

## Chatting with one of the K9andSports founders, Florian Knabl

### 1. Florian, why did you guys come up with K9andSports?

Because we were increasingly worried that in ten years, we might not have working dogs or practice our sports. We didn't want to just stand by. Instead, we decided to take matters into our own hands.

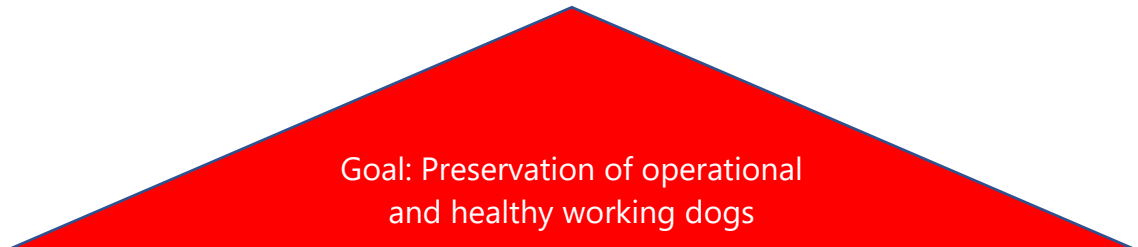
Our world/society is changing, and we have to respond. International organizations that have taken up the cause of "animal protection" are exerting massive pressure on politics. They are highly professional and have significant financial resources. Unfortunately, this is a global problem. Look at Austria, where just a few months ago, IGP and Mondio were almost banned. Minister of Animal Welfare Rauch, in alliance with a large animal welfare group, made it their goal to ban our sports. From our perspective, the Austrian umbrella organization ÖKV acted too diplomatically and cautiously – the last few decades are proof that this approach will not move our cause forward.

The advantage of K9andSports is that we can act quickly, given our setup. Our ambassadors are organized in WhatsApp groups, and the communication paths are short. The group is homogeneous enough that we can come to a consensus quickly. Our agenda is much more limited compared to a German Kennel Club (VDH) or the FCI. There, much more comprehensive coordination is needed before anything moves. We have few goals, but those we pursue adamantly.

### 2. What are the goals of K9andSports?

We want to preserve working dog breeds, ensure that they are not outlawed for the public and of course preserve working dog sports. In order to have healthy and capable working dogs, we need to make sure that we continue to have a broad gene pool and a large breeding population. Right now and in the past century, it was the sport that ensured such breeding population. The majority of working dogs that are bred have always gone and still go into the private sector and are used in working dog sports. Without working dogsports, the breeding population would shrink massively within a short time frame.

Our ambassadors work towards in five working groups; each ambassador is assigned to at least one working group: the working groups are represented in the form of pillars in the diagram.



Goal: Preservation of operational  
and healthy working dogs



### 3. Who founded K9andSports and how is the organization structured?

The initial idea was born after a short informal training that Connie and Peter Scherk, Patricia Pehrsson, and myself had. We have a German comedian, Martin Rütter, who went against IGP in a few of his popular podcasts and we were afraid that the general sentiment would go against our sports. We did not, of course, found K9andSports because of Martin Rütter – but he was one of many examples where a lack of information has led to misunderstandings and false impressions. That very day, we got on the phone and contacted K9 handlers and dog sports enthusiasts around the world whom we thought would champion the cause. A week later, a website was up, a rough idea was formed, and nearly 100 "ambassadors" were ready to support the initiative.

### 4. How is the organization structured? / What is the next goal?

Initially, K9andSports was purely a community of interest consisting of ambassadors (active members) and supporters. Within just one week, more than 5,000 people had signed up on the website to show their support for working dogs and working dog sports. However, the authorities, with whom a good relationship is very important to us, soon made it clear that we would need a formal organization for any cooperation. Therefore, we founded a non-profit association to maintain this form. We ourselves are members of the association and are currently in the process of incorporating Daniele Strazzeri, Horst-Dieter Träger, Björn Giessen and René Külzer into the board.

K9andSports does not pursue commercial interests. Whether we are supporting doctoral theses or organizing cross-association events, promoting young talent for sport and service, or other projects: we need a certain amount of financial resources. Fortunately, shortly after the foundation, Herm. Sprenger proactively approached us and has been supporting us ever since. In the near future, we will also start accepting sponsoring members.

### 5. Who does the initiative bring together?

It's hard to know where to start. We have incredibly skilled individuals from a variety of areas, sports, breeds and nations. From Germany, for example, we have the Vice President of the German Kennel Club (VDH), Christa Bremer. From the German Shepherd Club (SV), Daniele Strazzeri, Jogi Zank and Horst-Dieter Träger were on board very early on. Shortly after, Roswitha Dannenberg, the current president, joined. In the circle of ambassadors, you'll find the first chairman of the ADRK, René Külzer, as well as Helmut Reiser from the RSV. From the K9 sector, we have representatives from the German Military, the US Homeland Security and others, or Pierre Wahlström, who has established the military breeding in Sweden. Numerous veterinarians and scientists have joined. Very prominently, for example, the president of the Howard Hughes Institute, Harvard professor and DSH breeder Erin O'Shea, or the Israeli biologist Sharon Ronan. We have many renowned trainers and helpers like Ivan Balabanov, Sarah Prella and Marko Koskensalo and so many more. We have youth ambassadors who are actually from the younger generation themselves, so we don't overlook the perspectives of younger generations. We definitely want to extend our contacts into political spheres – that's next on the agenda. But even today, we are a large circle of very diverse people who discuss and work together in a cooperative, friendly, and pragmatic manner.

## **6. How did the separation between authorities and clubs come about?**

When I started in dogsports, it was still normal for K9s to be presented at the BSP (German Shepherd Championship). There used to be a K9 Handler Championship that was affiliated with the BSP. Police, railway police, Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces), and customs had teams. This event was discontinued, as far as I know, due to cost reasons which is a shame in our view. This is one example for the connection that we want to reestablish between the sport and K9 world. If we stand united, people will understand why working dogs and breeding are relevant for society.

In this context, we should also talk about trial regulations increasingly moving away from the actual dog of a working dog. We are seeing a specialization of the dogs in sports: at interregional competitions, focus is moving more and more towards speed, expression, and activity of the dogs. There is a certain amount of concern with this trend for example when we look at the dogs nerves stability. The associated easy excitability of the dogs is not always the right fit for service.

This developments are possible when we lose the bigger picture. Originally, the sport was meant to serve as a means to select dogs suitable for breeding for K9 handlers. Do you remember the times when the handler used to physically inspect the helper. We should not forget the origins of IGP and other bite sports, seek dialogues with K9 handlers and authorities, and continuously adjust the examination regulations accordingly. This will ensure that we maintain or go back to all-rounders suitable for deployment.

## **7. Please assess how the public/society views protection dog sports?**

I believe that people are generally becoming more distant from nature: we work digitally and spend a large part of our free time digitally. Most of us live distant to live stock and pets are increasingly humanized. Pets are companions and family members; the thought that animals work for people is negative for many. Animal welfare is very important to us and plays a major role at K9andSports, in particular when it comes to breeding of healthy animals. However, we need to critically take a look at certain measures in the name of animal welfare that - in some cases – ignore the actual nature of these animals and rather treat them like humans or children.

We are increasingly seeing organizations that supposedly collect money for animal welfare and use scandalous videos very professionally. Here, the viewpoint on coexistence between humans and animals is far from how I - and probably most of our readers - understand animal welfare. Huge organizations like PETA have even set themselves the goal to outlaw pet ownership in the long run. To continue raising donations, these organizations need to show continuous “achievements”: just now in Austria, we saw that behind small animal protection initiatives, there was an entire construct of larger companies that acted politically. What such organizations and their subsidiaries put out in the media forms opinions, changes the viewpoint negatively on our sport, and especially on protection. They exaggerate, and above all, they generalize, and the effects can then also be felt in some people's assessment.

On the other hand, in my personal environment and upon explanation, I generally experience a different view on working dog sports. When I became FMBB World Champion for the first time with my Malinois Conan, my working colleagues at Audi, mainly developers and engineers, wanted to know exactly what we do in our sport. I brought them a compilation from all parts of the competition. My colleagues wanted to know what it was that the dog is searching for on the track. They were amazed at how well the dogs follow in obedience. But most of all, they wanted to know why the helper hits the dogs – back then, the stick hit or stress test still existed. I explained to them that our trials select dogs that are suitable for K9 work and that this includes a certain resilience and robustness. After all, not only friends and pleasant situations await them. Such explanations make sense to people. And I was even once asked to hold a workshop for the Audi board, where they everyone worked on their communication and leading skills with dogs. It was a huge success.

## **8. Does politics therefore play a decisive role for our sport?**

Absolutely – we already mentioned the example with Austria. But discussions with respect to working dog breeds and our sports are also increasing at the EU level. We need good answers and, above all, contacts. Hunters are ahead of us in this respect – their networking into politics is significantly better than ours. Here, we simply must use and expand all contacts we have or can form. What we also need are data and scientific papers. In the context of legislative or judicial decisions, we encounter academics who place unconditional value on this. If we can't present data, all our experiences, however correct they may be, are worth no more than a mere opinion.

**Why do we need healthy and resilient working dogs? And why are breeding clubs such an important component for this?**

Because these dogs play very central roles in society, and we cannot do without them. Whether it's with the police, the military, customs, security companies, rescue squads, and so on... All these dogs require certain characteristics that can only be maintained through careful breeding selection. A good example is noise tolerance, and more specifically, indifference to gunshots. Nature dictates that an animal reacts to sudden unusual and loud noises by avoidance, as such noises could signal danger. In service to our society, whether at a port, airport, or during an earthquake, we rely on dogs that continue to work undisturbed when there are loud bangs, fires, or shouting.

Noise sensitivity and gunshot indifference are highly inheritable traits. Studies show that noise sensitivity in dogs that are pure pets is on the rise and is increasingly being treated with medication. This is not the case with working dogs. Why? Because we select for this with gunshots in obedience training and, in most breed clubs, also as part of the breeding eligibility tests, allowing only those dogs into the breeding pool that show gunshot indifference. The same applies, of course, to many character traits that we want to maintain or improve in working dogs. Here, breed clubs bear a responsibility, which is why correct selection, in terms of character and health, is a very important topic at K9andSports.

## **9. What is the relationship between service dogs and working dog sports?**

Service and sport essentially draw from the same resource: dogs bred by private breeders within breed clubs. However, the majority of dogs go to private individuals and into dog sports. K9 handlers are by no means the primary customers of breeders in terms of quantity. If private individuals could not engage in dog sports with their working dogs, the selection through sport would be eliminated. Because currently – especially with German Shepherds from working lines and Belgian Shepherds – primarily those dogs that show success in sport are used in breeding. And as previously explained, working dog sports at least test a part of the character traits needed in service. Not as extensively as we would wish, though. If private individuals did not even lead their working dogs in sport, there would be no selection relevant to service among the dogs that go into breeding. And very soon, there would no longer be enough deployable service dogs.

### **Goals, measures, and successes**

Currently, we are focusing on the following areas and measures to achieve our goal of preserving working dogs and sports:

- **Cooperation with Authorities:** As illustrated, we believe that sport and service belong together. In many nations, we use the connections of various ambassadors to bring dog sports, breeding, and K9 handlers closer together. In some countries, there is a solid cooperation, while in others, we are in the preparatory stages and talking to individual service dog handlers.

- Influence on Political Decisions: Naturally, we respond to events as they arise. We've already discussed how we did everything within our power to support Austrians in not losing their sport. In the short term, a K9andSports Austria formed under Georg Sticha, and with worldwide support, we were quickly able to clarify that the seemingly minor topic of "working dog sports in Austria" hid larger issues and that we could already show favoring substantial data. Consequently, the politics abandoned the hasty decisions that the Minister of Animal Welfare had initially planned.
- Experience with the IGP Youngstars Camp: In 2022, we found that it's possible to attract many young people across breeds to the sport. Together with outstanding trainers from various clubs, we were able to train with more than 160 enthusiastic young people for a weekend, and we remain in contact with many. Such camps were then also held in Sweden, Finland, and Switzerland. We are currently planning another camp in Germany for 2024.

Ambassadors have agreed that anyone giving seminars will provide one free spot for so-called Youngstars, interested youth under 25. Since the founding, we have been able to offer hundreds of young people in various nations access to high-quality seminars for free.

We are convinced that it is more important than ever for young people to find a healthy way to interact with animals and nature and to enjoy exchanging ideas in clubs. We have been pleased to find that our offerings have met with a very positive response. And, of course, our community thrives on the next generation.

- We believe there is a need to catch up regarding data and facts. The topic of animals, dogs, and training methods is emotional, and discussions are often heated. We need statistics on biting incidents related to sports, evidence of the efficiency and stress effects of training methods. We aim to acquire the knowledge necessary for responsible breeding and share it within the community. In this context, we have initiated discussions with scientists and universities and plan to support the first graduates in writing relevant doctoral theses.
- We have been conducting public relations for our cause from the start. Not only do we publish informative material on our Instagram and Facebook accounts, but our ambassadors also try to get articles about their activities into the local press, highlight the connection to service at sporting events with demonstrations, and actively try to make competitions more interesting for people not involved in dog sports. The goal is to create understanding for the background of what we do. To show that our dogs are social, can move safely in society, are well-exercised, and under control. We don't need to win over every individual for working dogs and the sport, but we aim to provide enough information to prevent decisions based on incorrect information, as was nearly the case in Austria.
- Daniele Strazzeri leads our working group on association work. In Germany, through our ambassadors, there's already a close contact between VDH, SV, ADRK, DV, and

Boxer Club. We aim to create a cross-association and cross-country common understanding and be able to present a united front. The FCI Working Dog Commission already exists in terms of breeding and sport. However, there is no exchange at the grassroots level among the active participants within this framework, and within the FCI, working dogs only make up a small part.

#### **- What milestones have already been achieved?**

- We notice a change in perception towards dog sports, with service dog handlers increasingly approaching dog sports enthusiasts. In the Austria conflict, it was the local K9 handlers who came to us, and together we planned how to proceed. A lot of activity took place behind the scenes, and the Austrian Federal Army and police quickly drafted statements that were sent to the responsible ministry. For our part, we sent a comprehensively supported statement to the Austrian parliament. In the end, many pat themselves on the back when things turn out well, and it's not about determining which actors achieved what. In any case, we were able to act quickly and unitedly. This would not have been possible without the groundwork.
- Since the founding of K9andSports in Germany, we have maintained a significantly more intensive contact with the authorities and also have some service dog handlers among the ambassadors. This first enables a comprehensive comparison of the needs that athletes and practitioners have. A major milestone was the first breeding meeting in November 2023, where we had representatives from almost all working dog breed and sports associations on-site, as well as representatives from the German Kennel Club, the German Military, and many sport and breeding representatives. With much support from Dr. Esther Schalke, commander of the Bundeswehr's service dog school, we were able to match our theoretical views and, in the afternoon with the support of helpers from various clubs, practically test dogs. The cooperative interaction was outstanding, and we look forward to building on it.
- As already mentioned, there's a lot happening in the area of youth, and we're just starting to plan the next camp for 2024. One can imagine that such events with hundreds of participants are not easy to manage by volunteers - but we invest time and effort gladly if it helps to advance our working dog sport.

How can one support K9andSports?

First of all, every registration on our site helps us:

<https://k9-and-sports.com/support-k9-and-sports/>

Because only if we can show that we have a critical mass will we be listened to in the context of political discussions or even within our organizations when it comes to the concerns of working dog sports enthusiasts. Those who want to actively contribute are welcome to contact us by e-mail. However, a lot of initiative is required because we do not have the capacity to coordinate everything in detail. We are very "hands-on" in this respect!