



# TRADITION and PARADIGM SHIFT

By Professor Dr Heinrich Meßler, SV and WUSV President

In part two of his report SV and WUSV President Heinrich Meßler refers to the urgently necessary

changes in terms of the attitude toward pedigree-dogs under consideration of the conditions of a changing environment in this respect. According to Professor Meßler this is the only way to lead the German Shepherd Dog breed on the road toward a successful future.

Dear friends and aficionados of the German Shepherd Dog Breed: To begin with I would like to thank you for all the feedback I received with regard to my latest publication in the October issue of the SV Magazine. Apart from two comments that were inappropriate to put it into mild words I was very happy to obtain so much approval from our readers in terms of the need for action that we are currently facing. An overwhelming number of readers agreed with me in terms of the needed innovation and adaption to the current social conditions and circumstances. By the same token, and as a central theme, many expressed their considerable doubts whether our organization will be able and muster the necessary power to cope with the absolutely indispensable reforms from within after having suffered from a continuous decline for the past 30 years.

In the September issue of the SV Magazine I expressed my concerns with regard to the decrease of key figures such as membership numbers and puppy registrations which have become alarming. This development has loomed for the past 30 years now. In the light of the current Covid 19 pandemic we are urgently forced to take action in this regard if we do not wish to jeopardize the existence of our organisation in its present form. The statistics as provided in my latest publication are self-explanatory and there is strong evidence that our problems are not only based exclusively on general social conditions but also on framework conditions that are specific to our organisation itself.

## **The Aim: Consolidation at a solid Level**

And I am not the only one who is convinced that it is instrumental for a successful future of our breed that we maintain respectively once again obtain a minimum of at least 50,000 to 60,000 members as well as 10,000 to 12,000 puppy registrations per year in Germany.

In this connection particular attention should be dedicated to the synergetic use of our resources in the mother country of the breed as well as the resources of our friends abroad. Contrary to the former heartland of pedigree breeding – Europe – the worldwide trend toward pedigree breeding – especially the German Shepherd Dog as well – remains unchanged.

At this point I would like to give special thanks to our WUSV member countries for their fruitful and targeted cooperation throughout the past years. The appreciation of the cooperation between the SV and the WUSV will – no doubt – provide for further synergetic effects. This issue will be addressed at some other occasion.

## **German Shepherd Dogs Breeding is tantamount to Working Dogs Breeding**

Emotionally, traditionally and according to our statutes we are bound to the guiding principle of our founding father – Cavalry Captain von Stephanitz. It is our original function to lead this cultural heritage – as some like to call it – into the third millennium and to provide it with further meaning and significance.

This is a challenge that has to be taken for serious and in consideration of the current conditions and constraints it requires an unprecedented level of adaptability and flexibility.

At this point I will refrain from joining the – from my point of view rather esoteric – discussion in terms of the definition of a working dog, leave alone to once again reopen the debate in this respect. I leave it up to the interested reader to decide whether this kind of discourse that has

been going on for decades, now, really served our breed.

A definition of the term *Working Dog* which I think is understandable and not burdened with ideology can be found on WIKIPEDIA as follows:

*Working dogs are dogs who are employed for specific tasks (used). They belong to the group of utility dogs. Working dogs are employed for instance (...) in case of disasters, as police service dogs, as sleuth dogs for drug searching, or as rescue dogs in case of avalanche accidents. The dogs have to comply with specific requirements in terms of their physique (power, height, manoeuvrability), their character (with good level of drive or resistance to irritation) and in terms of their training. The properties in terms of their character and physique depend on the respective field of employment the dogs are assigned for. The most important common feature of working dogs is – however – a strong willingness to learn and absolute obedience. It is important to start working on the dogs' socialization from the earliest possible age on.*

If we follow suit with this definition it has to be noted that a significant loss of “true” working dogs was suffered during the course of the past century as a result of social and sociological change in the industrial countries all over the world.

In the past, the animals did a hard job as herding dogs, watch dogs, cattle dogs, livestock guardian dogs, and hauling dogs. And this describes only a limited range of their fields of employment.

The selection criteria as imposed upon them by their employer, the humans, were likewise strict. For the working dogs this was a rather simple equation. Dogs who did not work properly were no longer provided with food and by the same token they were not supposed to have progeny either.

Many fields of deployment for working and service dogs have in the meantime been replaced by modern technology or seem to have become obsolete for social aspects. If you think about it how many of our dogs serve as herding, rescue, service, search, tracking and special dogs, and especially as guard dogs these days compared to former decades.

This is for sure a minority clearly in decline and the working dogs had only one chance for survival.

The dog who earned his or her living by work was replaced by the service dog raised and kept by enthusiasts and fanciers. In a similar way as for humans, work in terms of physical activities was replaced by sports as a not directly value adding activity.

### **Changes in the Conditions for Selection**

Another at worldwide level accepted definition of the term „working dog” is as follows:

*„Dogs who passed a working dog examination are considered working dogs”.*

As a matter of fact, this is exactly how we define ourselves within our organization. With the shift from working dogs to service dogs owned by enthusiasts and fanciers also the conditions for selection became subject to change.

In the founding years of the breed the dogs were exclusively bred under consideration of functional aspects for their special tasks and service to mankind. Accordingly, the standards are functionally derived from their future fields of employment. As a logical consequence, this led to a gradual selection of the breeding dogs in terms of a holistic functionality. The separation in physical and mental properties of the complex functionality led to the phenomena of the so-called over typification.

This can immediately be recognized – even by the untrained eyes of a layperson, and this leads to an understandable scepticism toward pedigree dog breeding – and not only in terms of the German Shepherd Dog breed.

When the fields of employment for working dogs became obsolete and the number of dogs increased who were kept by enthusiasts, the selection parameters were more and more replaced by the working dog examinations.

### **Flight from Top Level Events**

Instead of taking a holistic approach toward pedigree dog breeding and consider the dog in its functionality, during the course of the decades a separation between the emphasis in the morphologic and mental field took place. According to their respective fields of interest one group was rather focused on the morphologic appearance and the other group on the mental

properties of the dogs. Breeding and trotting structure on the one hand, and trial and IGP on the other hand have already become synonyms for us.

And we are now faced with the result hereof: on the one hand we have trotters who – even though this might sound a bit exaggerated – can scratch their noses with their hind legs while in a fast trot as practised by our organisation and who can sometime still be seen on the occasion of exhibitions, but who cannot be seen anywhere in wildlife. On the other hand, we have dogs who are able to gain a total of 300 points under consideration of the currently applicable examination requirements. However, this kind of performance is occasionally associated with a drive and social behaviour that does not necessarily meet the approval of our modern society. And thus, we are faced with the question whether we left those important fields to monomaniac enthusiasts for show and trial during the “good old times”.

And this clearly happens at the expense of popular sports and of the demand for German Shepherd dogs within our society.

A maximum of five percent of the total of our members has found a partly lucrative field of activity within their “biotope”. And at this point a very inconvenient truth presents itself.

On the most important events and competitions in the field of breeding and trial only a hard core of specialists and experts can be found. On the other hand, a massive and significant withdrawal of the non-professional enthusiasts from top events can be perceived all the way down to the grass roots of our organization.

We badly neglected the broad middle of our organization – our grass roots as I like to call them. Which raises the question whether these dogs whom I occasionally refer to as *Lamborghinis* or *Unimog* actually find a market in our society at all.

In the meantime, almost every layperson has become familiar with the fatal consequences of over typification, which is partly passed on in a deforming fashion and to the disproportional detriment of the breed.

But one thing can be taken for granted: the average consumer knows how to use a Golf car-brand. As a matter of fact, in this car the driver does not reach a top speed of 320 kilometres per hour, or drive up a mountain at an angle of 45 degrees. Nevertheless, if he or she is in the possession of a normal car, they will find 97 percent of their needs still covered. Any kind of over typification – in what-ever direction – is at any rate counterproductive.

### **The Universal Dog**

It will facilitate our arguments in the future to come if we can plausibly define our breed as a universal dog who suits many purposes. In this context, we need to refer and focus on the universal functionality of the breed. It will only be in this way that we can explain and further develop the relation between breeding and the breed standard.

It is my firm belief that the functional pedigree breeding of dogs in general – but in particular for our breed – has a real chance for survival if we work on a holistic and functional basis.

The SV and the WUSV share the responsibility and preserve the legacy of the founding fathers of the breed.

In the international breeding rules of the FCI – unfortunately – the responsibility of the individual breeds is assigned to the national Kennel Clubs, as you can read in the following excerpt:

*Competence and responsibility for breeding rests with the member countries and contract partners of the FCI and includes breeding guidance, breeding advice and monitoring breeding as well as the keeping of the studbook.*

It is our most pressing task – and the task of all the other founding organizations respectively world associations – to claim back our responsibility for breeding, both – de facto and de jure. This is the only way to stop a further splitting respectively factionalism in terms of the responsibility for the individual breeds.

### **Shared Responsibilities**

The breed specific world associations respectively

the founding organizations are fully responsible for the functional origins of their respective breeds and for the implementation of their breed standards.

The incapacitation of these organizations by the FCI entailed a lacking sense of orientation within the individual national organisations that are now clearly visible in the field of dog sports and the sector for working dogs. The fatal results are now becoming a first-hand experience.

The continuation of functional and standard based dog breeding under consideration of performance criteria will only be possible if the world associations and the founding organizations dedicate themselves to their breed at a global level and under consideration of stringent objectives, and if they do not allow external organizations to deprive them of their responsibilities.

All over the world, national clubs for pedigree dog breeding enjoy the benefit of having competent members and functionaries who need to begin to cooperate at a worldwide level if they wish that their breed does resist the current pressure. In order to guarantee the long-term survival of pedigree dog breeding every individual organization for breeding needs to join forces. It goes without saying that only a central and responsible leadership will be able to manage the survivability of the individual breeds – however – this can only succeed on a democratic basis.

It is about time that the majority of functional organizations for pedigree dog breeding becomes aware of their responsibilities toward their breeds, their founders and clients with the aim to initiate the necessary counter regulation.

### **Family Dog and Working Dog**

The worldwide popularity of the German Shepherd Dog is based on its high-performance level as a hereditary factor and on the variety the breed offers in terms of the possible areas of employment.

And I do still claim that we did indeed successfully manage to stabilize the excellent potential of our breed through scientifically supported breeding activities during the past 125 year – despite the

restrictions as already outlined above.

We can offer our society and authorities a dog that as a whole is still unparalleled.

Bearing in mind the heritage of cavalry captain von Stephanitz I feel the commitment to offer our society a universal, sound, predictable and reliable dog – primarily as a family and sports dog – under consideration of changing social conditions.

Each of us should reflect upon the question whether the range of a working dog in the current context should be limited to trotting and to 300 points. Or whether we wish to offer our society a breed ranging from therapy dogs and Corona virus tracking dogs to rescue dogs up to guard and police dogs.

This kind of broad range cannot be covered by an individual dog but only by the breed as a whole. And there is no point for discussion that also in the future to come a selection will take place in accordance with the needs of the individual interest groups. An instrumental requirement for a successful future will depend on the reciprocal acceptance of the different groups of interest and the mutual support they offer each other.

PS: In this part of my contribution I tried to shed some light on the changes in terms of our attitude toward pedigree dog breeding under consideration of changing boundary conditions. I will comment on the necessities this entails in one of the next issues of the SV Magazine and address the following issues:

1. Simplified access to Breeding
2. Differentiation of the Offer
3. Portales: Options for Local Groups