



Editorial Note: Readers may find some of the observations and suggestions in this article provocative. If so, please respond in a reasoned manner so that we may have an open-ended dialogue on how we may best safeguard the interests of the breed.

Shepherds, Herding, and the Future of the HGH: An Interview with Karl Fuller by Karen Priest

The German Shepherd Dog's history is inextricably entwined with sheep and herding. Our much-quoted Rittmeister von Stephanitz stated in *The German Shepherd Dog in Word and Picture*: "There is no doubt in my mind that the genuine and noblest vocation for the shepherd dog is tending flocks." The German Shepherd Dog has worked sheep in the tending style, serving as a "living fence," for many years. The dogs are also required to help move the sheep to and from grazing areas and to ensure that the flock navigates roads and obstacles such as bridges safely, all the while keeping the sheep together. A good tending dog will perform these tasks without causing panic in the flock.

There are many articles describing the components and the point breakdown of HGH trials, while other materials offer guidelines in starting a dog on sheep and in teaching the dog to maintain borders. (For this article, I am assuming that the reader is familiar with the basic tenets of HGH.)

The Herding dog & Zwinger vom Kirschtental

The current plight of Herding German Shepherd Dogs and the uncertain future of the HGH as a means of titling them was my intended focus for this article, but I find it impossible to speak of Herding dogs without also touching on Karl Fuller and his Kirschtental kennel's contribution to the German Shepherd Dog in general and to the herding shepherd in particular.

I am a long-time fan of Karl Fuller's Kirschtental lines, which are a result of many years of breeding successful HGH dogs. Karl has consistently produced characteristics that I admire in a dog— independent thinking, problem solving, biddability, and stamina. His dogs tend

to have conformation suited to movement over long periods of time, based on correct structure for working ability and lacking the extremes that often come in and out of fashion.

Now in his 80s, Karl rarely grants interviews, preferring to spend his time with his dogs and his sheep, or, in the evening, watching soccer on TV! Recently I enlisted the aid of his wife, Marion, in coercing him, and Karl agreed to contribute to this article.



Karl with Panjo vom Kirschtental SchH3, Kkl1

As a professional shepherd, Karl always worked his dogs as the breed was originally intended to work. His HGH dogs were also professionals, herding sheep as their daily JOB, not as sport. The mother line of his dogs comes through with incredible consistency, and his breeding bitches of today carry 57 years of his breedings behind them. Almost without exception, they have all been HGH titled. Karl has won 8 Golden Shovels, the highest honor

for professional shepherds, bestowed annually at the Bundesleistungshuten. He has bred countless HGH Sieger/Siegerins and, to date, has bred 6 VA dogs. (His well-known dogs of the past include VA1 Eiko Kirschtental, VA Xitta Kirschtental, and the super Herding girls, Winnie and Amie Kirschtental.) In 2007 he was the breeder of the HGH Sieger Sherry v. Kirschtental and HGH Siegerin Lailana v. Kirschtental as well as the JKL class winner, Panjo v. Kirschtental (a son of the 2006 HGH Siegerin, Tinkie). The dam line for all four of those dogs goes back to the excellent recent producer, V Aische vom Kirschtental, HGH.

Through the years Karl has never let his success in the conformation arena trump his requirements for the dogs' work performance. He has kept an unwavering eye on his goal, and met with considerable success. There are only a few other people in the world today with his professional knowledge and experience in training, working, and breeding Herding dogs. Karl has also—however unintentionally—garnered a substantial, loyal group of "disciples" who have based their breeding programs on his bloodlines and who believe in the strength of his motherlines (for further reading on his bloodlines, see the history page of Karl's website www.kirschtental.de). The Kirschtental devotees enjoy a family spirit and willingness to support and help one another that are rarely found among a group of individual breeders.

The people who have these dogs believe in them very strongly, and feel part of a larger community. As a breeder with a program based on Kirschtental foundation stock, I am appreciative of the qualities embodied in these dogs.

Unfortunately, in 2008 Professional Shepherds are almost extinct and HGH is dying in Germany. My fear is that we will lose the specific qualities of our herding

dogs when there is no longer an accessible venue in which to work and to title them. Already there are few shepherds available to teach a new generation, and Karl reports that every year there are fewer with a large enough flock of sheep to train for and put on the HGH trial. It is encouraging that Herding and HGH are growing in the USA, but that growth is stymied by the constraints imposed by needing 200 sheep for a trial.

Why Should We Care?

A Herding trial is such an excellent way to prove work ethic in a dog. In some of our other dog sports, we have all but lost independent thinking as we have worked our dogs in a routine time and time again, to the point that performance is almost mechanical. We value the Shepherd dog's ability to solve problems, but we do not test directly for this ability in most of our working tests, and certainly not in the currently-much-debated performance test at our Sieger Show. The nature of his work requires that the successful herding dog be able to think and decide for himself, but also that he ultimately obey the Shepherd. When I made this observation to Karl, he answered:

“That is exactly the most important thing! The sheep herding dog has to work independently. He has to watch the sheep, and when they try to go into the next field, the dog has to work by himself to stop them. At least a good one does. He has no leash and his trainer is at some times a big distance away from him.

Some people have problems just making their SchH3 dogs maintain heel position beside them when they are running.

In the HGH trial, the dog has to turn around the flock in the way that he goes some steps straight to their front, then stops after a command, then goes again straight to the sheep, stops again and then with a command he must go straight back out of the field [I think he means back out to the border] after the sheep turned around.

Today the Schutzhund dogs are most times trained with aids. The owners use the ball, or another toy, food, or the clicker. This is fine, but how will you train a sheep herding dog with a ball, or

a clicker, from across the field?

For the HGH training the dog must have a lot of natural drive for the sheep, otherwise you cannot train him! But additionally, he must be very obedient, and he must be smart!

Also, conformation is very important in sheep herding work. If the dog is over-angulated, has a weak backhand, is too loose in his joints, or if he does not have good, closed feet, he will be tired after a very short time of working on a rough field.”



V Xeniali vom Kirschtental HGH, photo by Marion Fuller

During this conversation, the Fullers recollected that years ago, a Herding bitch might have dug a hole and whelped her puppies underneath the little shepherd trailer at the grazing area, and then so strong was her work ethic, the next day, she worked, herding for a while! (Today, the breeding bitches whelp puppies in the comfort of the Fullers' home/kennel, with a whelping box and infrared lights for heat.) Karl added: **“The daily work of a shepherd dog, day for day, from 10:00 in the morning till 21:00 in the evening, in hot summer as well as in cold winter, this is what makes a real shepherd dog.”**

The basic premise — that herding is a valuable way to assess dogs, that it is what they were bred to do, and that it is in their genetic make-up — brings me to my next conclusion. We must not allow the herding dog to be phased out because in modern life, especially in the USA, there simply are not enough people with large flocks of sheep to warrant the NEED for these dogs to perform this job. What will become of our herding dogs when there is no great need for tending?

In my opinion, money and the market drive what many breeders produce, sad as that may be. If the demand is there, the need will be filled. If the demand is not there, the businessman produces a product that will sell. This worries me, because it appears that the HGH dog already is not highly regarded. In discussing work ability today people only consider how the dog performs at protection, but this is only one form of work—and one most often found in law enforcement or sport/competition. The other areas of “real life work” require more than a dog that will bite and show courage. And when we need a dog for other work—such as a Guide dog or a Search dog—we turn to our Herding lines to produce a dog for jobs that require thinking and independent work (Fidelco Guide Dog School, for example, was founded on Kirschtental bloodlines, and still occasionally imports a dog from the Fullers). At the same time, people do not want to buy an ugly dog with excellent herding capability. They demand a good-looking dog with excellent temperament and the capabilities of a sheep herding dog. And that is what Karl has been producing.



Karl with V Xeniali vom Kirschtental HGH at Xenia's 2006 HGH trial under Judge Hans Chiffard photo by Marion Fuller

Marion explained to me that **“Our herding dogs have a new job; they are becoming sought after for SAR work/RH. Now they often do work that requires similar skills, only without sheep!”**

I asked Karl what he thinks will be the future for herding dogs. Will HGH be carried into the future by a few purists, a few of the new generation who were raised with dogs that

herd? Will HGH dogs become a memory from the past? Karl said:

“In Germany we have every year fewer shepherds and fewer sheep. Within the German SV the HGH dog has not a big reputation. There is no ‘money’ in this part of the SV!”

Karl believes that HGH (working and breeding) will come to an end in Germany in a short time if nothing is done. He laments that there are now only a very few Herding breeders in Germany—meaning only a few professional shepherds who breed their dogs to excel with sheep, first and foremost. He told me:

“In Germany this part of working is going down, but I think, in the USA it is just starting, more as a hobby, but the people are interested! Here in Germany, for the big sheep herding trials there are every year fewer Shepherds with good trained dogs! The people here like more ‘Agility’, ‘Rettungshund’ and ‘Obedience.’”

What Can Be Done?

I told Karl my feeling is that, in the USA, our biggest problem is the need for several hundred sheep to have a trial. I wonder if the SV rules could be adapted so that fewer sheep are required? To me it seems the skill set is similar. Large flocks present certain challenges, but a small flock also tests a dog’s honesty. The lazy ones think they can slack off with fewer sheep. The honest ones work if there are 20 or 200. I asked Karl his opinion of this. Will the rules ever change in Germany? Will the SV accept a different set of criteria for other countries?

“This must be so! They changed already a lot in the last 20 years. What the German SV needs are really good specialists.” [I believe what Karl was trying to say is that in order for HGH to stay alive, there must be a new generation of people with actual experience as shepherds. Who better to judge a herding dog than a shepherd?] He also agrees that the basic skills are the same no matter the number of sheep.

Another issue I see is the lack of teachers/trainers. Many people express an interest in herding, but they can find no one to teach them. We do not have enough qualified teachers in the USA and we are widely separated geographically. For those who are interested in participating in some form of work with sheep, it is often easier, currently, to find AKC-sanctioned Herding groups. While they work different patterns

with fewer sheep and some different tasks than our SV-sanctioned HGH, there are some similarities with the AKC “C Course”. The way you start a young dog is largely the same for both venues. Currently, we have only one HGH trial annually in the USA. Compare this with the significantly larger number of trials we have for SchH & FH. When there is only one trial in an entire year, a dog could be pushed to compete too soon in hopes of obtaining a passing score, or the dog could have to wait a very long time once prepared. Distance also presents a huge difficulty, as the only venue currently is in NY. Travel for the HGH can easily become cost prohibitive. And, with many would-be competitors working regularly on much smaller flocks, trial conditions are really new for many of the dogs. I think our ultimate goals should include more opportunity for trials each year, perhaps at several venues.

My young stud dog, V1 (BSZS-HGH) Sherry vom Kirschtal, SchH3, HGH, KKL1 “a” ZW 69, is at home on the Schutzhund field and in his capacity as a herding dog. With sheep, he shines. It is clearly his great love. This year I had the chance to start one of his young daughters on sheep. It was truly inspiring to watch her! In a very short time, a “light switch flipped” and she went to work. Seeing my girl’s drive click in and watching her natural instinct guide her was truly amazing. Her desire to watch the sheep, do the tending job, use only as much force as necessary (even understanding to be gentle on the new lambs) was clearly visible: I could almost “see” her thinking and making decisions. Her genetic predisposition was even more apparent when I watched some other young dogs at various stages in their training. Not all of them had equal instinct or desire to do the work. Some wanted only to run off, some wanted only to chase or dive into the sheep, some were disobedient, others awaited their owners’ direction and only watched the owner, not the sheep. I came away with an awed appreciation for my K dogs’ inbred desire to do the work!

If you do not understand why HGH dogs do not need to complete an AD or a BH or why HGH is equivalent to a SchH title for working classes, I highly recommend that you observe an HGH trial and see the dogs in action. An honest Herding dog covers an enormous amount of ground as he trots back and forth on the border, moving to where he needs to be as the sheep move.

Taking the sheep to graze or penning them also requires the dog to exert himself, both physically and mentally.

In Summary

While Herding has its roots in a professional vocation, its current growth in popularity comes from its attraction as a sport and as an alternative way to title our dogs and prove breed-worthiness. Therefore, it seems to me, the SV should consider changing the sanctioned rules for HGH trials to allow more dogs to participate, thus aiding the growth of this important venue for working shepherds. Until changes are made, enthusiasts must take any available opportunity to work their dogs with sheep. You may be able to find some AKC “C” course sheep Herding groups who are willing to help start a potential HGH dog. I have found just such a group in my area, and the members are very supportive of my endeavor.

Part of my long-term plan includes putting more sheep on my farm. I will not have the 200 head needed for a trial, but several of us with smaller flocks and similar goals will be able to combine our stock to achieve the numbers needed to host a trial in the future. ♪



*Marion's favorite photo :
Karl with Steffi vom Kirschtal
(Uwe vom Kirschtal daughter)*

*Editor's Note:
Marion & Julie—thank you
for sharing your wonderful photos!*