

Schutzhund Commentaries

Jim Engel, March 14, 2014

In the beginning, the advent of our Schutzhund enthusiasm, we had the natural propensity to idealize all things European, especially German, and even more especially the German Shepherd establishment, the SV, the legacy of von Stephanitz. In time familiarity began to breed a more realistic view of the Euro scene, one with bad people as well as good, those with the normal human failings of greed, sloth and false pride as well as inspiring breeders and trainers faithfully carrying on the heritage one dog at a time. That there are all sorts breeding working dogs for money, pet sales and dog show trinkets as well as the perpetuation and evolution of the working legacy.

All of this could be attributed to a certain natural element of naiveté, except for one thing: the realization that the Schutzhund trial itself was systematically being compromised by the SV, that there are private trials, outside of the public purview, available only to favored people, where titles are routinely awarded to unworthy dogs, usually those destined for the conformation ring or export.

My first inkling of this surfaced in the 1980s when reliable people, primarily involved in American GSD conformation competition, were reporting supposedly Schutzhund titled Shepherds which failed to respond to a thrown dumbbell, were gun shy or otherwise obviously seriously deficient, incapable of passing an honest trial. The American show mentality has always been willing to embrace any dog which could win, regarded the soft or gun insecure German import as an opportunity to acquire a dog otherwise unavailable or much more expensive. It became apparent that there were Germans willing and able to accommodate them, but at the time it seemed likely that this was an aberration, a few people who had somehow discovered a crack in the system, that the export process could somehow be made to conceal the ruse, that in time it would be discovered and corrected. Little did we know.

Denial was for most of us the natural response, a deep seated reluctance to see the truth. But in time it could no longer be denied, there really were and are trials provided for the insiders as a means of titling weak or inadequate dogs, or simply to save the time and effort of training, and as a means of enhancing the value of dogs being exported as breeding and show stock. Americans and conformation oriented people in other nations also routinely send dogs to Germany to obtain a title, likely in many instances through these special trials. Sometimes the dog does not even need to step on the field, the paper work somehow working its way through the system without a trial actually having taken place, as if by magic. (Sometimes it is difficult to tell magic from money.)

It must be noted that deception and deceit are not unique to the Germans or the world of conformation, are melancholy but ubiquitous elements of the human condition. As examples, registration papers for "undocumented" KNPV dogs can routinely be conjured out of thin air and a tinge of favoritism sometimes touches high level working trials. What is unique about these special trials is that the corruption is systemic, that the senior SV leadership abets, condones and profits from this, and has for at least thirty years.

Although motivations are complex and obscure, the copious flow of foreign money, especially American money, has clearly played its part in all of this. The rationale is apparently that one should be free to falsify titles or records on dogs for

export, that Americans are vulgar and clueless and thus undeserving, that when they are unable to tell a good dog from a bad dog it is a waste to send them a good dog, which would just disappear into the morass.

Part of the problem is structural, in that other than championship events IPO trials are generally run by a local club, even a private club, as a virtually closed affair where they can and do select their own judge and the trial takes place on the home training field with decoys selected by the club rather than assigned by a higher authority. Where else in life can one select, pay and reward his own judge? Often there have been obscure and unpublished times and locations, making these essentially private trials rather than transparent events, open to scrutiny by the community at large. DVG judges were routinely doing this in the 1980s, particularly in Florida. At the local trial, the judge is all-powerful in his small world. Particularly in the 1980s and early 90s, prior to the common use of video recording, the judge at an American trial was beyond scrutiny, could do whatever he wanted to do. It turned out that some of them wanted to do some remarkable things.

Although the social and sporting aspects of the Schutzhund program became enormously popular, a pleasant way of life for many, the fundamental rationale was always that the dogs doing the best in the trials, and thus preferred for breeding, should be those with the highest potential as actual police or military dogs. Over time this has been seriously compromised, and more so in Schutzhund than the other European venues.

Many regard the Schutzhund style of tracking as done today to be artificial and contrived; more of an obedience exercise than a demonstration of the dog's olfactory prowess. In actual service the dog is permitted and expected to apply his aggregate search capability adaptively – using sight, sound and air scent as well as ground disturbance – according to his instincts and experience and the opportunities of the actual search. The object in reality is to find persons and objects or other evidence, and stepping off the track to inspect a possibly dropped object is part of the process rather than a defect to be penalized. But any deviation from the formal nose in each footprint track is penalized in the Schutzhund trial. In similar ways, the obedience and protection phases have evolved with less and less relevance to actual work, with emphasis on style in obedience and increasingly less real pressure in the protection.

This tension between fostering effective and adaptive application of the potential of the dog, according to his natural way of working, and the increasingly stylized and artificial requirements of sport competition is among the most serious and important issues in the working dog community today. Dogs are increasingly bred according to artificial, unnatural tracking styles and for rote obedience in exercises that less and less reflect real world working scenarios such as a police dog would face in his work. Under the pressure of the German show breeders and other elements the protection work has been watered down both in the formal rules, where the old reed stick, the attack on the handler and the original courage test are gone, and in the double standard of judging where special, less rigorous, trials for the show dogs are not only permitted but encouraged and condoned. The most slavishly obedient dog, or the most stylishly prancing dog, is not necessarily the best dog.

Although my history has been in Schutzhund for more than thirty years, and I still believe in the old style program, it must be reported that it has become incessantly less rigorous and demanding. The rules have been continually relaxed in a number of ways: the substitution of the A frame for the scaling wall, the introduction of the padded stick, the elimination of the attack on the handler and the severe shortening of the long pursuit, formerly the test of courage. Over these years, no feature to prove the mettle of better dogs and training, such as a call off in the long pursuit or variations in the order and details of the obedience routines on a trial by trial basis, have been introduced or seriously considered. Popularity and

accommodations for increasingly marginal dogs always win out over innovations for more stringent breeding and service selection. Most importantly the incessantly weakening rules and especially the lenient trials for show line German Shepherds have greatly reduced the credibility of the Schutzhund title, which after all can be no greater than the weakest performance by the most docile IPO titled show dog, a very low standard indeed.

The Schutzhund program, and the vitality of many police breeds, has been in serious decline over the past twenty years, as evidenced by European and American yearly puppy registrations, which have declined by half or more. The essence of the problem is that most of these dogs are destined for civilian homes, and most of the money has come from these sales and services rather than police or military applications. The Belgian Malinois is the noteworthy exception.

Military and police procurement is increasingly going to programs and breeds outside of the historical Schutzhund world, such as Malinois from KNPV or NVBK backgrounds. Watering down Schutzhund and transforming it to the more politically correct IPO ultimately depreciates the value of these dogs in the public mind, for the whole point for many civilian owners has always been the enhancement of their personal sense of vitality and masculinity through the ownership of a "real" police dog. You can famously fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but increasingly the public at large is coming to see the IPO breeding lines as counterfeit police dogs and taking their money elsewhere.

In the earlier years in America, when the AKC establishment became hysterical at the mere thought of biting dogs, there were reservations in many minds about protection training of dogs by private individuals. Although this has dissipated with the acceptance of Schutzhund and similar sports, and the demonstrated usefulness of police canine teams, these questions are relevant even today, for enhancing a dog's willingness and ability to perform an effective attack on a human being is very serious business. The prominent and well publicized service of our military dogs throughout the long and difficult Middle East engagements subsequent to the 9/11 atrocity, the increasing success and publicity of police patrol dogs, especially in drug and explosive detection, and a strong history of responsibility and good public relations by protection sport trainers have largely put such concerns behind us.

[Angel's Lair All Breed](#)

[Angel's Lair Schutzhund](#)

[Police Dog Book](#)