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TRAINING THE ELITE

At Adlerhorst Police K9 Academy, dog training is serious business.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTOPHER WARDWELL

A black German Shepherd Dog training for patrol work.

David Reaver, founder of Adlerhorst International Police K9 Academy in Riverside, Calif., which procures, trains and sells police K9s, wants people to know that the dogs that come out of his school are not vicious attack dogs. As a man who has spent decades combating misconceptions about the safety of his dogs, the distinction is of primary importance.

"They are not lethal weapons," Reaver says. In fact, he says none of the thousands of dogs Adlerhorst has placed since its inception in 1976 are responsible for any deaths.

However, the dogs' undeniable power to inflict injury, mixed with a political climate that is, Reaver says, sympathetic to criminals' rights, makes dog bites a potential liability issue for Adlerhorst and its clientele, which consists mostly of law-enforcement agencies. With this in mind, Reaver is painstaking about which dogs are allowed into service. "A dog doesn't leave here unless I know I can show it to a jury," he says. In fact, Reaver says he has demonstrated the obedience and functionality of dogs to courts in several police-dog bite cases.

If anybody is aware of the injuries his dogs can administer, it's Reaver himself, who estimates he's been bit "well over 1,000 times" in his 40 years of training. His forearms, a faint mosaic of scar tissue, testify to the statement. "It's like when you work with electricity, you're going to get shocked," says Reaver, who was a professional electrician before he started Adlerhorst. "When you're training dogs for this kind of work, it's not a question of if you're going to get bit, but when."

Reaver says that about 12 of the bites he's suffered were serious, including one where the end of his left thumb had to be surgically reattached.

A family business

Most people wouldn't think that a small family business is responsible for training thousands of elite law-enforcement K9s for some of the country's most high-profile airports (such as Los Angeles International Airport) and more than 500 police departments (including the Los Angeles Police Department, the San Francisco Police Department and the Arizona State Police). But in every sense, Adlerhorst is a family business.

Reaver, his wife Pip (the couple met when Reaver provided her with a guard dog) and his son Mike – all of whom are actively involved in the business – live in houses built within the 7½ acres that contain Adlerhorst. They employ a staff of nine experienced trainers (who live off-site), each a retired K9 police officer.

At the center of the operation is Reaver, who sports a neat, gray paintbrush-style mustache that makes him look like retired military brass – a characterization enhanced by the padded training stick (called a *slagstok)* that he typically carries in his right fist. Reaver is the resident expert at Adlerhorst.

"Some of the things you see Dave do with the dogs, you won't see anybody else do; they're too scared," says Greg Yerington of Lake Forest, Calif., an Adlerhorst trainer who formerly worked as a K9 officer for the Newport Beach Police Department in California. "It's like the dogs see him, and they're like, 'Whoa, it's Dave.'"

Reaver started the business after having been heavily involved in the sport of shutzhund and KNPV (which stands for *Koninklijke Nederlandse Politiehond Vereniging,* and is the standard by which Dutch police dogs are trained). Reaver saw an alarming contrast between what sportsmen knew about dogs and what professional K9 units knew. "In the '70s, police departments were very primitive in the way they went about training," Reaver says. "I looked at the people training these [shutzhund and KNPV] dogs and saw they were more knowledgeable than the police."

One of the procedures that needed improvement was the procurement of the dogs. "Back then, the police were just using dogs that were donated from people's backyards," Reaver says. From this realization, Reaver began a system of importing various breeds – mainly Belgian Malinois and German Shepherd Dogs – from European countries, such as Germany, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Netherlands and Belgium.

Reaver and other Adlerhorst representatives still make frequent procurement trips to Europe, purchasing up to 300 dogs a year. The dogs are usually bought when they are about 2 years old and have successfully completed various socialization and training protocols, including Shutzhund I or KNPV I certification.

David Reaver, founder of Adlerhorst, uses a Belgian Malinois to demonstrate "guard and bark" techniques.

An officer wears a bite suit for "handler attack" exercises.

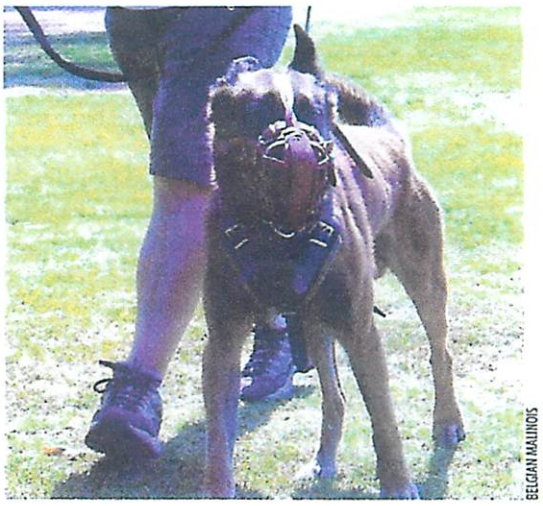
Reaver and his staff personally test each dog before buying it to ensure it is robust enough for a full-time career (paying special attention to the durability of the hips and spine) and is eager, friendly and outgoing. They do not pay close attention to conformation standards. The result of these transcontinental exchanges is Adlerhorst's multinational kennel of dogs that respond to commands in different languages, including German, Dutch and Czech.

Reaver believes that importing remains the best way to obtain police dogs. The breeding protocols and traditions in these European countries have not been successfully imitated in the United States, Reaver says. "What a lot of people don't always understand is that you can't raise these dogs like cattle. They have to be raised around people."

Training days

With the high level of expectation placed on active-duty police dogs – which must perform effectively and safely within a public sphere – Adlerhorst puts a premium on training. "Our dogs have to do what they're supposed to do more than 90 percent of the time. Less than 90 percent is not good enough," Reaver says. However, he admits "if

K9-officer trainees play dual roles, as both handlers and agitators.



BELGIAN MALINOIS

The dogs wear muzzles for some of the training exercises.

you say a dog performs 100 percent of the time, you're lying." That's one good reason for the signs hung around the academy, beseeching handlers to "Practice Every Day!"

The arid land that Adlerhorst occupies is studded with all the large equipment and terrain needed to train for professional patrol and scent work: ramps and A-frames (for obedience), blinds (wooden structures shaped like telephone booths used for "guard-and-bark" exercises), fields populated with large trees and boulders (for searching), and various vehicles and structures (also used for searching).

At any given time, police officers from departments all over the country could be training in anything from explosive-detection to search-and-rescue work. When I visited the facility, Adlerhorst was in the middle of an intensive 5-week patrol-dog training program in which about 25 officers, just recently paired with their dogs, were involved in a variety of training exercises.

As students at Adlerhorst, the police officers take on dual roles. The first role is the handlers they are training to become. The second role is that of "agitator," which means they will be barked at, chased, tackled and bitten by dogs being handled by their classmates. "The role of agitator is important for handlers," Pip Reaver says. "It gives the handler another perspective on the dog's behavior."

One such exercise that demonstrates this dual role is the "muzzle attack." The officer acting as an agitator runs up to a leashed, muzzled dog, flailing his arms and making wild noises, while the dog jumps and barks excitedly. The agitator then runs in the opposite direction about 20 yards, and the handler releases his dog, which quickly gains on the agitator, overcomes him and commences in a ground attack.

Officers don't have to wear protective gear for muzzle-attack exercises, but for others, such as the "handler attack," a bite suit is required. In this exercise, the handlers are calmly walking with their unmuzzled dogs when a yelling agitator wearing a bite suit suddenly pops out from

BELGIAN MALINOIS

All of the dogs in Adlerhorst's kennels come from Europe.

BELGIAN MALINOIS

Police-dogs-in-training seem to view exercises as fun games.

behind a van and makes threatening gestures at the handler. The dogs are tested to see how well they work to protect the handler.

The handler attack is also an opportunity to practice the "off," which describes a handler's ability pull his dog off the bite, either verbally or physically.

Other exercises include the "guard and bark," which is pretty much what it sounds like: the dog barks at the agitator, enticing him to stay put. There's the "transport," where the dog keeps pace alongside a walking agitator. Handlers and trainers also use starter pistols to train dogs to stay cool near firearms. "The last thing you want is a dog to go crazy when it hears gunfire," says trainer Charles Roger Smith of Fullerton, Calif.

Throughout all the exercises, Adlerhorst trainers scribble on their clipboards, monitoring the dogs' and the handlers' progress.

Measured force

Reaver said that when he started Adlerhorst, some K9 police departments used logos that pictured snarling or barking dogs. "That's not the image we want to portray," says Reaver, who advocated for pictures of serene-looking dogs, like the one used on Adlerhorst's logo. It's the image today's public most commonly associates with police dogs.

Still, the trainers at Adlerhorst are well aware of how menacing their dogs – especially the patrol dogs – can be. "I've seen big bad parolees ready to take on three cops," Yerington says. "But bring a dog out, and they'll give up right away."

Even when agitators wear bite suits, the power of the dogs' jaws is obvious. They bite and hold onto the heavy fabric, sometimes thrashing violently, until their handler calls them off. Even with the benefit of the suits, all of the officers in training are mottled with purple and green bruises – evidence of the bites' pressure.

Comparing the ability of his dogs to those of a martial artist, Reaver, who holds a 5th-degree black belt in judo, stresses the importance of the measured use of force. "You want to apply just enough to get the result that you want, without going overboard," he says.

The dogs can be intimidating. Yet, for all their bark and bluster, they look like they're having fun. Their tails wag excitedly; their ears perk with interest. For these chosen dogs, police work is a game they're happy to play. However, it's the responsibility of trained people to guide them into service.

Kristopher Wardwell is managing editor of Dog World.

DOG WORLD EXTRA
Visit DogWorld.com/Extras to see more photos of the author's day at Adlerhorst.

Fast Dog Fact

The Chinese Crested is among the most exotic and eye-catching of breeds. Small wonder, then, that one of the Crested's earliest breeders and supporters in the United States was the equally unforgettable exotic dancer, Gypsy Rose Lee, whose colorful story is told on stage in the hit play "Gypsy." – A.R.