

Interview with the SV president Prof. Dr. Heinrich Meßler

# ‘WE HAVE A FUTURE’

Prof. Dr. Heinrich Meßler held his first speech as SV president at the national winners’ breeding show. In his speech, the president found clear words for the current situation in the SV. He has a clear vision for the future of the association.

by Roswitha Dannenberg and Sascha Otto

## **Hello Mr. Prof. Dr. Meßler. What connects you with the SV? What was your motivation to stand as a candidate for president?**

In our family, there is a shepherd gene. My father introduced my brother and me to shepherds when we were still little boys. My nephew, too, is infected with this ‘virus’. When I was just 12, I occupied myself intensely with German Shepherd. The first breeding show winner I saw live was the male Zibu vom Haus Schütting. If I remember rightly, that was in 1964. Even at that time, I was surprised – though still a naive altar boy – that the breeder was at the same time the judge. He gave the dog he bred himself the winner’s title. As a student, I had quite good success with the male dog Argus von Aducht that reared in total, I think, nine successor groups. From the middle of the 80s on, my brother and I, together with Helmut Raiser, were decisively involved in the so-called democratisation process of the SV. Here, the principle delivered by the advisory board was replaced with the democratic principle of the congress of delegates. Because of my very time-consuming job, as well as various arguments in the association, I had withdrawn to breeding and presenting dogs in a contained field until shortly before my retirement in spring 2015. Corresponding to my Rhineland mentality, I never manage to keep my mouth shut and was always in the first row with criticism. In the end, it was my federal group’s president, Wolfgang Felten, who, in view of my relaxing time schedule, asked me to not only talk, but act. The obvious

independence of the World Union of German Shepherd Associations (WUSV), the extent of losses of members and registrants as well as decisions in breeding (breeding plan/size) not comprehensible for me gave me further motivation. Because of my job, and in the end also my scientific education and work, I believe to be in the condition to evaluate essential areas of our breeding. Additionally, I have almost 20 years of experience in hospital management, including administration. This knowledge can surely be applied in a meaningful way in the SV as well. Maybe it was also the desire to bring back old conditions. While in my youth, there were on occasion about 200 to 300 dogs at a special show or federal group show, in recent years, there have been exhibitions in which there were more classes than dogs. Finally, I decided to stand for president, also in view of these nostalgic aspects, knowing that I would be presented with a difficult task.

## **What was the time after your election for president like?**

Of course, I needed some time after the national elections in May to get on top of things. I managed to at least in most areas, I think. Nevertheless, I have to admit that I have changed some of my views. Looking at a house from the outside is different than looking to the outside from the inside of the house. Some things are not as easy as they seem from the outside.

## **Your speech at the national winners’ breeding show was eagerly awaited. Would you summarise it again for the SV newspaper?**

My speech summarised the considerations of the last months. Above all, I wanted to present first the plans that divert from the appraisal. We plan to put the speech online. Those that were present know that at the beginning there were some technical problems. I hope the revision of the video of the speech will be finalised by the end of the year and the speech can then be put on the SV homepage.

## **Could you please emphasise again the most important points for the readers?**

First about the appraisal: I will give you the three central indexes. In the middle of the 90s, we had



31,000 puppy entries per year. Today, according to the VDH statistics, there are slightly less than 11,000. So that means we have only a third. The development resulting from that, if you read the statistics right, is always the same: delayed by approximately three years, the other indexes will follow, such as HD/ED entries, trials, breeding licenses and membership numbers etc. What's bad is the loss of members: the membership numbers have halved since then. From a maximum of 108,000 members at that time, we are now at 60,000, with a clear downwards trend.

I fear if the entry numbers continue to develop in such a way, we will soon find ourselves in the size range of the Dachshund and Labrador Retriever and lose our position as the worldwide strongest breed. Correspondingly, our influence in superordinate structures such as FCI and VDH would diminish. A worst-case scenario we hope to counteract. Last but not least: we have a surprisingly small percentage of only 3.5 % of adolescents. In this, we are obviously positioned worse than comparable associations. The age structure in our association is clearly above the well-known and already over-aged German society. These warning signs are alarming!

**You say something needs to change in the SV. What do you base your statement on?**

The numbers just mentioned speak their own language. In a joint-stock company, with such a development, the stockholders would have demanded extensive consequences long ago. This is also true in view of so-called benchmarking, i.e. when looking at the reference values. It's like this: dog-keeping in Germany has not changed considerably in the last 20 years. By trend, there are even more dogs in German households. The position of the pedigree dog in society is unchanged. Since the turn of the millennium, the numbers of the other classical working dogs have stabilised, contrary to our developments.

**So the question is the following: do we have a specific problem?**

In my understanding, the question needs to be answered with a clear yes. Unfortunately, I have to put it in such a clear way.

**Please explain this in more detail.**

Take a look at the media with me. Again and again, you will find the same prejudices. A concise keyword is the 'downhill dog'.



**IT IS IMPORTANT NOW THAT WE FLIP SOME CENTRAL SWITCHES. AMONG OUR TASKS IS TO MAKE PEOPLE HEAR OF THE QUALITY OF OUR TOP PRODUCT.**

Then the unfortunately often cited so-called 'bite statistics'. As a service dog, the German Shepherd is not the first choice any more. From recent talks with service dog handlers, however, I assume that there will be a change of direction here. The image of the overbred and aggressive German Shepherd has unfortunately become anchored in the minds of our fellow citizens without great resistance. On the other hand, people have been reporting about the positive characteristics of our dog breed; I am thinking of rescue, therapy and seeing-eye dogs and so on here. However, at the moment, it is the case that our public image still needs improving.

When I proudly report that we are the biggest dog breed club in the world, the people I talk to often ask: But where are all these dogs? In public, there is the impression that our members live in their own world with their dogs. How is our German Shepherd supposed to score then?

#### **Can the SV reverse this trend?**

I hope so, and that is why I ran for election. There are many approaches. First, we should refer to our statutes. I have said

this several times. § 3 (purpose and tasks) contains a clear guideline. Here, our 'product', the German Shepherd, is defined exactly, and the services connected to it are described. If we all adhered to these guidelines - and not only regarding this paragraph - we would have less problems. This does not only concern our image to the outside world, but also our behaviour towards one another. Apart from that, there are surely many specific problems that need to be addressed further.

#### **In your speech at the federal winner breeding show (BSZ) 2015, there were words such as 'product', 'service' and 'control'. What's behind that?**

We have to reflect on what the central tasks of our association are. It might sound somewhat unemotional at first glance, but the German Shepherd is our 'product'. As an association, it is our task to put into practice the guidelines of the breed standard. Here, basically everything is described. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. Here, our predecessors did a good job and had worldwide success. This results in a clear

obligation: each pedigree has to be a watertight guarantee for the quality of our dogs!

The German Shepherd is more versatile than every other dog and stands for *Made in Germany* just like the Cologne Cathedral, sauerkraut or German beer. It manages tasks such as rescue, herding, protection or being family dog of the highest qualifications. A top product! They are popular all over the globe. The success story of the German Shepherd abroad is unbroken, as I gather from the information from our friends in the WUSV. Apart from our product, we also offer a multitude of services. Just think of the diverse and high quality training and sport options in the SV. And that with a nationwide organisation and structure of almost 2,000 local groups. Then there are the services of our well organised head office. These are all factors that are unique compared to other breeds. At first glance, a perfect foundation.

#### **Why at first glance?**

In my campaign speech in Lahnstein, I used the terms fairness, transparency, honesty and equal opportunities.

Impressive patterns of behaviour of individual groups have crept in that have been tolerated for a long time without any comment, and in the meantime, are seen as almost self-evident. Here, there is still much need for action. Before a costly image campaign, we first need to solve the specific problems within the association.

#### Which are these?

I like to call the main problems the four deadly sins.

1. The division of the breed and the missing corporate identity resulting from it.
2. Animal protection problems
3. Occasionally, elusive judges' decisions.
4. The still existing irregularity of the examination system.

#### In detail:

**CORPORATE IDENTITY:** I see one of the essential reasons for the association's crisis in the fact that the members of the individual branches - on the one hand, breeding, on the other hand, performance - do not have any understanding of each other. Instead of uniting around the German Shepherd as a breed, the dogs of the other side are called 'scissor grinders' or 'rams', regardless of the consequences. This behaviour is not only seen among the members, but also among the top operatives. Here, even within the association, there is a fatal paralysis, with the result of stagnancy and mutual blockade. At this point, I call on not only the members, but also the office-holders and operatives to dispense not only tolerance among each other, but also acceptance. Everything else damages our community and will accelerate the downwards trend.

#### DIVISION OF THE BREED:

During my time as a student, at the beginning of the 70s, I witnessed how the division of the breed into the so called 'breeding and performance lines' developed. At that time, it was completely different! At that time, there were such famous dogs as Marco vom Cellerland, Frei von der Gugge, Anderl vom kleinen Pfahl, Pirol vom Kirschtal and the many dogs Vom Busecker Schloss

and Nico von Haus Beck, to name only a few. We find these dogs as anchors in the pedigrees of our performance dogs today. At that time, these were VA dogs that were accepted by all breeders. The breed in total presented itself as more versatile in the phenotype. There were black, grey, black-yellow and of course also black-brown dogs in the selection. In the aspect of type equality, these dogs and their lines were taken from the so-called *Hochzucht* within few generations. Their lines were finally continued via the combination Canto/Quanto Wienerau. This development found its peak in the female dog Palme vom Wildsteigerland, who with few ancestors and a large number of descendants, represents the genetic bottleneck of the current breeding population. These lines nowadays appear in almost no performance pedigree anymore. My brother tried to confine this drifting apart of the populations through the universal idea.

After 30 years, I don't believe it makes sense to get back to this idea. The fact is, however, that within our association, we have two genetically almost isolated populations, though we have an identical breed standard. They could almost be called breeds. Correspondingly, we also have two different populations of dog keepers. Each one believes it is the solely blessed representative of the breed. In between, there are only the poor shepherd lovers that once became fascinated with the shepherd and are looking for a medium dog for all purposes. Here lies an enormous unused potential for our breed.

#### ANIMAL PROTECTION:

Regardless of the request that I have vocalised again and again for consistent animal protection-appropriate training, there still seem to be members who practice dog training at the highest level with the electrical stimulation collar. At this point, I would like to stress that this behaviour does not only contradict the SV's statutes, but also animal protection law. Surely there are different legal regulations in the different WUSV countries that make stringent action in individual cases difficult, or make it

seem legally actionable. It will be one of my tasks within the WUSV to create equal preconditions for everybody organised in the WUSV doing dog sports, even with different legal situations in different countries. The activists in this area should keep in mind that at the latest at the moment when the policy notices this behaviour, the entirety of IPO sport will be questioned. Here, I urgently plead for reason and understanding. There may also be a possibility for counter-regulation by the association's board of management. I believe experienced and good performance judges are able to recognise how individual dogs were trained, and I hope that they will take into account corresponding distinctive features when awarding the points. As we are a dog breed club, I believe to have observed that in the representation of our dogs in competitions at the highest level, there seems to have appeared a phenomenon that I call 'Malinois-isation'. The shepherd is no quadratic dog, but, as the standard dictates,

## PROFILE



**LIFE** Heinrich Meßler was born in Cologne. After his training as a medical specialist for orthopaedics, he worked as chief physician at the Orthopaedic Clinic in Mönchengladbach for 25 years. Since 1987, he has been teaching classes as a professor at the medical faculty of the University of Bonn. Since 1968, he has been a member of the SV, and since 2001, breeding warden in the Mönchengladbach local group. His kennel, *von Anducht*, was founded in 1973. Meßler is married, has three sons and two grandchildren. Another member of the family is the German Shepherd Uccas von Aducht. Apart from shepherds, fly fishing is his great passion.

a stretched dog with distinct angulations. Because of his anatomic preconditions, he cannot appear robotically H-shaped, for example, in the obedience part off leash. We should rate breed-specifically here.

### **Elusive judges' decisions**

Again and again, breeder affiliates tell us that they are giving up their breeding activity because there is no equality of opportunities. They either withdraw completely or move towards other breeds. As the reason for this, they often indicate that the evaluations given by the breeding judges and the ranking were elusive. Some judges are accused of showing a self-service mentality here. This leads to a lack of opportunities in competition and on the market for the normal breeder. The consequences are what we see nowadays at the breeding shows. Occasionally, classes are not even occupied anymore. In many classes, there are a maximum of three to four dogs. This is no fun for the ambitious spectator. I believe that in future, we will have to keep a sharper eye on the actions of individual judges in order to bring back equality of opportunities and enthusiasm, and, in the end, more breeding action.



In the selection of future judges, we will take this into account this.

Within the framework of the WUSV, we are working on creating a binding code of honour/ethics. It cannot be, for example, that ownership structures in pedigrees are signed arbitrarily. The same is true when those occupying posts transfer their companies and businesses to another name to be able to make money with the German Shepherd while retaining their necessarily 'neutral' functions in the SV. Here, the members' trust needs to be restored. The board of management should be given the possibility to immediately impose sanctions in the case of demonstrable misbehaviour.

**MANIPULATION OF COMPETITIONS:** Another big problem is the indications of manipulation of competitions that happens now as it did before. Here, we should remember that criminal offences such as deceit, favouritism and falsification of documents always resonate. Taking an exam is the quality control of the working dog qualities of a dog and therefore inevitable. Every attempt to bypass an exam is sabotage of quality control. However, also at this point, the association should look to itself and wonder if maybe the requirements for dogs and handlers, for example in the IPO 1, are stacked so high that people prefer to evade them. Within the board of management and in the committee, we are thinking about how far we can help the dog handlers towards a simpler and faster sense of achievement without lowering the requirements for the dogs. Independently of that, we will keep persecuting exam manipulations.

### **How do you understand the terms 'competition' and 'quality control'?**

These two terms cannot be separated for us. There are certain minimum conditions: the breeding admittance that can be reached with a breeding evaluation of G, an IPO 1 trial or a rescue dog 2 trial. Then, there are the known health parameters. In the competition, the individual animals are ranked regarding their quality. In the end, this serves for selection in order to improve the average quality of the breed. If there are irregularities here, the board of management needs to interfere. Here, I clearly remind myself and my colleagues from the board of management of our duties. Well organised companies and institutions have invented so-called control in order to keep up the pre-set quality standards. If these control mechanisms fail, the board of management is usually responsible. The usual and logical consequences of lacking control were presented to us all in the recent Volkswagen emissions scandal. Some months ago, I had a decisive experience when I wanted to undertake a product control regarding the quality of size in the winners' show. By the way, the size, apart from the number of teeth, is the only measurable criterion in the evaluation of the dog! The quality controllers partly stabbed me in the back and threatened me with preliminary injunctions in order to subdue this trivial affair. This, mind you, after they had tolerated the decrease in the numbers I described before without any comment. I think about this from time to time and not without a certain degree of frustration.

**So you want to go in new directions. Will you directly address the approximately 60,000 SV members about this?**

How else? But not only them. We have almost 200,000 organised shepherd friends all over the world in the WUSV. They know that we had temporary problems regarding autonomy in relation to the SV. These were solved by mutual agreement in some reasonable conversations. Here, I learned that we have to tackle the problems in Germany from a much broader point of view. This, in a world that has become small, in which show and trial results can be recalled globally within seconds. Our friends abroad expect clear guidelines from us and also an exemplary function. We need to do justice to this.

Correspondingly, planning in the breeding and training field has to be considered not only from the German point of view, but from a worldwide one. Of course, this makes the entire organisation even bigger, but in this approach, I also see the opportunity to get back on the old road to success economically and cynologically. I believe the most urgent task in Germany is our capital, meaning using the almost 2,000 local groups the SV has even more consistently to the association's advantage. After the breeder, the local groups are the first point of contact for interested persons and new members. What the individual local groups offer and how they behave is our association's business card. I would like to stress this again! With our almost 2,000 properties, we have a big advantage over all dog schools and competitive companies, at least regarding space. Our expertise is superior to that of dog schools in my understanding, not to mention the cost-benefit ratio.

However: 20 % of the local groups do not indicate any activities in their reports. The different groups of interest might paralyse each other, as described above. Pretension and reality drift far apart here. We are wasting massive potential here. Important first steps have already been taken with certification. Recently, I had the opportunity to take part in various certifications.



It calls the attention that the certified local groups have, almost without exception, opened up to dogs sports and sports with the dog.

**Maybe that will also have a positive effect on the average age in the local groups?**

We are working on broadening the term 'certification' a little more in order to extend what is offered on-site via a regional coordination of individual neighbored local groups. This way, we will ensure the survival of individual local groups. We might also evade a conflict of interest of the individual groups with this.

**How do we reach more members?**

I believe that we must place our offer of spending time with the dog on modern foundations. Our 'Formula 1', the protection service sport IPO, is clearly declining. We are talking about our important second pillar here. While in 2007, there were still 17,600 protection dog/IPO trials, in 2014, there were only 10,902. This corresponds to a 62 % decline from the initial value. That is shocking. If we do not open up to other forms of activities with dogs, we will soon reach a critical mass. The attractiveness of alternative activities with dogs, I am thinking of rescue dog sport, man-trailing, obedience, agility, to name only a few, is obvious. The increasing trend speaks for this. We should try to gain new sportspersons for IPO sport from these fields. If not there, where else?

The German Association for Working Dog Sports Clubs, DVG, recognised this trend in time, and outran us here years ago. Of course, it is an advantage to not be a breed club for one specific breed. Nevertheless, we have to take on this challenge. As our chancellor would say, there's 'no alternative'.

**What conclusion do you draw?**

In view of the many problems described, I would be happy if we could solve only some in the next legislation period. Within the association, there is a huge number of antiquated habits that need to be broken away from. At the moment, I cannot fathom determining whether my ideas or those of the new board of management will lead to the desired trend reversal. I can assure our members that my activities are directed solely to the interests of the German Shepherd and its survival in society. Here, I hope for the cooperation of all committees as well as operatives and members. Should my considerations and approaches be wrong or unable to be realised in the medium or long term, I will take the responsibility for that. Let us vouch together for a unique and wonderful dog breed and gain back some of the lightness, fairness and comradeship that fascinated us about this breed years ago. Our teenagers show us this in an exemplary way. It is simply fun to live and work with our fantastic dog on an equal footing. This gives me further motivation and the hope for a better future.