

Dog Sports

Jim Engel, March 14, 2014

Why do men engage in violent sport, a ritualistic, limited form of aggression? Today there are enormous amounts of money involved, but this was not the purpose in the beginning. Men engage in boxing or football primarily as condoned and controlled outlets for aggression. Since society at large has generally endorsed, glorified and rewarded this, it is a reasonable premise that maintenance of a certain level of aggressive and competitive drive has always been necessary for the vigor of the social fabric, necessary to enhance and maintain a population with physical fitness and potential for combat prowess. Throughout history the male warrior role, to defend the hunting band or the crops in the fields, has been fundamental to every viable social structure, from the age of hunting and gathering through the military and police service of today. Success in the hunt or an abundant crop meant nothing if outsiders could take by force what time, labor and skill had produced. The fundamental dilemma of mankind is that while war and conflict bring only suffering and deprivation, we glorify the warrior and the implements of war, from the knight with sword and lance to the military aviator. In a similar way, men admire and desire aggressive dogs, even when there is no social justification, as witness the age-old practices of bear or bull baiting or the fighting pit. Uncontrolled aggression becomes tyranny and oppression, but eradication of the manifestations of aggression through social emasculation and political correctness creates vulnerability at every level.

Just as young men have since antiquity been encouraged in aggressive outlets, pups and young dogs by their nature routinely engage in mock fights and roughhouse play, and much of this propensity carries over into the adult. Just as sport in the ideal teaches the young man to engage and compete within the context of a set of rules and limits, sport training instills in the dog the sense of appropriate, proportionate reaction to specific provocations or simulations, making the dog controllable when the threat is not imminent and thus useful in police service and similar related roles.

Sport, ritualistic aggression, is much more than game playing. In human society, in the era of the Greeks and Romans, and indeed most primitive societies, sport evolved as preparation for war; and reflects these original purposes even today. Although modern working dog training has become increasingly ritualistic and obedience oriented – seriously detracting from the original purposes of breeding selection and service preparation – the training is still essentially sport in this fundamental sense. In the protection work particularly we play out ritualistic aggression without the intent of actual injury for purposes of developing physical fitness and skill in adversarial engagements, to solidify and enhance the instinctive confidence and tactics to prevail in meaningful confrontation.

From the beginning of the modern police dog era the breed founders and police canine pioneers devised functional tests or trials to provide the screening process for breed worthiness and as practical prerequisites for service. Examples include the Belgian Ring Sport, the Schutzhund trial in Germany, extended to all FCI nations as IPO, and the Dutch police or KNPV trials. All of these trials became popular as civilian training, social and competitive venues, a way of life for thousands of amateurs.

Every police breed and line has been based on such trials. In the homeland of the German Shepherd a dog needed to prove his mettle on the Schutzhund field in order to produce progeny worthy of carrying on the heritage, to be members of this noble breed. In the Netherlands the KNPV trial was created to be a police service qualification, primarily a test of readiness for patrol duty, but also emerged as the de

facto breeding requirement for the Malinois and the working Bouviers. The Ring Sports of Belgium and France are suit oriented sports similar to KNPV but somewhat more civilian oriented, but with little practical emphasis on the scenting or olfactory capability.

Schutzhund, and to a lesser extent the Ring Sports, were primarily created as breeding certifications and sport rather than to produce dogs ready for immediate deployment in a police patrol role. Thus in some ways these exercises, relative to KNPV, can be seen as less practical and less directly related to service. In the older days this was of relatively minor practical significance, since innumerable Schutzhund titled dogs historically went on to exemplary police service with minimal additional training; a good Schutzhund dog was indeed usually transformable into an exemplary on the street patrol dog. When the trial was sufficient to challenge the dog, to reveal and discard the insecure, unwilling and unstable, the details of the exercises were relatively minor issues, the resulting dogs easily adaptable to street service.

But in more recent years the lowering of standards in the IPO program, and the emphasis on style and rote obedience rather than challenging the dog physically and in character attributes, has diminished the credibility for police service. Much of the rising popularity of the Malinois in police and military applications is related to this degeneration in IPO and the consequent diminished confidence in German Shepherd working lines; a good German Shepherd is still a remarkable police patrol candidate, but the proliferation of show line Shepherds with suspect IPO titles has debased the currency. The IPO title is no longer a serious universal indication of police potential, and police level German Shepherds are today virtually unknown in these show lines, virtually a different breed from the heritage of von Stephanitz.

Schutzhund as we came to know it after WWII did not exist in the early years. Prior to the WWI there was a police dog certificate which predated the Schutzhund title, held by a significant number of the influential breeding males of the era. But this was mostly a matter of evolving programs and terminology, the expectation of actual proof of performance as a prerequisite, although not always honored, was an objective from the beginning.

Thus it is to be understood that in the early years the process was imperfect and sporadic, not all or even most German Shepherds actually held a Schutzhund, police or herding title and the tension between emerging show breeders and the police oriented trainers intensified in the 1920s as explored further in the chapter covering German Shepherd history. Toward the end of his life von Stephanitz implored:

"Take this trouble for me; Make sure my shepherd dog remains
a working dog, for I have struggled all my life long for that
aim."

The real concern was not so much the external societal influences but rather the enemy within, the show and commercial elements this man struggled against throughout his leadership tenure. This internal struggle for the soul of the German Shepherd is not novel, was incipient in the beginning, even prior to the SV in the days of the Phylax Society, and is ongoing today.

The working trial in the ideal serves to set a minimum level of physical prowess and inborn character attributes – intensity, trainability, stability – for breeding. But even when honestly and diligently conducted this is an inherently flawed process, for no matter how severe the written requirements and diligent the judge and decoy it is still artificial and contrived, cannot recreate the reality and stress of street engagement. As a consequence, trainers have always been ahead of the curve in their ability to prepare a marginal dog to pass the trial, even if with indifferent scores. Thus even the KNPV certificate or an impressive Schutzhund score does not

guarantee that a dog will succeed in actual service, and every serious working breeder and police trainer knows this.

But for purposes of breeding selection this does not negate the essential validity of the ongoing process. Training and certifying marginal dogs is arduous and unpleasant work, and does not enhance one's standing in the esteem of his peers. Knowing that one's reputation is based on the actual serviceability of the dogs produced, and that the breeder will most likely need to train the progeny in their turn, provides a strong incentive to select for breeding the strongest and most trainable dogs.

Thus in the beginning, and for many years thereafter, even today, it was and is the selection through the training process itself rather than the actual titles, or the relative scores, that were of paramount importance. Dogs had value not only because of a working title, but because they and their line were known and acquired locally by those who had seen them work, or had friends and associates who could provide first-hand knowledge. The fact that the dog had a lucky day and barely made it through, or was a particularly strong dog losing points through enthusiasm, was available knowledge that had its own influence on the value of the dog. The point of the trial was not so much that bad dogs will fail and be eliminated but rather that the breeder and trainer, since he must title each dog, will make a strong effort to improve his lines so that the training takes a reasonable amount of time and effort, and is a much more pleasant and rewarding experience.

This natural competitiveness played out on the trial field is a fundamental aspect of the process. When I take my dog on the field in a club trial or when a European trainer takes his dog into the stadium for the most important and prestigious European event, scores, diplomas, titles and who is first or second are of secondary importance. What is most desired is the ongoing respect of one's peers, the people who have shared the struggle on the training field over the years. These people are not fooled, see through the points and the pieces of inscribed paper and know and respect the good dogs and programs, the trainers who have struggled to produce them. This is the mechanism by which the trial system maintains and enhances the working breed, this is why the individual breeders and trainers struggle each year to come back with a better dog and earn the ongoing respect of the community.

In the 1970s and 80s Americans in increasing numbers became aware of these titled dogs and were willing to spend ever increasing amounts of money to obtain one. Acquisitions for individual need and desire quickly evolved into the concept of brokering dogs, of buying dogs on speculation with the idea of a substantial profit through eventual resale in America and other remote nations lacking an indigenous working dog heritage.

This was a critical juncture, for it profoundly changed the dynamics of the European training community. When the dogs remained within the local community it was knowledge of the work of the dog and the reputation of the lines, the trainer and the training club, that established the value of the dog. The advent of brokering dogs, selling them into distant and unknown environments, tended to change the titled dog into a commodity. In these new circumstances, a piece of paper denoting a working title took on new and unreasonable value. A dog with such a certificate had significant foreign sale value even if the title was earned in a marginal way, on a lucky day, under a lenient judge or simply fabricated, an untitled dog fraudulently sold with falsified papers.

For the European trainer with one eye on the dollar this meant that the quickest route to the title, regardless of the actual quality of the dog or his training, became a primary consideration. Why put extra work into a dog which is going to disappear into the broker's hands the day after the trial, never to be seen again? Rather than training the dog with the objective of laying a foundation for ongoing training and

serviceability the remainder of his life, training just to get through the trial, by any means, becomes the profitable approach for the quasi-commercial trainer.

Thus the trial based training and breeding system is a fragile process, susceptible to outside influence, primarily in the form of money. When ignorant Americans will buy a dog based on the title alone, for what are seen as incredible prices in a largely working class training community, the system is corrupted and weakened at its very core. The desire for the quick title and the money from the consequent export sale rather than excellence and personal satisfaction can quickly become the primary motivation. When the Americans are joined in ignorant enthusiasm by the newly rich Japanese, Chinese and others willing to expend enormous amounts of cash the heritage is prostituted, in danger of collapse.

In summary, the reality is that a title is a piece of paper, that the presence of a title does not in and of itself guarantee that the dog is capable of effective service. Aside from the fact that the title might be fraudulent at some level, which does happen, the dog may have been slid through under a lenient judge or just had a lucky day. Every person buying a dog needs to regard the title as an indication that the dog is potentially worthwhile, but base the actual purchasing decision on more comprehensive testing and confidence in the seller of the dog. In buying a dog, especially an ongoing series of dogs as in a police program, knowledge of and confidence in the seller is even more important than the evaluation of any individual dog.

For the person new to the working dog world it can be quite difficult to grasp that while the working trial is the foundation of every successful working line the title on the individual dog is of only limited value, is not and should not be taken to be a credible guarantee of working potential. This is always a paradox for the novice, and we all begin as a novice. This paradox can only be mastered gradually through experience and observation over time. The tendency is to make one of two errors: either believing that the title is literal proof of working functionality, or the more treacherous converse, that since the title does not always correlate with working excellence in the individual dog, it is not of fundamental importance in the ongoing breeding process.

This fundamental principle, the absolute necessity of testing working stock through training, has at times been an enormous difficulty for those in what have come to be known as the alternative breeds, that is, breeds other than the German Shepherd and the Malinois. Since it is very unusual, almost impossible, to find lines in these breeds generally based on the title as a breeding prerequisite, overly credulous enthusiasts come to believe that these breeds and these lines are or can be viable sources of reliable working stock. Sometimes, depending on the integrity, dedication and skill of the individual breeder solid, reliable lines do exist. But all too often this is not true, the program is based on emotional appeal and clever promotional schemes, as many have learned through personal disappointment. Thus many enthusiasts for these breeds are in a perpetual state of denial, choose to believe things that common sense, the evidence available through observation and accumulated wisdom, have made obviously untrue. But widespread denial of objective reality has only tended to accelerate rather than retarded the demise of these unfortunate breeds, as I know too well.

[Angel's Lair All Breed](#)

[Angel's Lair Schutzhund](#)

[Police Dog Book](#)