

The Euro Way

Jim Engel, March 14, 2014

Just as working class European immigrants – the Irish, Poles and Italians – looked to America as the land of opportunity, with dreams of gold paved streets, in the earlier years of the Schutzhund movement we, the enthralled Americans, believed that Europe was the land of working dog opportunity, that there was at least one training club in every village or town, easy access to working pups and serious dog training as a way of life. And so it was. But it was also an illusion, a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that we could approach but never quite grasp and bring home to America.

When I first went to the Netherlands in the 1980s it was all there: the clubs, the dogs, and above all the people with years of breeding and training experience. Belgium and Germany were more of the same, abundant picturesque training fields, often with a cozy clubhouse and a friendly bar complete with old timers conversing or playing cards over a beer, sometimes French fries on the table. Trophies, ribbons, photos and trial posters, going back for decades, adorned the walls. These were people of every walk of life, and the clubs provided an opportunity for the ordinary man to participate and achieve according to his willingness to work and his luck rather than his money. The young trainer was commonplace, and many were aspiring decoys, anxious to put on the suit and engage the dogs. A training field on public land, where you could perhaps have a clubhouse for your own use, seemed easily available, just as American parks have a tennis courts and ball fields. Pups of proven working lines were affordable, especially for those with a more experienced trainer as a mentor. It was typical to see several young men doing the helper work, often with a couple of older men directing in the background. The young enthusiast would often have a father, uncle or family acquaintance who could take him along to the club and, if the interest was there, help him find and train a first dog. Clubs were plentiful and close by; stopping by the club in the evening was a short drive or even a walk with the dog. It was a training life style most Americans could only dream of, and the dream was to become increasingly elusive as the years passed.

Dog training is a way of life for many Europeans used to a selection of training clubs in the neighborhood or just down the road. Many years ago, visiting an old friend near Hilversum, a KNPV judge, she remarked as we were pulling out of the driveway that it was going to be a long ride; that we were on our way to an especially distant club. Along the way she would point out a KNPV or IPO club, often with a comment on why it was not appropriate for this day. Finally, after an arduous twenty-minute drive we arrived at the desired far distant club, just in time for training. We had gone perhaps 20 kilometers or 15 miles, a short distance most Americans can only envy.

On another occasion, a warm late afternoon sitting outside a clubhouse in Belgium, near the Dutch border, Turnhout if memory serves me, as we sat idly sipping our beer a little old man with a large Malinois male appeared and began his obedience training. In a way it was not very impressive, for the man was slow moving and low key and not much seemed to be going on. A little while later a helper, a very young man, casually came onto the field. After a few words, the helper took up his position on the opposite side of a pond, probably ten to fifteen feet across. The man and his dog moved off to the other end of the field, where the dog was sent with a soft command. The dog burst across the field and over the pond, but at one low key command from the handler stopped, took a regretful look

at the helper and returned. On the next go round the dog was, much to his enthusiasm, allowed to complete his attack.

In talking to my friends, I learned that this man, while never quite a big winner, had participated in Belgian Ring for most of his life. A little later, I noticed the man heading out for home. He had a three-wheel cycle arrangement, homemade with two dog crates and bicycle parts, into which he loaded his two Malinois and peddled off home. I am sure that this is a little bit unusual, that many more Europeans load up the Mercedes station wagon, perhaps with an expensive, high tech aluminum dog trailer, than a homemade three-wheeled bicycle on training night. But the access of the common man, the young man with a family or the old man on a fixed income, to the training sports has always been a fundamental, and I believe necessary, part of the heritage. Somehow, we have never quite been able to make this a reality in America.

European training offers diverse opportunities, from the casual social trainer seeking an evening out with his dog to the driven, ultra-competitive fanatic. Some trainers traverse both worlds; I knew a Dutch IPO judge who was training director at a local club and on another evening drove down into Belgium to work with a more competitive, exclusive group. In this way he was able to carry on two distinct and rewarding roles. This was viable because the distance he drove in a month was likely less than the typical American Schutzhund trainer drives in a week; everything is so close together in Europe that even international travel for training can often be done in an evening!

Quality helper work is the foundation of protection training, and historically many European trainers would take up the suit or the sleeve to one extent or another so that the burden was distributed.¹ Many clubs have several helpers with roles according to their age, experience and physical condition. The older men tend to serve mostly as teachers and instructors, only occasionally picking up a sleeve or suit jacket to demonstrate a point or fill in. And, of course, there are a few older men in denial, determined to put the callow young men – the whippersnappers as it were – to shame. But on the whole the bulk of the work is carried on by younger men with the knowledge and experience to work on their own. At the bottom of the pyramid are the novice trainers, eager for opportunity and recognition. Although some helpers prefer the role for its own sake and seldom train a dog, many are also trainers and take for granted that their dogs will receive excellent work in return, since the club with one exclusive helper is very unusual. Not every club has this ideal situation, but most have several helpers, so that the serious trainer can routinely work near to home with good helper several evenings a week.

In Europe as in America modern technology has created a series of distractions – radio, television, video games, the internet – increasingly occupying discretionary time, especially among younger people, chipping away at social activities such as soft ball leagues or dog training. The same trends exist also in Europe; generally amateur dog training seems to be in moderate decline. Police breed registrations have fallen in half or more around the world starting in the mid-1990s, including the German Shepherd in Germany: the European popularity base is eroding in the face of current social and population trends, with ominous, unforeseeable consequences.

Beginning in the 1970s the emerging American Schutzhund movement was a time of excitement and promise, of better things to come. We had come to believe that dog training was fundamentally different and more exciting in Europe, that an all-pervasive working ethic predominated in working breed affairs, that the credo that form must follow function was the universal mantra. Somehow we believed that every European was above the venality of the AKC world; that working the dogs was

¹ Participation by women was generally unusual prior to the 1970's.

a serious matter, that what counted was what a dog could do in his work even more than his appearance. Our faith was general, in all breeds, but above all else was in the German Shepherd mythology, so effectively nurtured by von Stephanitz: that form must follow function, that every German Shepherd must pass a rigorous Schutzhund trial as a prerequisite to breeding, each an incipient police patrol dog.

But the reality proved to be disillusioning: not only were insipid show people the norm, not all Schutzhund trials were honest, and what was worse this was known and condoned at the highest levels of the SV. Except for the Malinois community, a significant majority of Europeans involved in the police style breeds were and increasingly are primarily show oriented, just as in America, paying little more than lip service to work. The SV, the legacy of von Stephanitz, was perhaps the greatest disappointment, for in time we were to come to see that the Schutzhund trial was being prostituted, that judges were too often pimps and that titles were increasingly being given to show dogs void of serious police level character through emasculated trials, lenient judges and outright fraud. Most of us had come to accept that American bred German Shepherds were evolving into a deviant breed, but it was almost inconceivable to us that these German show lines were being allowed to degenerate in the same way, just as in America.

Although our expectations, in hindsight grossly unrealistic, led to disillusion, all was not lost, for outside of the SV establishment and the all-breed show dog world there remained diverse pockets of old style working German Shepherds and true guardians of some of the other breeds. Rather than focused on Germany itself, today many of the better dogs are in neighboring nations, that is places such as the Czech Republic, the Netherlands or Belgium. The good dogs from within Germany are coming from lines outside of the establishment mainstream, such as remnants of the old East German breeding or those maintained by the older hard-core German trainers and breeders. Thirty or forty years ago one could look at the four or five generation pedigrees of the winning show and working dogs and see commonality, dogs which in extended pedigrees were producing both working and conformation winners. In recent years, this has become almost unknown; only a fool tries to cross the lines.

Beyond the German Shepherd the other breeds, often with a scattering of really excellent individual dogs, existed only as fragile communities. I saw some excellent Rottweilers, a wonderful Beauceron or two and some of the Bouviers I was looking for, but in a broad sense these were breeds in decline, even in 1984. Although my younger readers will no doubt suspect that I exaggerate, the Malinois was simply not on our radar screens, very few of us, even those of us venturing out to the new Schutzhund clubs, were even aware of the breed.

In America today, some forty or more years after our initial wave of enthusiasm, Schutzhund is still marginal: our vision of prospering amateur clubs available to large segments of the population, with the ambiance of Europe, remains unfulfilled. Among the reasons is our inability to achieve critical mass, to have enough clubs close enough together to bring in the young trainers which carry the bulk of the helper work burden. The sport is increasingly commercialized; with the purchased titled dog still predominant on the field, and helper work more and more a commercial service rather than amateurs working together in a club environment. Young people especially are finding Schutzhund increasingly out of their reach in terms of both time and money.

Our personal experience is an illustration of these trends, for our first Bouvier des Flandres came from the du Clos des Cerberes kennel of Edmee Bowles, driven from Belgium as WWII commenced and living just outside Philadelphia, the founder of the breed in America. We were able to train this male to the Schutzhund III and the FH, the advanced tracking title, in relatively short order. The dog was an excellent

natural tracker and strong in protection. The obedience was marginal, mostly because of my inexperience as a trainer and because there was no one with experience to help; I often wonder what the dog could have become had I been better trainer, or if there had been a mentor.

But there was a serious down side to this, for we came to believe that in general the European Bouviers were serious working dogs, that all of their lines were fundamentally sound, that belief in working character could be taken for granted. As a consequence we acquired a few dogs of the then very fashionable Dutch show lines, with the expectation that a little selection would enable us to insure the appropriate character. This turned out not to be true at all, the dogs were in general lacking in sufficient drive for the protection work and difficult in obedience and tracking, exhibiting passive resistance rather than enthusiasm. These lines were eliminated and we went on to establish relationships with people in Holland who were active trainers with police line Bouviers, which provided us a reliable source of excellent dogs. But it was a major detour, a loss of time and a waste of money.

Some might perhaps comment that we should have known better, and there is a grain of truth to it. But this was before the internet and the advent of European travel for the typical American training enthusiast. These were difficult lessons to learn, and even today many spend too much money and time to understand that dogs coming out of mainstream European show lines, of all breeds, fall far short of serious police service potential, are in reality no better than the typical American breeding.

[Angel's Lair All Breed](#)

[Angel's Lair Schutzhund](#)

[Police Dog Book](#)