman Pincher Club was a charter NASA member and held out to become last-ditch supporters in the end. NASA was a purely American organization with no links to or affiliation with any European entity. They created their own set of rules and certified their own judges. Many felt that this was not real German

Schutzhund and that no one speaking English without a German accent could possibly be a real working dog authority. (Schellenberg, 1985)

The real sticking point was of course commercial, for there was a strong desire by potential German and American dog brokers to sell European titled dogs, many of them decidedly second rate, to Americans who could thus become players and overnight Schutzhund authorities. Ultimately the appeal of being really German was hard to resist, and NASA withered and eventually disappeared in the 1980's.

In 1975 the German DVG established a relationship with a group led by Dr. Dietmar Schellenberg in the New York area known as the *Working Dogs of America* or WDA, not to be confused with the WDA founded as a subservient organization to the American German Shepherd club a few years later. After a flurry of activity, this organization also experienced difficulty and its association with the DVG authorities in Germany came to an acrimonious end in 1979, closing another transient chapter in American Schutzhund history. (Schellenberg, 1985)

In the early to middle 1970s, the *German Shepherd Dog Club of America* (GSDCA) had begun some tentative Schutzhund activity under the leadership of Gernot Riedel. Several clubs, including the above-mentioned *Peninsula Police Canine Corps*, had become active. In 1975 the American Kennel Club cracked down hard on such activities, forcing the GSDCA to abandon its fledgling Schutzhund program. This precipitated a crisis, for there was growing activity and enthusiasm but a total lack of organization or supporting infrastructure. Shortly thereafter, the people involved in this aborted effort joined together with similar minded people in some other breeds and struck out on their own.

USCA, the Early Years

As a direct consequence of AKC repudiation of Schutzhund, there were meetings in California beginning in late 1975 that led to the foundation of the *United Schutzhund Clubs of America* (USCA) as a specifically German Shepherd entity with formal links to the SV, the mother club in Germany, thus providing access to German Schutzhund judges and Schutzhund titles with international recognition.

The fact that the words German Shepherd did not appear in the name and people with other breeds made up a substantial portion of the membership created confusion and strife that continues to this day. Although USCA conformation events and breed surveys, introduced a number of years later, are for German Shepherds only, other breeds have always participated in local training clubs, often self-styled as all breed, and Schutzhund trials. USCA quickly became the predominant working dog sport organization in America and within a few years was larger, and certainly more influential, than the AKC shackled GSDCA.

For the Germans, there was the good news and then there was the bad news. The good news was that they had become major players in American canine affairs. Though the focus in the beginning was on the Schutzhund trials, this connection was to be used as a wedge for German Shepherd conformation guidance in America, a way to bring in substantial numbers of German conformation judges to provide guidance and help, and of course to sell dogs and make money.

The bad news was that while the SV had become mother to a new organization, they already had a petulant child in the GSDCA through their world union link with that organization. This set the stage for struggle and strife that would go on well into the next century as each entity, that is, the SV, USCA and the GSDCA, played one against the other in a struggle for influence, control, power and of course money.

Overall the American Schutzhund movement has been marginally successful, but with a decline in numbers and cohesiveness beginning as we moved into the twenty first century. USCA, which formally came into existence in November of 1979, peaked out at about 5000 members about 2003 or 4, but fell off significantly to about 3500 members by 2013. (This was not uniquely a USCA phenomenon, as organizational vigor and numbers, amateur training activity and most significantly national puppy registrations have been falling off in Europe and America since the mid-1990s.) The good years featured an elaborate magazine, upwards of 150 clubs and a very strong judges program; the magazine came out on time, in a consistent format for many years and the judging program produced excellent American judges and an ever-increasing curve of better quality work and more consistent scoring. Although USCA is a German Shepherd organization, all breeds were allowed to participate in Schutzhund trials, but not breed surveys or conformation shows. Historically about a third of the USCA membership primarily trained a breed other than the German Shepherd, but they were living on borrowed time.

Beginning about 2005 serious problems began to emerge, with increasing SV commercial interference, declining membership and the overhead of an increasingly costly and overbearing bureaucracy, mostly created by the expense of the SV mandated support of their commercial breeders. The organization was forced by the conformation oriented SV establishment to become overtly hostile to other breeds, which was entirely in line with their commercial marketing strategy. After a period of relatively benign indulgence, life as a subservient German colony was becoming increasingly onerous.

The other Schutzhund organization active in America today was a result of political strife and a split from USCA in the early 1980s, resulting in the establishment of LV/DVG America as an American affiliated geographic region (Landesverband) of the DVG in Germany. Much smaller than USCA, DVG America is estimated to have about 400 current members. The first DVG American championship was in the Fall of 1981. DVG America was very strong in Florida, with virtually all USCA clubs going with the new DVG organization, loyal to a group of popular trainers and leaders, notably Phil Hoelcher, experiencing severe differences with the USCA leadership. The organizational support tended to be regional, with strength in St. Louis and the Los Angeles areas in addition to Florida among other places. As of 2014 total American DVG membership was 872.

This second coming of DVG operations in America, the result of a quarrel and split among Americans, turned out in many ways to be the opportunity to be under the thumb of a heavy handed German bureaucracy with well-established priorities: the interests of commercially oriented German judges, the most conspicuous carpet baggers of the era, German breeders and their own bureaucrats.

In the early years of the Schutzhund movement in America, in the 1970s and 80s, everything was new and exciting. Most of us had our beginnings in obedience of some sort, and protection training on the part of ordinary dog owners was virtually unknown, but an enticing prospect. The biting dogs of the era were mostly those in nightly drop off services of area protection dogs for commercial operations such as car dealerships and some personal protection training by commercial operations, often run by a German. In the AKC scheme of things man aggressive dogs were unmentionable, the forbidden fruit. Police dogs were few and far between, and their association in the public eye was in many ways with the fire hoses and riots in the south splashed across the evening news on national television. People expressing interest in biting dogs were admonished, told stories of evil dogs out of control like the scare stories used to make children behave. Even the European police style

breeds were suspect, the German Shepherd people to a large extent staying in their own little world of specialty shows, with their own elite group of judges and handlers, rather than the mainstream all-breed AKC shows. Within the AKC power structure care was taken to minimize evil influences, the Rottweiler was for instance denied a national club with its single delegate vote for years, even as it became one of the most popular and numerous breeds in America. When the *German Shepherd Dog Club of America* (GSDCA) began tentative, exploratory steps into the world of Schutzhund, the AKC power structure cracked down hard and formalized rules against even the most indirect link with protective dogs. In the early 1990s they became even more adamant and explicit in their opposition to any sort of protection activity.

In this environment, exploring the world of Schutzhund, even in the most tentative way, was like opening a door into the sunlight. Instead of the protective capability being the skeleton in the family closet, the original sin, it was openly an intrinsic and necessary aspect of the canine nature and strongly aggressive dogs were not only accepted but greatly admired.

Americans taking tentative steps into this training found that their obedience background provided a basis for their new sport, that there were no particularly mysterious skills to master. Those with tracking experience needed to deal with a new and controlled style of training, where details of the dog's performance rather than the simple finding of the object were scored; but that existing skill sets provided a solid foundation.

The protection work, however, was a new ball game. Security style training with the negative socialization, heavy reliance on pure defense and the pillow suit were of no use at all, and some of the military sentry style training of the era was equally inappropriate. Instead of fear based, non-discriminating aggression the Schutzhund dog was required to demonstrate control and restraint as well as aggression.

Moving on up into the new era meant adapting European ways and methods, and in that context this meant German Schutzhund style work, since the suit style work of KNPV and the various ring flavors was virtually unknown in America. Doing Schutzhund meant working with a few Germans resident in this country, spending time in Germany to learn or bringing over German judges and trainers. A few American service men took the opportunity of a tour of duty in Germany to develop some useful dog training skills.

Many Germans, and a little later Dutchmen and Belgians, were enormously helpful, supportive and sportsmanlike in the best meaning of the term. Most of us who achieved any level of success received enormous help from new European friends. Sure, there was the occasional judge or itinerant trainer on an ego trip, a few arrogant buffoons, and a few more who were and are primarily financially motivated. But in the big picture most of these European trainers and judges have been what they seemed to be, good people motivated to share their working dog culture and training in a truly sportsmanlike way.

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