



Grunfeld German Shepherds - source Facebook-forum 21/11/2009.

(Claudia Romard interview with Elmar Mannes)

One man's view about Schutzhund and the German Shepherd Dog breed today by Claudia Romard. Training for the top 12 Schutzhund USA.

For this issue of Schutzhund USA Magazine, I took the chance to talk to a man that is not only a "Schutzhund –Old timer" who started in the sport long before most of us did – he actually started even before a lot of us were born – but a man who managed to adapt to the evolution of the sport as a successful trainer, handler, breeder and respected judge.

The person I am talking about is none other than Elmar Mannes, BSP competitor, breeder "vom Leipheimer Moor" and a judge that has been invited to many trials all over the world.

Elmar trained and handled dogs like Basko vom Flughafenrand, King vom Körbelbach (BSP, sire of Arc vom Bunsenkoher), Jenny vom Körbelbach (BSP, foundation female for the kennel vom Leipheimer Moor), Kim vom Lisdorferland (BSP, sire of Kondor vom Flughafenrand, Yessica von der Adelegg and many more) and his recent dog Sid vom Haus Pixner (BSP).

Elmar's decades of experience as a breeder, helper, trainer and judge and his passion for the breed are the basis of his strong view of the GSD breed and our sport today. His goal always was, and still is, to do whatever he can to improve the quality of the breed that we all love.

I asked Elmar for a little introduction and this is what he wrote:

I am 61 years old, married for many years and the father of two daughters.

Further am I a proud grandfather to a wonderful granddaughter.

My family accepts and supports my hobby 100 percent. My passion is training and breeding GSDs.

I first joined the SV in 1966. After handling primarily show dogs in my early years I switched to working dogs. Through the years I handled many dogs in even more trials in all levels. I showed my dogs in small club trials, Regional and National events with differing degrees of success.

In 1985, I became a SV judge and since then I have been fortunate to judge several National and International competitions in Europe and the USA and even in Japan.

Further I was invited to give numerous seminars for handlers and helpers in those countries. I endeavor to judge fairly and to put the best dog, which demonstrates exceptional working qualities, on top.

In 1971 I started breeding GSDs. My SV registered kennel name is "vom Leipheimer Moor." The name refers to the region in Germany where I reside. More than 100 litters (four times through the alphabet) were registered with the SV

throughout the years. So I have seen many puppies develop into top working dogs. My first breeding goal and philosophy is to breed healthy and handler-strong working dogs, that is, dogs that can deal with stress and recover quickly from a correction.

I hope to stay healthy for many more years because I want to continue my contribution to the preservation of our breed's quality. Furthermore I want to support the honest dog people and breeders with my experience if it is needed."

CR: Elmar, in the past you repeatedly made comments about your personal belief that judges have a strong responsibility towards the future of the GSD. Could you explain this standpoint to our readers?

Judges always had a strong responsibility due to the fact that they are the ones that give the dogs the titles. The SchH1 with a minimum of 80 points in protection is a breed relevant title.

Out in the clubs we often hear people complaining about breed surveys where dogs with very poor performances in protection still pass the breed survey with a "pronounced" rating and that this hurts the quality of our breed. Let's look at it a bit more closely – all these dogs got their SchH1 prior to their breed survey and this title was always given by a performance judge. We, as judges, select the breeding stock by giving them such a title. Therefore I think the judges need a very high level of knowledge about the training of our dogs in all three disciplines. Furthermore those judges have to be equipped with good self-confidence, a high level of responsibility and an unselfish passion for the breed. They should have a "strong spine" – the courage to speak the truth in the face of pressure. Then those candidates need to be prepared properly with training and guidance.

In my opinion the most suitable people for this "job" due to their knowledge and experience are:

1. Helpers with a high skill level and years of experience
2. Experienced handlers that have proven their skills by training and showing different dogs successfully on a high level in all three phases.

Those are the people that – if they are willing to sacrifice their free time – bring a lot of feeling for the right training to the table. They also have the ability not to go overboard with little mistakes and to understand the positive and negative traits of the dogs and their qualities.

It should be easy for a judge to evaluate performances even at Regional or National events. The only occurring problem that they might run into could be a lack of concentration throughout the two to three days of judging, but the quality of the performance in every discipline should be evaluated correctly and scored accordingly.

Let me get a bit more into detail here to demonstrate what I am talking about:

Tracking:

It should not be enough that the dog just "walks" the track to receive a V score. Part of an "excellent" track is a high level of concentration and strong obedience. One of my teachers once said to me: "For our dogs with their noses and their incredible ability to discriminate scents you can compare a Schutzhund track with driving on the freeway.

The Schutzhund track itself is an easy task, but we added some things like asking the dog to "stay in line" on straights and in "curves" (corners) and we demand to

follow the rules (according to the rule book).

Obedience:

It is normal and expected today that the dog's heeling is alert and with a constant eye contact to the handler. It is even commented negatively if a dog checks out his environment while the handler is walking/running away after a correctly shown sit, down or stand. At a judge's meeting we discussed half a point loss in the free heeling for over 30 minutes. In my eyes we do not see what is essential here; we are training a living creature!! The dog should be attentive to the handler in heeling, but not necessarily like a machine. I think that a lot of people that want to see such a behavior in a dog also have never been involved in the training of a dog with a very strong personality. Dogs like that will always try to escape the pressure and do what they want to do. Just take a look at very obedient dogs in protection and their hardness; the majority of those dogs are not strong enough for the high demands in big events. It is normal for a strong dog to glance away to check the environment because they need to check out things for themselves. www.germanshepherddog.com July/August 2008 13

The next thing is the speed of the recalls in obedience. It definitely should be the fast speed of a German Shepherd Dog, but you should not try to compare it with the speed of other breeds that have a total different "nerve" make-up. You also have to see the correctness of the dog besides the speed; I am talking about the straight fronts, fast and straight finishes and the correct (not elevated) sitting position throughout the routine.

Protection:

It is a fact that the protection phase is the number one criteria for the selection of breeding partners especially in big trials. This is where spectators, handlers, trainers and breeders can watch the dogs and make up their mind about what they like and what they dislike.

To be able to judge correctly in protection we need well-conditioned, energetic helpers with a lot of dog knowledge and experience. The judges need to be aware that they are NOT judging obedience, which means that the dogs should show a certain required guidability but that this should not be the main focus in this phase. A strong dog will not heel in the same manner as in Obedience. The judge should be able to see what the dog's motivation is in front of the helper. If it is a dog vs. man fight, then this should be seen very positive. If it is the fight for the prey, then that is very positive as well. If it is the motivation to play with the helper then it should be seen much more negative.

It is important to see the power the dog puts into the strike and to evaluate how hard and calm are the grips. This is what the judges need to learn and what they need to be taught in.

The whole attitude of the dog and overall demeanor is important. A small female dog will not have the size and strength of a large male, but a good judge will notice the intensity of her fighting, trying to dominate the helper. This knowledge can either come through own experiences as a helper or through close observation in training sessions.

Judges should not hesitate to engage in conversations about those topics with experienced trainers, handlers and helpers.

We as judges need to be very aware how much we are involved in the selection of our breeding stock. It is not rhetoric talent that makes a good judge; it is

knowledge and honesty without big egos.

CR: Maybe you should try to describe how the “perfect” GSD looks for you personally. Which traits does this dog have and how is this dog supposed to be structurally?

I think that there is no such thing as the “perfect GSD”.

There is so much that we expect from our dogs in areas like character and anatomy that it is impossible to get perfection.

Further, perfection would be totally subjective; every individual has their personal priorities.

My personal values and priorities are:

Most important to me is the animal’s fitness, the overall health and the genetic background (ancestors). I am not just talking about good hips and elbows here, but how often the dog needs to see the vet for things like allergies, digestive tract problems, growing problems, etc. I would also include breeding problems, how the dog’s behavior is being bred and how easy or hard the whole birth procedure is for the female.

We really have to keep an eye on the fitness in the bloodlines.

For the anatomy I like to see something like a SG body. I am thinking of a medium size, compact dog with normal hair, good muscle tone and good bones. The animal has to have something special; it has to catch my eye when I see it the first time. It is hard to explain that in more detail.

For the work I need a good portion of braveness and self–confidence, a normal play drive and good handler hardness. The rest is controlled and strongly influenced by the environment and how the puppy is raised. I’ll try to keep it short here, if I would start getting into more details about this topic, I would have a hard time stopping and probably write a book.

Elmar’s second passion is music, especially the oldies of the 60s and 70s like the Beatles and the Stones. He is part of a band called “The Rockets” and some of you might even remember seeing them playing at the BSP 2004 in Oberhausen, where Elmar also competed with his dog Sid vom Haus Pixner.

CR: You trained and handled a bunch of different dogs throughout the years. Which one was the most important one for your career as a handler? Which were the ones that taught you the most?

I handled quite a few dogs at the BSP with more or less success, but the ones I learned the most from were the ones that I was not able to show in the big events. Those were the ones that showed me my limits as a handler/trainer by testing me in every possible situation. From them I learned about respect for the animal! It was very simple . . . whenever it hurt I had to come up with a different way to train and get my message across. The “detour” ways often took much longer and also did not always show the improvement I wished for, but what was most important was that I did not break the strong, dominant character of the dog. If you have a dominant dog you must make the dog believe that he is “in it for himself” to gain his cooperation. I might not have had the big success with those dogs, but we maintained a high esteem for each other.

The dogs I am talking about were:

– Basko vom Flughafenrand (born 1976)

– Ilko vom Peko Haus (born 1984, sire of Laines vom Leipheimer Moor and Sid vom Haus Pixner's great-grandfather on the mother's mother side)

– Bajakko vom Kiebitzende

I also do not want to forget to name the different people that were exceptional teachers to me, who taught me the majority of what I know today: Jürgen Ritzi and Reinhard Lindner in training and breeding, and as a helper in protection, Walter Kreipl. The very best of all was Günther Funke. He was a wonderful friend and a judge with tons of knowledge and feeling for our dogs. Friendship and trust is very important in the sport.

There is a very interesting African saying I would like to share:

"If you want to go fast, go by yourself; If you want to go far, go with others!"

CR: I know this is a very hard question because this is where the whole problem starts . . . Subjectivity.

Everybody sees the world with different eyes and what is beautiful and desirable for one may not be desirable at all for somebody else. Do you have an idea how we could try to reach more objectivity?

In all those years as a handler and judge I met very different owner/handler characters. I think we have to ask how the "perfect" handler and breeder looks to get closer to the answer of this question. Everybody in this sport starts as a newbie, a green handler. We all have to learn a lot, some are more talented interacting with dogs than others. Most essential is to watch, to listen and to try!

We often meet people that pretend to know everything; those people are lost for the sport. We NEVER stop learning! Each dog we are confronted with gives us new problems we have to master, new lessons we have to learn. If we do not observe what others do we will not learn and not improve. It is not just the "big" names, the so-called "gurus" with their videos, books and seminars you are learning from. The most of those "trainers" just want to make a lot of money fast.

If you are willing to pay attention and watch, you also learn from the normal people on their club fields who make mistakes on a regular basis. Even if the only thing you might realize is how not to do it, it still is something you have learned. As an old and experienced trainer and handler you often run into the problem that you forgot about certain training methods and then you need someone to refresh your memory because exactly this method might be the suitable one for the dog you are just training.

In my seminars I often have the handlers describe their dog before we start training and those assessments are very often very wrong! Those are the people that need to learn and just need some guidance and knowledge because they do not do that on purpose. Bad for me, without hope and hurtful for the breed, are the ones that do not acknowledge their dog's problems and pretend to have the best dog ever. Then when they are trialing, the helper, the judge, and everybody around is responsible for their failure. Those are also the people in training who only train what the dog already knows best just to shine in front of everybody. It is comforting to know that you can find them all over the world in any area of life. I have no idea how to solve the lack of objectivity problem.

This is an evil not just in Schutzhund. Maybe it would help to stop idolizing the "big" trainers and to research their ways first to find out if that would be at all

suitable for yourself and your dog. Another possibility would be to have the judge ask the handlers for an honest evaluation of their dogs prior to the SchH1. There is a saying in my circle of dog people that hits the nail on the head:

"It is easier to tell a handler that their spouse sucks than telling them that their dog sucks".

CR: "Kennel blindness" and the missing ability to evaluate your breeding stock honestly seems to be a big issue. The question I am asking myself is how you can find a partner for your own dog that can fill the missing links if you do not know what they are. How do you see that?

You know yourself how hard it is to become a responsible breeder, how much energy and time are involved and also experience in bloodlines. I got really lucky. I had Jürgen Ritzi as my adviser and assistant. We spent hundreds of evening hours discussing the quality of different dogs and their value for the breed. The second person I learned from was a breeder in my region who concentrated in reading and analyzing pedigrees to select breeding partners. We looked at many pedigrees and even extended these pedigrees by two additional generations.

We spent a lot of time doing those things, but in the long run it did not really show much improvement in the breeding program. The only good thing that came out of it was that we learned a lot about those old bloodlines.

For the breed today, I think it is important to know parents and grandparents personally or through trustworthy sources.

It is very important to look at the dog and analyze which "ancestor-type" the dog reflects, and then you have to decide if this is the right bloodline, the one you were looking for.

Further we should look at the dog's entire family, such as parents, grandparents, siblings, etc. We use the word "durchgezüchtet" in German which means that a dog is not a single product. This dog's siblings show a high level of uniformity and not a variety of different types. Missing uniformity could influence the outcome of the next generation and make the dog more unpredictable as a breeding partner. In the past I was fortunate to own males with bloodlines that complemented my breeding female's bloodlines and I was able to create a stable foundation for the future. I am curious and excited to see what the Kim-Sid combination has in store for me.

In my opinion you are very fortunate if you own such an outstanding dog, that you have to be thankful, care for them and you have to treat them with respect. Think twice about turning such a dog into money. The money is gone so fast, but a dog like that is hard to find.

When it comes to kennel blindness, I think the main reason for it is not a lack of knowledge, but a financial aspect. To sell your product people are willing to hide and bend the truth and nowadays with the Internet it is so easy to spread the word -true or untrue- across the whole wide world!

CR: One very important trait to you seems to be handler hardness.

For me this is a very fine line, because extremes in both directions make a dog almost untrainable. Can you explain to our readers what you are striving for and what you would consider too much or too little?

Handler hardness is very important for the breed. You are right, extremes, no matter in which direction are never good.

I want to share some of my experiences with you. The handler hardness in my dogs never caused injuries if I raised the dog from a puppy or got him as a young dog because I got the chance to channel the behavior in the right direction. The only times dogs decided to bite me were when I got the dog older and he already had a successful bite history with his prior owners. Those dogs were put into a situation where they did not understand what they were asked to do and/or which caused pain and learned that they can change the situation by using their teeth. This learned behavior was imprinted and therefore difficult to control. I totally ignore people that want to show me how "tough" their dogs are by trying to bite them. A lot of handlers are afraid of their dogs and this fear can strengthen even moderate dogs. Reactions that are caused by that are normally eliminated very fast.

Let's get back to the breeding topic. If I breed such a handler hard, dominant dog then we do not automatically get puppies with the same level of hardness and dominance.

Behavior like that washes down with every generation. So if we are taking two already handler soft partners that do their work motivated by playing with the helper, then we are going to get puppies that are impressed by the fact that the handler is in a bad mood or by just giving them a "dirty" look.

Last but not least you cannot confuse handler hardness with bad nerves and a poor temperament!! My dog Basko was –aside from training– the best play pal for my then young children.

CR: My experience is that dogs that were raised, sheltered without any stress to deal with, often turn out to be quite sensitive. Do you think the way a puppy was raised has a significant influence in the hardness he will show as an adult?

This is the same with raising kids. Some are over protected and kept away from any problem, but at some point they have to face the real life with all its hardness; they cannot deal with it then because they never learned how to. Kids that have to make decisions from early on and who have to fight for themselves have a lot easier time later on in the real world.

The same happens with our animals. We cannot pretend that the world is all good without anything bad ever happen to them and then we demand obedience and correctness. They will not understand that, it will confuse them. Most of them either fall apart or start defending themselves. It is important to give a puppy age–appropriate boundaries and limitations–simply some basic obedience–throughout their puppyhood to prepare them for life. Puppies need to understand that a correction is not the end of the world. They need to learn that there are consequences for their behavior. You will have a lot more fun with your dog and he will have it much easier.

CR: The last question I want to ask touches a very misunderstood and controversial topic – aggression.

Especially for breeders it would be beneficial to be able to evaluate aggression during a trial performance. How do you as a judge tell that a dog is working through aggression and what kind of aggression?

Without aggression you will never get far in protection. We have to recognize our

dogs' genetic make-up and then we have to try to balance prey and aggression. This is the helper's job in a young dog, and it has to be done early and with a lot of feeling. There are not too many helpers around anymore that can do that. This is a gift that grows with training and experience, because you are walking along a very fine line here. Without touching the aggression you might be able to get a visually nice prey performance for a limited time, but this will get worse. In time the dog loses interest and motivation to show the same power and enthusiasm they did before. Prey is "play" and the dog can choose to play, or not. On the other hand, The fear that causes aggression is always recallable and will evoke energy against the helper.

Aggression is a survival mode, an instinctive reaction. For us judges it is not easy anymore to differentiate real aggression from acted aggression in a trial performance and if we are not 100% sure what we are seeing then we should not comment on it at all. The training is too good nowadays, and you can cover up so much. If I am personally interested in the dog then I put the sleeve on myself and take one or two normal, unspectacular bites from the dog on a leash to see how the dog responds.

CR: Thank you very much for your honest opinions. I truly admire that you are not afraid to speak your mind even if some things might cause controversy in the dog community. Is there anything you want to tell our readers? Any final words of wisdom and good advice?

First of all I want to thank you, Claudia, for the outstanding translation. All those things I talked about are ideas, thoughts and philosophies that grew throughout my many years as a dog person. Me and my friends talked about them and discussed them many, long hours and I am aware that there are as many people that agree with me as there are people that have an opposing opinion. I am always open for an honest discussion!

In my eyes the Schutzhund training is at its peak now. If you look at a big event like the BSP, you will see a high degree of consistency. You do not see the dogs anymore that show something special, something out of the ordinary. 130 teams in obedience without any V score tells you something about the uniformity of training and handling. People look for an even picture and individuals that stand out are punished. For the spectators, this trend is often boring to watch.

In protection we see the same old routine over and over again from helpers and dogs. The time of the "ohhhhs" and "ahhhhs" in the bleachers is over.

Often spectacular individuality is eliminated in training because the handler's fear point loss. Constant changes of rules and regulations also do not make it easy for the handlers; therefore we see more and more dull performances that lack sparkle.

It is important to take care of the established way and even more important to preserve it, to stand up for your opinion in an honest way, and last but not least to share the knowledge with the interested ones.

CR:USA