

Schutzhund and IPO

Jim Engel, March 14, 2014



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In America, Schutzhund was the big new thing in the latter 1970s, an exciting alternative to the dreary obedience programs of the era, where passive compliance was the preordained role of the dog. This was a venue where the protection dogs were called upon to fulfill their age-old heritage, to protect, to engage human adversaries in simulated attack scenarios. The dogs, the good ones, came alive, and their handlers were right there behind them. The AKC establishment was appalled, biting dogs were simply not the American way, and dire predictions, by establishment icons such as Carmine Battaglia, of action by the civil authorities to suppress this German perversion were shrill and widespread,

which only added to the aura of excitement.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Schutzhund was the predominant European working dog venue, created by the founders of the German Shepherd as a character and working evaluation for their incipient breed. Beyond these origins this program quickly evolved to become the predominant all breed police style working dog trial system, first in Germany, and then through the international popularity of the German police breeds increasingly prominent in various national venues in other European nations and the rest of the world, particularly North America. Most Americans, including the dog people, had never heard of strange things such as ring sports, bite suits or breeds with funny sounding names such as "Malinois."

Schutzhund specifically evolved as a German national sport under the VDH, that is, the German national organization comparable in scope to the AKC. In other FCI nations a similar bite sleeve style international program under FCI auspices, the IPO program (*Internationale Prüfungsordnung*). Over the years there had been substantial differences in rules, philosophy and judging expectations, but beginning at the turn of the twenty first century the programs converged, became more and more similar. International annual championships under the IPO banner gradually became the most prestigious venues in the world.

Finally, on January 1, 2012 IPO became the universal FCI protection dog working trial and Schutzhund as a distinct entity passed into history, although the term is still widely used in the colloquial sense.

The primary purposes of Schutzhund are:

- Identification of those dogs suitable to be bred, that is, of sound temperament, willing to work and of correct structure.
- Preparation of the individual dog to serve the purpose of its breed in police or military service or civilian protection of family and property.

Provision of sport and recreation for man and beast that brings out the best qualities of both.

The use of the separate, removable, padded arm in the protection work, rather than the full body suit, and the fact that the dogs are trained to bite the forearm exclusively, distinguishes Schutzhund from other protection dog venues. The Schutzhund trial consists of three separate phases or distinct sequences of exercises, focused on tracking, formal obedience and protection. These individual testing phases normally take place in a single day at a small or local trial, but are spread over two or more days at major regional, national or international championship events. All of the dogs are sequenced through the individual phases individually, so a particular dog will typically have an hour or more between phases in a single day trial. In a larger trial, each dog's work will normally be spread over two or more days. The local trial employs a single judge, while the larger event uses three judges so that the phases can go on concurrently, that is, while one group of dogs is out in the field tracking, another group, with a different judge, will be sequencing through their obedience routine. In any situation, all of the dogs see the same judge for any particular phase, that is, one judge does all of the tracking or protection evaluations.

Although there have been historical references which describe Schutzhund as originating as early as 1900 as a foundation on which the German Shepherd was built, this must not be taken too literally, especially in light of the fact that there is no explicit use of this term as late as 1925 in the seminal von Stephanitz book. Schutzhund is the German word for protection, and in this generic sense they were evolving a variety of tests and trials under varying rules and procedures. Thus although police trials and certifications began well before 1910, Schutzhund titles as such did not begin to become common in German Shepherd pedigrees until the 1920s, and the program as we know it today would not entirely emerge until the post WWII era.

Veterans of the sport tend to regard the transformation of Schutzhund into IPO as part of an ongoing watering down, a popularization based on political correctness in an increasingly pet oriented European canine environment. In such minds IPO is Schutzhund reduced to Schutzhund light, mere sport in the pejorative sense, stripped of much of the potential to guide breeding in the way of strong, serious police patrol level dogs.

Since the Schutzhund program is for dogs of the protective heritage, its emphasis is on those qualities necessary in such dogs, such as initiative, courage and trainability. The three phases of the program are tracking, obedience and protection:

Tracking tests the olfactory capability, the ability to follow the path and find objects dropped by the tracklayer, as a dog would be called upon to do in police or civilian search and rescue service.

Obedience demonstrates heeling, retrieval of objects, jumps and other exercises that demonstrate agility, compliance and handler control. The presence of another competing dog on the field during the obedience exercise verifies impartiality to such distractions.

Protection involves a search and hold of an adversary, close in defense of the leader and a remote pursuit and engagement of an adversary.

The performance in each phase is evaluated by the judge and awarded up to 100 points according to the correctness of the exercise, with a resulting 300 points for a hypothetical perfect performance. The dog must receive a minimum of 70 points in each phase in order to achieve a new title or pass. Titled dogs which fail a trial do not revert to a lower level or give up the title as is customary in some other sports such as French Ring or KNPV.

There are three progressively more difficult levels of competition that lead to the IPO titles I through III. Many dogs go on to compete repetitively at the IPO III level in order to achieve the highest possible score and thus to qualify for participation in various regional, national or international championship events. There are also advanced tracking programs and a number of other specialized titles; it has more recently become possible to compete in a single phase such as tracking or obedience although no actual titles are awarded.

Among the factors contributing to the usefulness of the dog is the remarkably sensitive nose, which makes the sense of smell so superior to that of a human being that a dog virtually lives in another world. The olfactory sensitivity adds another dimension, a further capability, to the human-canine team. In service dogs locate lost children, detect the presence of narcotics or warn of and perhaps engage a concealed adversary, as in a criminal hiding in a commercial warehouse, store or factory.

Tracking is thus an integral facet of the program in order to verify and enhance this most useful faculty. The test is conducted in an open field where a person, the tracklayer, walks a prescribed route several hundred yards long and drops a number of articles, such as a glove, which the dog must locate. Elementary level tracks are laid by the handler himself; more advanced competition uses a different person as tracklayer. The IPO three track incorporates four ninety degree turns, three objects such as small blocks of wood to find and is an hour old. The track is sometimes laid in a plowed field rather than on grass or in a pasture, but there are no transitions in cover.

The track is aged for a period according to the title being sought (20 minutes to an hour) after which the dog is taken to the marked starting point and sent out, usually on a ten meter line attached to the collar. (The handler has the option of sending his dog off lead, but I have never seen this done in an actual IPO trial.) It is necessary for the handler to stay ten meters behind the dog, at the end of the line, except when the dog picks up a dropped article or indicates its presence by laying down or sitting. The difficulty of a particular track is dependent on the nature of the vegetation and the weather. Damp, cool, still conditions are generally the most favorable. Early in the morning is often the best time of day, and most local trials begin with tracking as early as practical. Tracking dogs goes on regardless of weather, my dog has passed tracking after an inch or two of snow or enough rain to cover the articles occurred between the laying of the track and the actual exercise. Freshly plowed or disked fields are sometimes used for tracking.

The rules, procedures and judging expectations require that the dog track footstep by footstep, that is, according to the disturbance in vegetation or soil at the surface rather than the air borne odor of the person which dissipates over a wider area. Even the slightest deviation from the track is penalized by point deductions.

During the obedience exercises the dog heels at the handler's side in a pattern with turns, changes of pace and distractions such as gunshots and a group of milling persons. The dog must be left in the down, sitting and standing positions and come when called. Objects thrown by the handler are to be retrieved on command. This is done on the flat and over a one-meter barrier and over an A frame shaped scaling wall. The dog must go out away from the handler and then down on command. The gun sure AKC obedience competitor at the CDX level will find the Schutzhund I obedience routine familiar, the only additional exercise being the go out which is introduced at the Utility level under the AKC system. There are always two dogs on the field during the obedience exercises, one doing the active routine and the other on a long down away from the handler; this demonstrates control and the willingness to tolerate the presence of a neutral dog, often important in actual working situations.

The protection exercises involve a number of simulated attack and guarding scenarios where the dog engages a human adversary wearing padded pants and a padded sleeve which the dog bites or grips. Schutzhund training, in contrast to most other systems, requires that the dog bite only the arm with the sleeve. Once on the sleeve, the decoy will strike the dog twice with a padded stick across the rib cage to establish the willingness to persist in the face of a counter attack. The dog is trained to respond to an active aggressor and that when the helper ceases active opposition and the release command is given he must remain attentive and guard but must not bite unless the decoy renews physical aggression, in which case the dog must firmly grip the sleeve. Control and discipline are recognized as essential attributes of the well-trained dog.

In the IPO III protection routine, the dog begins at the end of a long field, often a football or soccer field, and searches six blinds, often portable, triangular fabric covered frames looking like small tents, and then intensively guards and barks at the decoy standing still and silent in the last blind. After a time the judge will indicate to the handler to call the dog back to his side, and the decoy leaves the blind and takes a stationary position. The handler places the dog on a down about six yards from the decoy. The decoy runs away, and the dog pursues and bites the decoy on the arm. The decoy turns and drives the dog several yards and locks up in a stationary posture facing the dog. On handler command the dog releases and goes into the bark and guard posture. The decoy lunges and the dog bites a second time, followed by two sharp stick hits to the rib cage, and the locks up again. The handler gives the release command and steps up behind his dog calls him to his side. Finally the handler takes the stick from the decoy and the handler and dog escort him to the judge.

The final exercise is the long bite, formerly known as the courage test, which involves the handler sending the dog against a distant helper running toward the dog in a threatening manner, with the helper slowing as the dog engages for a safe grip or bite. Once the dog engages the helper drives the dog, that is, steps into him in an intense way and strikes two measured, constant stick hits. When I became involved in the late 1970s the Schutzhund III courage test began with the decoy walking to the center of the field, about 40 yards from the dog and handler at the end of the field, and then running away from the dog. When the decoy was about 50 yards out, the judge would signal the handler to send the dog. As the dog approached the decoy would suddenly turn and aggressively run at the dog, waving the stick and presenting a very threatening picture. The turn was serious psychological pressure, for the fleeing prey suddenly became the aggressive adversary. For reasons of political correctness and to reduce the pressure on the show line German Shepherds, the flee and turn aspect was eliminated and the distances, which test confidence and drive, were greatly reduced.

Advocates of other systems, usually enthusiastic novices, sometimes contend that this is an artificial restriction and renders the Schutzhund trained dog less well prepared for actual police or civilian guard service; but the fact is that for a century such dogs in Germany have been the wellspring of police service canines and provided much of the foundation for the advent of American police dog service. Other trial systems use a suit providing full body protection and provide much more latitude in bite location. (All of this is discussed in great detail in the chapter on protection training.)

In the early years of the American Schutzhund experience, in the 1980s, most of us came from an AKC obedience competition background, seeking out greater challenges and a more fulfilling experience for our dogs. For us the immediately striking difference was that the Schutzhund obedience exercises are conducted outside on a relatively large open field rather than the cramped AKC ring with its confining fence, important considerations with the larger, more robust dog. In the

earlier years there was less emphasis on precision – the handler had some latitude in the precise location of turns in the heeling pattern. The fact that the dog might be a couple of inches ahead of or behind or sit slightly crooked was not of Earth shaking consequence, for the purpose was to demonstrate control, cooperation and working willingness rather than to turn the dog into an ultra-precise heeling machine. Unfortunately in recent years Schutzhund has increasingly focused on the details of precise obedience, becoming much more obedience and style oriented in the process. This trend has been greatly exacerbated by the metamorphosis into IPO, where subservience is increasingly important relative to the aggression, initiative and robust character fundamental in real police dogs.

Although tracking, obedience and protection are the three phrases of the program, the divisions are in a certain way more apparent than real, for each facet of the training must contribute in harmony to the balanced whole, result in a fundamentally sound dog, or they mean nothing. In a properly run program there is synergism, the lessons of one phase positively reinforcing those of the others. The tracking builds confidence and initiative that carries over as an alert, positive attitude in the obedience. Obedience teaches discipline and responsiveness to the handler, which reinforces the precision necessary for high tracking scores and paves the way for the control aspects of the protection work. And the enthusiasm of most dogs for the protection work carries them through the long haul, provides the spark that makes training day the best part of their lives. The proper Schutzhund program does not train tracking, obedience and protection, it does not even consider the dog as a whole and train him, rather it trains the team, the dog and his leader together.

The club level trial generally starts with the tracking early in the morning, since that is the most favorable time for this work, and because there is a long day's work ahead if there is a full slate of ten or twelve dogs. The judge begins by assigning tracklayers and supervising the laying of the tracks. Each team in turn reports and is sent out to attempt their track.

The judge does a cursory temperament evaluation in which he will purposely pressure the dog, perhaps by walking between dog and handler, perhaps pushing him with his knee; the dog showing a fearful or inappropriately aggressive reaction can be excused.¹ It is the judge's prerogative to devise whatever tests he believes to be necessary to establish the stability of each dog as they progress through the day. It is entirely appropriate that the Schutzhund judge have sufficient latitude in conducting the trial in that his duties are by far the most difficult and serious one can take on in the entire scope of canine affairs. In the larger view, it is much more important that the best dogs, according to real life utility, be favored for breeding than who takes home the biggest tin cup that particular day, for in thirty or forty years the cup will most likely have been left on the curb for the trash man by the descendants of the handler, but the dogs selected will still be contributing through their progeny.

At the completion of the track the judge will give a brief critique of the performance and announce the scores. At the local trial, especially in newer clubs with less experienced members and competitors, a primary purpose of the critique is education; the judge will often not only point why he has taken points away, but go on to suggest improvements in training approach to correct the problems. Teaching at the club level, especially where the sport is relatively new as in America, is an important part of the judge's role, and a trial conducted by a good judge can be an effective educational opportunity as well. There are similar critiques after the obedience and protection exercises.

¹ Increasingly stringent screening in the preliminary BH examination, and diligence in training and selection, has severely limited the problem of inappropriate or poorly prepared dogs entering trials.

The judge's critique can greatly enhance the spirit of fair play and sportsmanship, for those present may come to understand what he has seen that was not apparent from their vantage point or within the scope of their experience. They will occasionally find out that they noted a detail that he in fact missed, for no man can see everything when there are two dogs and two handlers on the field, often widely separated. Many years ago the noted judge Jean-Claude Balu made a point that bears repeating: it is the judge's responsibility to score according to what he actually sees and hears, that while he will on occasion know or suspect that something has occurred when his vision was blocked or his attention diverted he must not deduct points. It is important that those in the audience be aware of this distinction. (God forbid that in this day of instant replay anyone suggest that we interrupt the flow of the trial for a review of the judge's decision, especially one initiated by a disgruntled handler.) The necessity of giving a critique and announcing scores immediately after the exercise puts an element of pressure on a judge, as there is no such thing as having a ring steward post the scores and being long gone before anyone knows what went down.

[Angel's Lair All Breed](#)

[Angel's Lair Schutzhund](#)

[Police Dog Book](#)