

The American Working Dog Movement

Jim Engel



Americans are on the whole proud of their heritage, the revolution which broke free of an oppressive European aristocracy and established a government of the people rather than a hereditary privileged class. This was a precursor to the French Revolution, which in time had the same outcome there, that is the opening up of opportunity to all men regardless of the circumstances of their birth. Reality is of course more nuanced, the down side was that these opportunities were limited to white, property owning males; indeed our nation was founded on slavery which preordained a century of strife culminating in a great civil war to complete our revolution.

But in the working dog domain our revolution is yet to come. Forty years into the movement we remain subservient, dependent on Europeans – primarily German but increasingly of the Low Countries – for working dogs, training methodology and guidance. Although individual Americans are successful at the highest levels in international competition, this is primarily with European dogs, often trained there and then purchased for competition, personal aggrandizement rather than any long term benefit as a national breeding resource. Our police and military rely on imported dogs, and there is no American culture in the sense of a unified community producing lines of dogs for real service in our military or police agencies. In the working dog world we are still essentially an increasingly oppressed and subservient German colony. These Germans, that is primarily the SV, have gained control of our national institutions and manipulate us relentlessly for their own benefit and profit. In order to gain control of our own affairs we must comprehend our past, see how this situation evolved; this is our purpose here.

In Europe the police and military style breeds, such as the German Shepherd, emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, that is about 1900 and a little later. Although a smattering of dogs came to America prior to the First World War, a scant handful imported by our police agencies, the numbers and public awareness were minute. The war, beginning in 1914, devastated these emerging breeds in Germany and especially in Belgium. As the European founders were struggling to survive and prosper amid war and social strife, two devastating conflagrations in thirty years, America, already emerging as a world economic juggernaut, was lightly touched, her homelands secure and exempt from this devastation, even her sacrifice of young men late and relatively light. A fascination with German Shepherds came home with the troops in the early 1920s and they became enormously popular, surged to the lead of the AKC registration list for a number of years. The Dobermans would come later, and the Rottweilers much later, in the 70s. Although these German breeds were bolstered by American popularity and money the Belgians, suffering much more grievously during the war, saw their incipient breeds, especially the Malinois, banished to obscurity for most of a century.

In the aftermath of war American cash flowed to struggling German breeders, and large numbers of German Shepherds, even major show winners and Siegers, were imported by financially able and entitled – but naive and ignorant – American hobbyists. But these money men knew little or nothing about the actual working functionality of the breeds or the training, were not the least bit inclined to be hands on. This did not tend to work out well, the imports were on the whole seed scattered

on barren, infertile ground where they failed to flourish, either in working roles or long term as a viable breeding foundation.

Thus ever since the early 1920's Americans have been perpetually seeking to acquire prominent European show winners and their progeny – dogs from predominant, well publicized and promoted show lines – with the expectation of gaining prominence and importance on the American canine scene. The essence of the appeal was the macho image – real dogs for real men, and the women who admire them – ready at a moment's notice to come forth and protect and defend. They were marketing machismo and virility, and it was selling like hot cakes.

The inherent problem was that these quasi commercial Americans did not begin to comprehend that selection based on character verification through training and the trial was the foundation of ongoing breeding. Although Germany was even then separating into to work and show lines, serious defects such as lack of gun sureness or timidity greatly reduced the value of a dog even in the show sphere. Such dogs were increasingly exported to Americans who were unaware of or unconcerned about such things. To the extent that they were aware many importers, sometimes carpet bagging Germans residing here, in turn saw this as a means of obtaining less expensive dogs since the American public was in general incapable of perceiving the inadequacy.

In American circles breeding was not according to any standard of working character; we were oblivious to the fact that the lines we were creating were a mere shadow of real working dogs, cared only that softer and more compliant dogs were easier for unsophisticated kennel help to deal with and less likely to be disruptive in inexperienced pet homes. It was all about perception and image, like muscle cars with racing stripes and monikers such as "Grand Prix" but nothing special under the hood.

Money can buy many things, including prominence and notoriety in the conformation ring, as embodied in collections of cups and photos of a judge handing out a ribbon or trophy. But such prominence is nothing more than a grass fire, forgotten by next year, not about dogs as living things with inherent value to the people who they live and work with, little more than marker pieces on a dog show board game. Next year and the year after there would be new dogs, new imports, but nothing had been added to an ongoing American culture producing generations of quality working and family dogs of our own. Indeed, the cynic might comment, and not be far wrong, that the most fundamental hindrance to the advancement of the American working dog movement had been having too damn much money for our own good.

Thus because of culture and history these American hobbyists were oblivious, incapable of comprehending the fundamental principle: in order to be a working dog breeder one must become immersed in training and testing in the fundamentals of aggression, guarding, searching and general olfactory service. This knowledge base must not only be conceptual and abstract but also and even more importantly hands on. Buying trained dogs or paying others to train dogs omits the most important part of the process, the deep insight into whether a dog is adequate or not, and perhaps even a glimmer of insight into why, where an undesirable tendency might be coming from, as a guide to breeding decisions in later generations. In incessantly training, working and testing his dogs the breeder is able to see into their souls, interpret what emerges from the process as a guide to a next generation.

The overwhelming problem for the initial advocates was that individual effort or excellence is not enough; it takes so much more in terms of a comprehensive culture and infrastructure, that is a community of savvy breeders and capable trainers, a trial system to validate breeding stock and strong, ubiquitous local clubs with adequate training decoys. Also essential was the evolution of a general public not

only desiring serious dogs but also able to cope with them in day by day life, able to deal with the inherent aggression and high activity level. In Europe it all grew up together, but to recreate the culture rather than just importing dogs meant that we would have to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps, an endeavor in which even a century later we are still struggling.

Thus the paradox of the protective heritage breeds has always been that while the allure for the general public is the aura of power and protection, emasculating the breed for smooth transition into pet homes ultimately renders the promise of vigor and power empty. As breed popularity expands the portion of the dogs going into actual service diminishes and the breeders respond to the money, compromising character to sell into homes increasingly less able to deal with such robust dogs. Image dogs are by their nature a fashion whim, inherently short lived, most recently exemplified by the 1990s surge in American Rottweiler popularity. A long term viable working dog culture is much better served by smaller and in particular less rapidly growing numbers of enthusiasts and advocates, people desiring the dogs because of their inherent value and quality rather than as some sort of personal worth statement, a prop for a fragile ego. We would be much better off, worldwide, if all of these breeds had remained primarily in the hands of serious working people and trainers, with few but serious companion owners, a situation exemplified by the Malinois.

The dog world at large, that is the breeders and clubs, seek to project the image of the defenders of the heritage, guardians of noble canine breeds incipient from time immemorial. But the reality is much more pedestrian, is that these people are about personal aggrandizement, money and the pretense of prestige. Since the dog show is an inherently political process, where the person on the other end of the lead is often more influential than the dog, these quasi commercial breeders and exhibitionists come to dominate national, regional and local breed clubs. Ultimately the capricious public comes to perceive the deception and moves on to the next wonder breed. The breed club office holders, far from being guardians of an abstract culture and heritage, are little more than publicity and sales promoters at the beck and call of the breeders. The SV in Germany is perhaps the most egregious example.

Although the divergence between show and working lines began to emerge very early in Germany, until the 1950s the separation was less pronounced; working GSD pedigrees typically included well known ancestors also prominent at the Sieger¹ shows. In spite of this early on divergence, on the whole working dogs prospered in the hands of working men who took the time to train and work with their dogs, came to understand and appreciate the intricacies and subtleties. In the homelands there was an ongoing process of selecting, breeding, training and then testing so as to be able to produce a next, hopefully better, generation. It would have been entirely normal to routinely notice the progress of compatriots and fellow trainers, soliciting a pup or stud service when they seemed to have a piece of the puzzle. There was quite naturally pride and competition, but there was also cooperation in training and breeding, a sense of community, everybody more or less advancing together.

But this whole process, this whole cultural infrastructure, was missing in America. More to the point we had no idea, actually thought that by mating a male to a female we were breeding working dogs. The reality was nothing of the sort; we were producing empty replicas less and less worthy of service and the heritage in each generation. The fact that Europe was rapidly evolving separate, increasingly effete show lines is a story for another day, but they were doing it cynically and for the basest motivations, betraying the heritage for money and power. To our credit we were for the most part naive and ignorant, inherently less culpable.

¹ Annual conformation championship in Germany.

The Shepherd surge commencing in the 20's was followed up by a swell in popularity for the Doberman Pincher in the 1930s and then much later the Rottweilers in the 60s and 70s. The American Doberman enthusiasts turned out to be master promoters, conjured up the "Marine Devil Dog" image and saw many Dobermans, along with even more numerous but less well publicized German Shepherds, serve dramatically in the South Pacific Theatre. But at the end of the war the Marine canine program was abandoned – not to return until Vietnam – and the days of the Doberman had come and gone like a grass fire. Clever promotion and aggressive public relations were not enough.

This American bonanza was a German party mostly by default. The Germans, led by von Stephanitz, were promoters and salesman of the first rank, starting at the turn of the twentieth century. On the eve of WW I they had 6000 dogs trained and ready for deployment, mostly Shepherds but also Dobermans, Airedales and other breeds. The British and French were caught flat footed and their war dog programs were delayed several years into the war. The Americans had no program of their own, but made some use of allied dogs.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, prior to WW I, small numbers of Belgian dogs from the Ghent police program and a smattering of Airedale Terriers from England were imported by American police agencies, but this connection disappeared during the war. Modern British service has been by German breeds and neither British breeds nor British training have been of international significance for decades. As an aside, there were British programs during both wars, featuring local breeds such as Airedale Terriers in the 1914 war but also incorporating German Shepherds, which they called Alsations, in the second. Early on the Airedale was a serious contender on the continent; there was for instance extensive German use of Airedales dating back to the latter 1800s, prior to the existence of the German Shepherd as a formal breed, and continuing into WW II.

The French were never a factor in the serious American market for the simple reason that there is no French breed that has been a significant presence in police or military applications anywhere. Small numbers of French Ring Malinois, technically a variety of the Belgian Shepherd, have come into the hands of American Ringers, but to my knowledge very few if any have ever been imported for police or military service.

After a few dogs were imported by American police departments right after the establishment of the Ghent program in 1899 the Belgians, at the epicenter of two European conflagrations and under social and economic duress for most of the century, simply had no presence in American working affairs, that is police or military service, for most of the twentieth century. Thus this German Shepherd monopoly, this strangle hold, held fast until the last decade of the century, when the Malinois came out of nowhere to vie for predominance.

Up by the Bootstraps

Prior to the Vietnam War American police and military canine service had been minimal. A brief surge of war dog activity in WW II quickly withered², police dog service, very sparse to begin with, died out entirely in the early 1950s and there was no sport training and only very minor civilian involvement in protection or security training, primarily commercial security services of the junk yard dog sort. By the 1960s a few police canine units had come into service, but flagrantly aggressive use of dogs in the civil rights confrontations in the South resulted in another down turn, units being curtailed or eliminated due to concern about negative publicity.

² There was a small Korean War revival which did not persist.

When Americans finally began to become seriously involved, in the later 1970s, pulling ourselves up by the boot straps proved to be a daunting task: working dog selection and training is complex, multi-faceted and demanding; knowledgeable and capable helpers needed to be recruited and trained and existing infrastructure – mentors, decoys and clubs – was nonexistent. Working with existing dogs out of lines imported primarily on the basis of conformation proved frustrating, we soon realized the need to go back to Europe to see the working breeders rather than the exhibitionists.

A few incipient Schutzhund clubs began to form in the early 1970s, and by the end of the decade the sport was flourishing, and also full tilt into the political conflicts which plague us to this day.³ The United Schutzhund Clubs of America (USCA) emerged late in the decade in the wake of conflict, much of it the consequence of AKC slapping down GSDCA participation, but almost immediately there was a major split as many of the leading figures broke off, or were forced out, and affiliated with the German DVG organization.⁴ The infighting has gone on incessantly ever since.

In the early years there was the aura of wonder and innocence, of building a brave new world together; and the enthusiasm of the dogs, in contrast to the sterile AKC obedience experience, took training and competition to a new level. But real world pragmatics soon intruded: human nature being what it is it was not long before those who became impatient – wanted a short cut to the podium – took advantage of the obvious alternative. Rather than training, learning, breeding and cooperating – the old fashioned way – it was much easier to just go to Europe and purchase a trained and titled dog, buy rather than earn a place on the sport field. What began about a level playing field where the common man could prosper according to his inherent determination, skill and work ethic evolved toward just another American commercial venue, where the place on the podium was a commodity, open according to your financial means and willingness to pay. European trainers with an entrepreneurial spirit, carpet bags in hand, were soon coming to America to participate in the bonanza.

Trained imports have been a double edged sword. On the one hand, when pioneers such as Phil Hoelcher or Gene England were importing titled German Shepherds, beginning in the 1980s, and making waves on the trial fields and taking them back to European competition as better dogs there was a point to it. These early dogs provided Americans with a dramatic example of what was possible for such a dog, set the bar appropriately high. On the other hand people such as Tom and Holly Rose were very successful in training dogs from the ground up, breaking new ground and providing a prototype for the future. But even in this early era they had many years in the dog business behind them, particularly obedience competition, and were in this sense professional.⁵

The down side of the large scale importing of titled dogs for competition has been unforeseen consequences in terms of the professionalization of Schutzhund in America, the creation of an entirely different dynamic from the inherently amateur Euro ethic. Thirty years down the road, in an increasingly commercial environment,

³ French Ring came into existence a few years later, and a plethora of minor sports, mostly suit based, none of any real consequence, continue to come and go.

⁴ Sorry for the alphabet soup, but the sport is continually undergoing Balkanization; see a comprehensive glossary here: <http://www.angelplace.net/Angel/glossary.htm>

⁵ The term "professional" has complex and contradictory connotations, that is, when those supplying sexual gratification for money are referred to as professional it is most decidedly derogatory, but a professional actor or athlete is greatly respected and admired. I have sought to avoid moral judgements, and focus on the historical consequences, but it is difficult.

we are still small, insignificant and stagnant. This does not mean, however, that this approach was a "mistake" and that if we had only been pure of heart and better human beings we could have built a more successful amateur venue on the European model, it may simply have been impossible, with no direct way to get from where we were to where we wanted to be. With the benefit of hindsight — that is the magnitude of the difficulties in terms of distance, cost and organization to recreate the Euro culture — it is difficult to see how we could have made this happen. Not only was there a lack of any sort of organizational structure, there was both explicitly and implicitly the active opposition of the existing AKC establishment. The prevailing American view, inherited from our strongly British canine origins, was that aggression in dogs was a bad thing to be minimized or eliminated through breeding and training rather than an inherent aspect of the value of dogs for man. We were trying to build in an unfortuitous era where the trend to suburban living and the proliferation of other activities, especially for younger people, was diminishing the sense of community, developments which even in Europe were creating head wind.

In the kingdom of the blind the one eyed man is king, and some folks progressed very quickly, waving plated plastic cups standing on a little wooden box on the basis of someone else's training, two years later running seminars, often with the objective of evolving into a profitable business. But we were much too often not learning how to breed and train dogs, but rather learning how to select, polish and compete with increasingly expensive imports. This made it a rich boy's game, tended to preclude the working class family man or woman with limited resources. It is a pattern we have never really been able to break out of, so forty years later we are still largely on the same treadmill.

In more recent years a few men such as Ivan Balabanov have taken it to a new level, founding American based breeding and training operations second to none in the world. Ivan's Malinois saga is unique; there are no examples of comparable ground up breeding to podium German Shepherd programs in America. A primary reason for this is that German control and manipulation of American institutions — primarily GSDCA and USCA — has been a millstone around the neck of American GSD advocates, breeders and trainers. The Germans do not want us to advance, to aspire to parity, but rather to be forever subservient. They are much more interested in money than the heritage of von Stephanitz.

The vast majority of these trained and titled imports were German Shepherds, simply because titled dogs in other breeds were in very short supply. Alternate breed, titled dogs were not only less numerous, they were typically in the hands of more amateur oriented trainers unwilling to relinquish them on the altar of finance. So in the early days many or most of the best dogs on American Schutzhund fields were titled, imported German Shepherds. Others seeking a free pass to trial field tended to follow suit, creating an ongoing self-fulfilling prophesy of the superiority of the trained import.

Why this German domination? Primarily because of the legacy of von Stephanitz in that he created and projected an enormously successful marketing structure, international in focus from early on, rather than just a national registry. Even though WW I ultimately ended in defeat it did not end in occupation and the war turned out to be an enormous publicity vehicle for the German Shepherd breed, in particular sending the wave of overwhelming popularity home with the American troops and making "German Shepherd" synonymous with "police dog" worldwide.

No French breed has ever been a serious international factor in police or military canine service: their Beaucerons, Picardy Shepherds and Briards, although in many ways admirable breeds with serious potential, withered on the vine. There never was any sort of national effort to promote French commercial canine interests or worldwide participation in their programs. Through the 1970s the German Shepherd

was the predominant breed in French Ring, indeed "police dog" in France meant German dogs until a few Malinois began to seriously compete with the predominant German Shepherds on French Ring Sport fields in the 1970s. By the time I was first in attendance for the Cup of France competition at Lorient, on the Atlantic coast, in 1987 there were 17 Malinois, 7 German Shepherds and 2 Terveruren. The GSD entries were on the downward slide and virtually disappeared in later years.

French Ring came to the United States much more because advocates here persistently sought it. Although there was a very brief period in the 1990s when there was talk of an "International Ring" with promotional efforts in America, this seems to have been stillborn. Although many French judges and decoys have come to America and been helpful, cooperative and enthusiastic, there never was the broad organization wide engagement as we saw in the German national canine organizations, most especially the SV.

While France failed to become a serious international factor because there were no viable French breeds and no French international entrepreneurial spirit, the Belgians had the dogs — the Malinois — and a tiny flickering flame of the spirit but were simply too backward, small and divided nationally to recover from back to back German atrocities in two generations, were suppressed for most of the twentieth century by brutal German aggression.

The original vision of Schutzhund as a sport venue, what we idealized to exist in much of Europe, what to a large extent did actually exist, was groups of amateurs, middle and working class people with children, obligations and real lives to live, gathering together to train their dogs as comrades, each group and individual in their own small way contributing to a breed and an ongoing culture. Think of amateur softball leagues where people gather together after work and with a ten dollar bat and a five dollar ball enjoy comradery and a beer or two afterwards. Such venues are inherently open to young people, since there are no money barriers and many opportunities.

Now think about golf, an elite sport with multimillion dollar courses, stratified as to social class. Rather than amateur players working and playing together the paradigm is that of the professional and his clients, where the professional can supply \$500 clubs to extend your drives or sink your puts and provide elite individual instruction at any level of cost the market will bear. The professional must of course pander, take responsibility for the client's sense of self-worth, provide the rewarding sense of accomplishment that keeps the money flowing in, provide participation trophies as necessary.

Schutzhund in America has to an extent fallen into an elite professional and client paradigm very similar to golf, where the individual purchases accomplishments and a sense of worth and importance according to his financial status. He can purchase almost anything from puppies to competition dogs ready for a serious run at a podium place, and the coaching and training necessary to stand on the little wooden box and wave the tin cup. This of course excludes enormous numbers of people, especially young people except for the most well off and fortunate; but to have elite people you must have excluded people.

The problem is that the excluded drift away sooner, and those purchasing importance and the trial placement, if they have any intelligence at all, drift away only a bit later, after a dog or two, finding it an inherently empty experience. This has been going on for more than thirty years and in the larger picture we are going no place in terms of growth, sportsmanship or a contribution to the breeds and real police and military service.

In one sense the golf analogy is imprecise; for this program is almost entirely a commercial enterprise, supported entirely by fees for service with no one putting in personal effort or support without the expectation of payment. The truly amateur

origins of the American Schutzhund movement was driven by many people putting in enormous amounts of time, effort and personal funds for things such as bringing over European judges with no expectation of payment or profit, purely of idealistic commitment to the vision of an amateur venue as existed in Europe. Many of the professional people, especially in the early days, had similar motivations and made a serious effort to give back as much or more than they took. But increasingly the purely business and profit motivated nature has become more predominant, many strictly acting in their own interest, essentially parasites. In the long term this is going to drive out the truly amateur idealists, who will become weary of putting in effort and personal funds only see the benefit flowing into the pockets of opportunists.

My belief is that in spite of the enormous difficulties and obstacles we need to pursue the original working specific, amateur paradigm and renew an effort to foster serious American lines going into military and police service as well as amateur competition. To succeed we must free ourselves of European control and manipulation, in particular the millstone of the SV show dog breeders, and commercial interests. We must also make a serious course correction toward trial rules, procedures and judging related to serious functionality relative to real police and military service, that is steer away from scoring on the basis of style and inherently irrelevant factors.

This return to our origins and roots will be enormously difficult and may in reality be beyond what we are capable of, but we need to make the effort because the current road leads only to irrelevance and gradual decline into nothingness.

Jim Engel, Marengo © Copyright September, 2016

Background and Reference

[Glossary](#)

[Decline and Fall of the House of von Stephanitz](#)

[Who Owns the House of von Stephanitz?](#)

[SV Power Corrupts](#)

[Working Dog Organizations](#)

[Supreme Authority of the Canine World](#)

[Animal Rights and Wrongs](#)

[German Shepherd Police Dog Heritage Repudiated](#)

[SV Abandons Work Test for Breeding](#)

[AWDF, Stillborn American Elite](#)

[Emergence of a new Canine World Order](#)

[American Consequences of the WUSV Vindication](#)

[The Way Forward](#)

[Meltdown in America](#)

[Legacy Lost, the Other Breeds](#)

[Temperament or Character Testing](#)

[Jack of All Trades?](#)

[Style and Opinion Sports](#)

[The Commercialization of Schutzhund](#)

[How We Play the Game](#)

[Has Sport Subverted the Schutzhund Trial?](#)

[The Herding Canard](#)

[The Mother State](#) 2016

Web presence:

[Schutzhund America](#)

[Ongoing FCI / WUSV Strife](#)

[Conacts & References](#)

Much more historical detail can be found in the police dog book:

[The Police Dog: Evolution, History and Service](#)