

Training The Rottweiler

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Earlier on I spoke to Oliver Neubrand about Rottweiler and the many aspects of the breed. Considering Oliver's background and experience in working the Rottweiler it was only natural to take the talk a bit further and focus on the working, training and trialing. Having titled numerous dogs, having worked Rottweilers worldwide as a trainer and helper and perhaps most importantly having successfully trialed with several Rottweilers on championship level I thought he would be just the right person to tackle the world of today's working Rottweiler. Below are Oliver's thoughts on the Schutzhund training and the demands that the sport puts on the dog, handler and helper.

I would like to begin by saying that first and foremost the Rottweiler is a working breed by any and all standards. In the early days, it was purely for its working qualities to serve its owners in herding, guarding and protection. Based on this history, breeders eventually founded organization(s) to ensure that the Rottweiler was continued to be bred in accordance with the standards for both appearance as well as its working qualities. In time some aspects of the breed have changed while the standard has more or less remained the same. While Rottweiler was originally a pure working dog, and still maintains his position as such, it is now more often a sports dog. The breed has gone through an evolution of being a 'real' working dog to a dog who can and has to adjust to being also a social dog and living with families. This change in the use of the breed has affected breeding selections and pressed breeders consider different aspects of the breed. More tests and requirements have been developed for health, appearance (i.e. teeth, eye colour, size etc) and more importantly for character and behaviour. As the world has changed, so has the Rottweiler! Today we want and need a Rottweiler who is able to function as a police dog, as a sports dog and as a family member. Hence, what we want is a multi-talented Rottweiler and that is a requirement the breed should be able to meet.

In my opinion, the specific working qualities that we need to cherish in the Rottweiler's temperament are high prey drive, endurance, hardness, steady nerve build and controllability. Steady nerve-build is essential for the dog to be able to concentrate and to calm down and relax when he is 'off'. By controllability, I mean that the dog must be controllable by normal family by normal methods. And by 'normal family', I mean owners who do not aim to compete in high class trials with their dogs. Besides that, I think a dog who has good amount of hardness and high prey drive has, in most cases, also a good aggression base. This opens up the possibility for special things like use in the police force or working for higher classes of dog sports that place more specific and precise requirements on the dogs.

Training is based on good relationship between dog and handler.

For any training, the most important factor is a good relationship between the dog and the handler. This means the dog knows its place in the pack and the handler treats



*Oliver Neubrand with Unkas vom Hause Neubrand, SchH 3
2006 Landesgroup Championships - Protection Score 100a*

him as a dog; firm yet fair and square! It is also important that the dog is socialized properly starting in puppyhood on and is well familiarized with his environment. These requirements for socialization must be emphasized in today's society where the dogs live with us in totally different way than they used to. Today, they travel with us, they have to meet the traffic and they get their share of the hecticness and stress of modern society. Even a trialing dog has to be able travel, to sit in the car and to be able to sleep in different places like cars, trailers, hotel rooms.... For all these reasons and more the owners and handlers must know how to control their dogs. With the Rottweiler, handling means treating them with a firm and fair hand. In general, I think that training a dog whether for obedience, or Schutzhund, or whatever the sport may be, will give both the handler and the dog a lot. It will help them understand each other and teach them how to work together. Training a dog will help strengthen the relationship between the dog and the handler and therefore also help fix possible problems between the pair. This works, of course, only when training is done right.

Starting to train for Schutzhund

When someone comes to my club saying that they want to start training for Schutzhund, I will start working the dog in bitework easily in prey area as the new handler often has more to learn than his dog. If I get an experienced handler to come to me for training, I will review his dog and see what it is that the dog needs. That is the most important thing in training, to train the dog on the level that he is in. However, the capabilities of the handler need reviewing also; is the handler able to read his dog and

react to the dog's actions? Is he able to do the right things at the right time? Schutzhund is a complex sport that sets requirements not only on the dog but also the handler.

As a trainer and helper, I will review trainees by the capacity of the dog, capability of the handler and the goals that they have set for themselves. On top of this I will need to assess the potential of the particular pair in view of their goals and figure out the way how best to help them get there in realistically set time-frame and with acceptable methods. Unfortunately, there are cases that simply will not work out. Even a motivated handler with a good dog may not advance in training if the handler does not have enough knowledge of training, is unable to read and understand his dog or is unable to learn these new things. There are also times when one meets a motivated handler with just not good enough of a dog! In such cases, it is the job of the trainer/helper to talk to the handler honestly and make him realize the facts. Of course, not everyone needs to reach the top but everyone needs to be realistic and understand the capacity of both the dog as well as the handler!

As a breeder, I have to be clear on the precise goals that I have for my dogs. For a dog that I want to use for breeding, I may need to title in a faster schedule than I would trial a dog that I was building to compete in the highest level of SchH, for example and this, is called time-efficiency! It is my belief and I have seen it many times that a dog that is good and has been trained in fast mode (to be included in breeding programme) can later on be successfully trained further to trial in higher classes.

Requirements for the Team

The rules are easy for everyone to read and learn but what is important when training for a sport such as Schutzhund is to know what is required of the dog, handler and the helper, in a word, the team. All parts of this team have to work together for the training to be successful. Some of the requirements for a good sports dog have already been mentioned earlier in this article but in addition a good sports dog needs to be self-confident and to have good drives for food and prey. Food drive is essential for tracking. Many trainers also use food in obedience and reach excellent results. Training with food is easy to keep the dog in drive as the dog has a natural need for food (for staying alive). The dog still needs to have a drive for food as having to keep a dog hungry in order to utilize this method in training is not fun at all.

The dog has to have a good natural base for aggression (natural protection drive = gives us the possibility to create aggression in the sport). Aggression is needed in phase C (bitework). A good dog in dog sports will also need to have good nerves! In many cases of the modern working Rottweiler we see dogs that have these nervy or nervous temperaments where they are just not able to focus or concentrate on what they are doing. A stable nerve system is a base for a lot of things and it is also the base for a good hardness in a dog. Only a dog that has certain hardness can be trialed in higher levels of Schutzhund. In many show lines this quality of hardness is missing. That type of dogs may not appear nervous yet they lack the endurance in drive and are not able to take on the pressure of training. Besides these qualities in a dog we must be able to handle and control him. With no control there will be no results, simple as that! With dogs that are too hard for most handlers to control we have no



Oliver tracking with Unkas vom Hause Neubrand

time for things other than practising just that – control – and we miss out on all the other necessary elements that require training. In many cases where the training has to be focused mostly on control we tend to lose out on the drive and energy that we really do want and need in the dog.

For a handler the theoretical knowledge about different training methods is not enough! Knowing how to react in certain moments without someone telling you to do so is the correct kind of knowledge that a good handler possesses. It is the feeling for timing; timely corrections, timely rewards and the correct and timely reactions to the actions of the dog. This feeling is something one can learn to a certain degree and for results and real success you will need to have it in you. For example, a base ball player needs to have a very special feeling for the ball. Anyone can learn to throw a ball and even to catch it but to really play baseball you need to have it in your blood! This feeling that I talk about goes hand in hand with the ability to read the dog; doing the right things at the right time by reading the dog and understanding the situations that occur in training and responding to them. Theory must be backed up by practical knowledge for this to work.

In many ways the helper needs to have the same abilities as the handler— the ability to read the dog, to feel and understand what the dog needs and to know what different training methods are about and how to utilize them on different dogs at different ages on different levels of training. In addition, a helper in protection training will need the knowledge of different canine characteristics, drive areas and methods and different ways training to reinforce the dog properly, to avoid possible problems and to deal with and diminish any problems that may occur. Physically, a helper needs to be strong, athletic and to have good motor coordination. Psychologically, a helper needs to be stable and to have the edge it takes to face a big dog! Not an easy task being a good helper!!

Schutzhund and Responsibilities

One of the responsibilities of the handler of a dog being trained for Schutzhund is being aware of and understanding what is being trained on the dog and how the dog is being trained. The dog must be in the handler's control in any and all situations whether in training or in

every day life! In case problems arise, the team must work together to assess and fix such problems i.e. if the handler cannot handle his dog in too high a drive or if the aggression training on the dog is causing for it to slip out of control of the handler. At such time, and specifically in the event that the handler himself does not realize the existing problem, the helper MUST step in and blow the whistle. Training a dog for protection is working on the fine balance between high drives and control and it is that balance that will ensure training can go on and advance into trialing. Personally, as a helper I stress the fact that training a Rottweiler for Schutzhund can never be training for bitework only. It is training all 3 (three) equally valuable phases of tracking, obedience and bitework. These three phases together constitute the great sport of Schutzhund.

The Rottweiler as a breed is such that it needs to be worked in a fair and systematic way from the start. A Rottweiler must be able to rely on the way it is being handled and trained. This alone makes it a different trainee compared to other working breeds. A Rottweiler will bring in the game all his good qualities only when he really knows what it is that is required of him and when he understands those requirements. He must be trained step-by-step by being introduced carefully to new things. He must also be made to fully understand what is expected of him. When a Rottweiler is worked step-by-step, and handled decidedly and fairly, he can also be worked hard and placed demands on. When working a Rottweiler, we need to remember that ours is a very heavy breed who is quite large in overall size and tall in height and that matures slowly. A year old Rottweiler must be handled differently than a year old Malinois, for example. Understanding this is a must for anyone working a Rottweiler for dog sports. Now I will briefly touch on the three different phases of Schutzhund.

Schutzhund ABC

A (Tracking)

For me it is important to teach the dog to track with the correct technique right from the start. This includes building up the drive and focus that we need for good tracking. I prefer to train my dogs by using, again, the step-by-step tracking system. Before starting the training, though, we must always assess the individual dog in question and pave a way for the training method that fits him. How we begin our training will naturally affect the way we drive track in the future – i.e. with a loose line vs tight line.

The food drive is what gives us, in most cases, the best result on track. I like tracking with dry food because with dry food, dogs need to be more intense to find the food and there is no risk of insects attacking food. Dry food will also stay pretty much unchanged whatever the weather conditions and later on as the dog learns the basics we can change it to even more special food. Training tracking step-by-step means creating first of all the drive for the track. Then the dog needs to learn the correct searching technique and following of scent paths. After that it is time to progress on to first straight lines, then to turns and curves, articles etc. until the dog knows how to track a proper track. With my own dogs, I train tracking on different grounds – i.e. dirt, grass, forest etc.



B (Obedience)

This is a very interesting phase of Schutzhund. Today, we want to see a dog that apart from being technically correct also expresses strength, drive and certain happiness in his performance. I grew up with total old school training for obedience and had a lot of success with those methods in the past. In the last couple of years however, I have started to mix modern training and old school training to reach an optimal balance between pressure and drive. We need both to create a powerful, impressive obedience performance. Mere technical completion of exercises will not get us the scores that we want. As a large and heavy dog Rottweiler must work in drive so as not to appear lazy or slow.

Also obedience must be trained step-by-step and each exercise taught to the dog in pieces. But as always, it is most important to realize the kind of dog we have in hand, the strengths and weaknesses of his character and qualities. We also need to assess the skills and experience of the handler to conclude how the training should be taken forward. Because of these factors it is hard to recommend the style one should train obedience in without seeing the dog and handler work. Personally I prefer training my dogs for obedience utilizing their prey drive (with i.e. a ball) and by concentrating on the speed of performance as well as focus on the activity. Some handlers may find it easiest to use food in training obedience as well.

C (Protection)

When speaking of protection, we are dealing with yet another ballgame. To reach good results, we will need a dog with at least good abilities and secondly, we will need a very good helper who comprehends the qualities of the Rottweiler. With the sport becoming increasingly popular worldwide, many handlers encounter the problem of finding a suitable helper. This is a problematic case in many places where there is not a lot of history with Schutzhund, at least not with the Rottweiler. The



Oliver working Raideen vom Sittard at a Zip test

Rottweiler is an unique breed that may be difficult for helpers used to other breeds to work. The fact is though that without a good helper it is impossible to make any progress. The helper needs to have a very good knowledge of the breed, strong physical and psychological abilities and very importantly he needs to have a system to train the dog in.

In the protection, having a system means that we need to work the dog consistently on things while advancing all the while on the dog's terms. To build a strong confident schutzhund Rottweiler, he must be introduced to new things carefully. Training with a system also means that the system (training method) is not changed along the way on a young dog. I emphasize that we need to read the dog and the handler and as a helper always try to find a way of training that will work for the two of them together.

In my training, I strain to make the dogs that I train as a helper to become strong in mind and heart. I pay attention to important basic things like full grips and correct jumping technique from the beginning. I often prefer to work young Rottweilers on a pole. That way they get to work on basics and mature and gain confidence in peace. This works especially well if the handler is inexperienced. I also like to train a young dog with only his own helper in the beginning to set the base for future work. Later on, as the dog has advanced on his training I will introduce him to different helpers and through them to different training methods. It must be done very carefully, though, so as not to confuse a young dog. In worst scenario one training session gone badly may destroy a young dog's career for good.

The demands of training and trialing

There is a big difference between training a dog and trialing a dog. The stress of trialing will not only affect the handler but will also put additional pressure on his dog. The handler

may feel stressed because of his own or other people's expectations, the crowd watching him and the judge judging his every move. The dog feels all that and knows that the handler is not himself at that moment and that in turn will stress the dog. The amount of stress felt by the dog and the way the dog reacts to that stress will vary depending on that particular dog. We know that we will not be able to reward or correct our dog during a trial. The helper is also bound by the rules and hence cannot help, correct or reinforce the dog for his behaviour. Therefore, we have to be sure as we enter a trial that our dog is in control, knows what is expected of him (read: has been taught all the exercises) and that the dog has the heart, drive and hardness to function under a stressful trial.

As we train our dogs toward a trial, we also put the dog through a lot of pressure both physically and mentally. A trialing dog must possess the technical capability to pass the trial. In other words, we owe the dog to teach him well before taking him to a trial. Everyone who has ever trained a dog to pass even IPO 1 knows that to reach that point takes countless training sessions. It takes hours and hours of training during which the dog has to be able to handle the stress of doing exercises again and again and being corrected while maintaining his capacity to function in control and in drive. Then there are the demands on the handler; laying tracks and practicing obedience regardless of the weather, driving miles and miles to a specific helper or a club to train bitework, caring for the dog's physical condition and health etc. and doing this all consistently.

Both training and trialing demand a lot of our dogs. The main difference is that while training puts more physical strain on the dog trialing will in addition test his mental edge. In my opinion 'a good dog' should be able to pass through IPO 1 – IPO 3 in a relatively short time period with minimum scores of at least G or SG. I want to mention this as too many people talk a about their dogs as having 'great' working qualities yet these dogs are never seen in trials and some not even on training fields. Working qualities cannot be measured if the dog is never worked!

Now as I think about the qualities of the working Rottweilers I want to make a difference between the genetics and learned behaviour. A genetically good dog has the natural capabilities that are easy to take forward with proper training. Good genetic qualities can already be seen in a pup. A genetically weaker dog can also be trained to pass trials but that requires very good handling, very good and carefully advancing helper work with lots of repetitions and reinforcement in training. While a lot of the success of a trialing dog can be contributed to the abilities of the handler and helper, the fact is also that no great handler nor a great helper can achieve great things with a dog that has no will to work, or has no hardness, drive or nerves to go through a protection routine with a helper putting pressure on the dog. On the other hand, no great dog can win trophies alone either!

To be successful in Schutzhund trials takes time and tests patience many times before any titles are won. It requires good teamwork with the dog, handler and helper working intently together and focusing equally on all three aspects of the sport. Let's all enjoy working our Rottweilers for they deserve to work!