

From Dog Sports Magazine October, 1986

Destailleur & "de Mouscronnais"

Stewart Hilliard

There is one man who is more than any other responsible for the evolution of the French Ring into its modern form. That man is Leon Destailleur and this is part of his story.

In 1946, Destailleur was 26 years old. He was a stocky, powerful young man with the broad, square face common among the peasants of Belgium and northern France. He lived then, and always, in Mouscronn, a town on the border of Belgium, in a small stone house in a narrow alley 30 feet from the tiny river called "Ri," which was the border.

He had spent the war years hiding from the Nazis, who would have sent him either to the forced labor battalions or to the Eastern Front to fight the Russians along with other Belgian conscripts. In order to live, he hid by day and smuggled tobacco across the border into France by night. Smuggling was a calling which came naturally to him, as it did to almost all of the young men raised in Mouscronn or any of the other border villages and towns.

In the depression-era days before the war smuggling approached the status of a major industry. Young men and boys scurried across the border laden with sugar, butter, cigarettes, and silk stockings. They jumped the ditch where the Ri trickled, or burrowed deep into the loads in the backs of trucks, and many of them sat hidden in the woods, whistling softly for the dogs who ghosted back and forth across the border carrying packs of light, valuable goods. For in those parts smugglers' dogs, too, were a tradition, and many blooded Malinois earned their keep jumping the Ri.

With the invasion and occupation of the Lowlands in May, 1940, by the German Wehrmacht, business became better than ever. Despite the militarization of the countryside and the presence of Nazi troops, not to mention a very considerable increase in the risks of being caught, nights on the border were busy.

Destailleur was evidently a good smuggler, and he weathered the years of war with "sang froid." He speaks of it now off-handedly, sitting with his guests over drinks in the immaculate wood-beamed dining room in the stone house in which he has lived all of his life.

He tells how, at the end of the war, and with astonishing speed, normal life was resumed. The working dog men of Belgium and northern France cleared the weed infested training fields, repaired the sagging jumps, and soon the dimly lit bars echoed again with their talk. The dogs which they had at that time to train were at best a motley crew, for at least 95 percent of their animals had been lost during the occupation, either to starvation or to the Wehrmacht, which requisitioned many fine dogs for military service. None of these animals were ever seen again. The loss was immeasurable. In many cases the efforts of 50 years of selective breeding for character by son, father, and grandfather were irretrievably lost.

It was therefore only with great luck that young Destailleur acquired his first bitch, a cart dog called "Silva," who became the foundation for 30 years of breeding "Malinois de Travail" (working Malinois). His kennel, which he later came to call "de Mouscronnais," was in its time probably the greatest kennel for working Malinois in Europe. For 10 years dogs surnamed "du Mouscronnais" totally dominated Ring competition in France.'

Before the coming of Destailleur, only German Shepherd Dogs played in the French Ring. The Malinois were primarily kept and bred in Belgium, although they were also well loved in the Netherlands. (The wellspring of the Malinois was, and still is, Flanders. The close ties of language and culture between the Flemish-speaking

natives of Belgium and the "Dutch" made it inevitable that Malinois would be imported to the Netherlands very early on in their development.)

However, in post-war France "Le Petit Berger Flamand" (the little Flemish shepherd, as he is called) was almost unknown. By 1970, less than 10 years after Destailleur began to train his dogs for the French Ring and to compete in France, his Malinois had all but swept the German Shepherd Dogs from the Ring. His early spectacular wins with his dogs brought French dog men flocking north to buy Mouscronnais dogs and they soon spread all across France. Almost all of the modern kennels for Malinois de Travail are either partially or completely founded upon the bloodline of Mouscronnais.

In addition, Destailleur was also the finest training director of his time, and from his little stone house in Belgium not only his dogs but also his ideas flowed south. More important than all of the others was one concept which came to totally redefine the French Ring and make it unique. This is how it happened.

In 1946, when Destailleur was first becoming involved in Ring in Belgium he used to take a German Shepherd that he had found somewhere to the clubs in his region to watch and to learn. (Ironically, for many years until about 1960, he was nearly the only man in all of Belgium who kept and trained and trialed German Shepherd Dogs. As he puts it, "Nobody looked at me without disdain, until," he adds with a wicked smile, "I began to win." His "A'Boul" was in 1954 the Champion of Western Flanders and next month the Championne du Nord in France.) He saw an advertisement for the Championship of Belgium which was to be near the border, and he went to see it. At this trial an astounding thing happened. The judge, M. Franschet ordered the trial decoys to prevent the dogs from biting the arms. When pressed in this way most of the dogs, as the French put it, "abandoned the attack!" Many, many of the dogs failed and the anger and consternation which this caused were great. The handlers in the trial, the great trainers who had come to watch, and the spectators were all unified in their vilification of Franschet. Destailleur, who was a rank novice at the time, asked what was happening, wasn't this the way a trial was always played? This was, in fact, the first time it had ever happened.

Young Destailleur went home and began to train his dogs to bite the legs, imagining arm-biting to be obsolete. "This idea" as he says now, "took a long time but was, indeed, ultimately true."

Although many Belgian trainers took this cue and, like Destailleur, began to train their dogs for the legs. It was not until 1949 that he began to see dogs coming right to the legs on the entry and staying there. "We had many troubles to make the dogs bite down to the legs. They would change to the arms at the first opportunity and the result was very mediocre." As a result of his years of study and observation, Destailleur believes that leg biting is a genetically inherited behavioral trait, and that their early post-war Malinois had no "atavism to bite the legs." Through strenuous selection, this tendency gradually crept in through '47, '48, and '49, and by the 1950s Destailleur began to see dogs that refused to accept the arms.

However, while leg biting took, the idea behind it did not. A decoy who was elusive and actively opposed the dogs did not become a major part of Belgian Ring trials. In modern Belgian Ring many dogs trained for the legs. This is not, however, to aid them in combating a slippery decoy. It is rather to show their mouths to good advantage. In the Belgian sport the dog is scored specifically on the quality and depth of his bite; a dog who does not "bite to the ears" cannot win a championship. Therefore, dogs with weak or shallow mouths are commonly trained to the arms because they will look better here, where a full mouth is easier to take. A hard biting, punishing dog who buries his bite will often be trained to the legs in order to show to full advantage of this difficult surface the power and depth of his mouth.

As the years passed, Destailleur studied and trained and learned, and bred his Malinois. Because he was outspoken and opinionated, and also very talented, he began to have

problems with the old, established trainers of *Le Societe Royal Saint-Hubert*. At this time there was a tremendous shake-up and conflict within the ranks of the working dog men of St. Hubert which resulted, in 1962, in a succession and the formation of a rival working dog organization called the "Verbond." Destailleur decided to make a move, and a change. He began to look to France, where the training appealed to him because the trainers and agitators were kinder to the dogs.

He succeeded in obtaining French affiliation for his club, and the right to conduct French (trials as long as they were on French soil. He formed a "paper club" in Wattrelos, right across the border, and they held their trials there, while they trained in the empty lot behind his house.

Destailleur was initially very disappointed because the French decoys of that time were very easy meat indeed. They did not run or move, he complains, but simply "gave one arm to the dog." As was his wont, Destailleur began to talk and, predictably, encountered much hostility: He met a man named "Poix," a judge who was sympathetic to his ideas, and through him Destailleur was asked to act as decoy in some French trials. He took this opportunity to begin playing esquires (escapes) on the dogs which he faced. He still remembers with indignation the day he encountered a dog in a trial who was obsessed with the arms and therefore easily escaped. "I ran all around the ground without being bitten. I went on until I had to stop because I ran out of breath. Only then did he bite me." To Destailleur's amazement, the judge gave this dog no deductions.

Poix had friends in "La Vie Canine" magazine. At Poix's urging they asked Destailleur to write a column. He set to work with a will. For one and a half years he studied all of the exercises of bitework in France and Belgium and Western Europe and vociferously wrote his opinions. "This," he says, "was the crucial time."

"All of the dogs bit in the arms except in Belgium. At this time we had no cars, it was difficult to travel and to train. Only the people in the north of France knew the Belgian Ring, and that the dogs bit the legs in Belgium."

Then, in 1965, Destailleur met Andre Noel who was "in love with all things new." Noel was huge, ran very fast, and tried not to let the dogs play with ease,

Destailleur and Noel were kindred spirits, and immediately became friends. They even resembled each other a great deal, and still do; both broad, stocky men with wide, powerful faces; excitable, volatile, and enthusiastic.

Destailleur had developed some influence, and he arranged to have Noel agitate in die Championnat du Nord. When Noel came they spent several days talking in depth and comparing their points of view. They were in complete accord. Noel made sure that on May 1st of the next year Destailleur was invited to come to Sucy and play in a trial.

Sucy was a town near Paris which every year witnessed a great rendezvous of the best and brightest French trainers of the time. The arrangement cost Noel considerable effort. It was only with great argument and exertion of his influence (hat he ensured that Destailleur would be one of the Hommes d' Aitaque (decoys) for the day. The results were catastrophic.

As Destailleur said to me, a powerful old man leaning back in his chair with a wicked smile, "On 18 dogs only one bit at the entry. In all, only two dogs bit me for more than a moment. Only two dogs on 18 succeeded against me." He had stood, no less huge than Noel in his "Costume," with the stick in front and effortlessly prevented arm and shoulder bites.

The crowd was angry. The handlers were angry. The judge was angry. But they were possibly even sadder than they were angry. They said of Destailleur that "He is brutal." Noel vociferously defended him. He argued that they couldn't say that; that while Destailleur looked brutal he was not. The onlookers had still another objection. "Of course that is beautiful work. You are very clever, but it has no worth. No dog can possibly catch you. It would be the end of sport."

Destailleur was astonished that they could be so childish. He had brought a Malinois with him, and at the end of the day he sent the young male on Noel, who for the benefit of the crowd, played the same way as Destailleur had. The dog, who at the time was 1-year-old, and was beginning to show to Destailleur that he would be a tremendous, punishing biter, came scorching down the field. Noel stood fast, threatening with the stick in front, holding the door closed, until it became plain that the animal would crash through, and then he tried for an esquivé. At the perfect instant, he went left, hard, leaning away and flipping his arms out of reach. As he slipped away the dog, skidding and scrambling, fighting the momentum which threatened to carry him past Noel, reached out and seized his leg. Noel went down hard. When he got to his feet again, the furious Malinois still shaking and biting-in, his smile flashed through the dirt on his face and he exclaimed to the crowd, "Look!".

Destailleur still laughs about that bite. He swears that Noel was more pleased than he was, to be so soundly defeated in front of a crowd, and by a young dog at that.

The young male was the great dog Norton v.d. Grensstraat who was probably a son of the immortal "Flap" (it is not certain who sired the N-litter v.d. Grensstraat). Although he was never seen in competition, Destailleur still says that he was a greater dog than his brother "Nerk," and he went on to become the sire of Pion du Mouscronnais, called the hardest biting dog of all time in France, and both the uncle and the grandfather of Quacha du Mouscronnais, French Champion and the most important stallion to emerge from Destailleur's breeding.

After Sucy things began to change very quickly. French decoys began to play more and more in opposition to the dogs. They began to refine techniques, and the selection was for swift, powerful men with great, great intensity of presence. In order to team how to teach their dogs to cope with these new warriors of the Ring, French trainers began to flock north to see and to train with Destailleur. They absorbed and took home his ideas, as well as quite a few of his dogs. Because the German Shepherd Dogs they had showed such great reluctance to bite the legs, and Destailleur's Malinois were so eager to do so, as well as so athletic and fast, Mouscronnais dogs were quickly seen all over France. While German Shepherd Dogs were far more numerous in clubs and trials than Malinois (and still are), the smaller, lighter and most hot tempered dogs of Mouscronnais soon utterly dominated the upper levels of competition. As Destailleur puts it, "It was no invasion." "Mulot" was vice-champion in 1968, "Pion" was 3rd in 1970. "Sander" was champion in 1973, and "Quacha" was champion in 1975. The conquest of the French Ring by Destailleur's dogs was total. For instance, in 1972 at the Championnat in Lochmine, Brittany, of the 12 dogs in the trial five were Mouscronnais, and none finished lower than eighth place.

This was the beginning of working Malinois in France, yet Destailleur claims that it had little to do with the quality of his dogs; "Belgian breeders had Malinois as fine in many places." He says that it was, rather, an accident owing to three things: the astounding influence which Destailleur developed, the fact that his Malinois were, by training and by heritage, willing and eager to bite the legs, and also a fortuitous rule change in 1965 in St. Hubert which enabled Belgian-bred Malinois to receive for the first time white LOSH papers rather than pink ALSH papers. A dog cannot compete in the French Ring with a pink pedigree, and as a result no French trainers had any reason to buy Malinois in Belgium before 1965.

After years of judging and breeding and training, Leon Destailleur retired in 1982. but not before one last fling with a brave dog called Typist du Mouscronnais, fifth in the Championnat de France in 1976. He lives quietly in his stone house in Mouscronn. Fewer dog men make the pilgrimage to see him nowadays, but his influence is still ubiquitous. He changed irrevocably the face of working dog sport in France. Every Homme d' Attaque who steals points today follows in his footsteps. and most of the Malinois who play in the Ring are descended from the little dusky, homely bitch called Silva, whom Destailleur bought from between the shafts of a cart in 1946, when the war was newly over and a young man's dreams were still bright and shiny.

[Angel Place](#) [Schutzhund America](#) [Police Dog Book](#)