SV Announcements

**The character judgement within the SV**

At the 2017 Federal Convention, there will be an application for character judgements to be introduced. The core team behind the concept, consisting of Udo Wolters, Jens-Peter Flügge, Helmut König, Joachim Stiegler, Marco Ossmann, Heinz Gerdes, Egon Gutknecht, Hartmut Setecki and Lothar Quoll, would like to take this opportunity to outline the most important points of the evaluation.

**Why do we need a character judgement?** Society as a whole is being increasingly critical and applying significant pressure on dog breeders, handlers and pedigree dog breeding societies. Bans on dangerous dogs, and unscrupulous dog breeders and trainers are being more and more widely discussed. And the discussion always returns to devastating bite incidents involving dogs. The fear, which is largely the trigger and cause of these discussions and requirements, that is at the heart of this issue must be taken seriously. Meaningful measures need to be taken to show that we are taking the situation seriously, and want to find solutions and foster a feeling of good will.

Even-tempered dogs who have strong nerves yet are not excessively aggressive are in demand nowadays. The dogs must be able to adequately deal with the constantly changing demands of their social environment. By introducing the concept behind the character judgement, the society is implementing its wish to place our dogs’ nature and its fundamental importance at the forefront, and to make it possible to assess its influencing factors. And this is therefore important to later align canine efforts and work, to understand the reasons behind unwanted behaviour traits and disorders – also known as character deficiencies – and to help prevent these emerging further in the world of dog ownership in a way that is appropriate both for the animal and for society as a whole. We are responsible for using the knowledge arising from biological behavioural research on the nature of dogs available to us presently and for considering the knowledge gleaned from cynology.

The key guiding principles are therefore using knowledge gained from biological behavioural research to better understand the dog, its behaviour and its behaviour development. In doing so, it is important to consider the interplay between inherited and acquired behaviour control traits, and between fear and aggression. There is no doubt today that a dog’s nature is not predominantly determined by genetics. Instead, it is the combined result of countless interactions between hereditary dispositions and natural, social and civilizing environmental conditions. Therefore, only the foundations of nature are inherited. Nature itself is not inherited, but rather it develops as a result of environmental conditions on the basis of genetic dispositions. Hereditary dispositions are not based on specific  nature or behaviour genes, but rather on genes that when combined have an effect on the organism’s development and behaviour foundations. This means that one and the same gene influences the inheritance of physical and behavioural traits.

**What does this mean for nature (temperament)?** Even if you discount necessary environmental influences as part of this consideration for ease – nature cannot be bred by itself. Our dogs have innate regulation mechanisms. They have an innate ability to learn. Using the different innate strategies for gaining experience, it is possible for the dog to complement its behaviour to the conditions within its “personal” environment. Learning is therefore not something distorting or overlapping, but rather fulfils the innate drive for openness and incompleteness. Learning – particularly formative and character-like learning – therefore allows a dog’s nature to develop. A dog’s nature is the result of a dynamic development process between genetics and environment. Unfavourable environmental deficiencies cannot be compensated for through breeding. Dogs who are unable to fulfil their innate drive for learning an open behaviour program naturally develop behaviour that is more or less distorted.

In future, the society will not only support its members to teach a dog to perform to BH/IPO standards. By introducing the character judgements, we want to encourage dog owners to ensure that a dog is not deprived of anything that they need for their behaviour and nature to develop healthily (Kaspar Hauser effect). Furthermore, we must not expect anything unnatural from the dog, which may harm the development of their nature. Deprivation or excessive demands result in fear or aggressive behaviour.

The way dogs live alongside humans has changed and our dogs must be introduced to these changing conditions. A puppy’s willingness for social convergence or confrontation with the environment crucially depends on their past experiences during rearing, and on the coping strategies they have learned and acquired until this point, as well as meeting their natural social needs. Without the right rearing and developmental conditions, our dogs cannot themselves show which genes they are really
carrying, which is why humans must bear this responsibility to demonstrate what the dogs cannot achieve.

**What happens in a character judgement?** As part of a character judgement, a dog’s behaviour and its flexibility is recorded by confronting them with different stimuli that may trigger or provoke a particular behaviour. A conclusion can be drawn on the dog’s nature based on their behaviour throughout the entire assessment, with the aim of checking the dog’s suitability for living with humans in today’s world as objectively as possible. The dog should not be handled in obedience. Commands must be kept to the very minimum. For this reason, performance examinations (BH, IPO, etc.) that predominantly test learned and conditioned behaviour are no substitute for character judgements. Character judgements are split into the following categories:

**Impartiality:** The dog should allow their handler and an unknown person, e.g. the judge, to touch them at different points on the body.

**Social behaviour:** Interaction with people, individuals, groups

**Noise sensitivity:** In this section, the dog is subjected to different acoustic stimuli, e.g. rattling, engine noise and blanks being fired as the loudest stimulus.

**Certainty of movement:** Sensitivity to heights (e.g. assessed by looking at a dog’s movement behaviour across tables) as well as a dog’s movement on flat ground.

**Play and predatory instinct/behaviour under stress:** The assessment is based on how the dog plays with their owner (teamwork) and with an unknown person (representative). Furthermore, the intensity towards obstructed prey (willingness to find) and their willingness to play under increased demands (moving table) are also assessed. Only a dog that feels comfortable in its environment and can cope with the situation is able to play.

**Basic nature**: behaviour in isolation and when meeting an unknown person.

**What happens during the assessment?** The dog is assessed is two ways: based on the specific evaluation of each behaviour trait (descriptive) and based on reliability ratings. Not only are the dog’s reactions crucial here, but also how the dog manages the individual situations and using which coping strategies. If the dog becomes visibly overstressed, the assessment is stopped so that the dog is not harmed indefinitely.

General grounds for exclusion include character deficiencies that are also stipulated in our breed standard. This affects dogs that are very anxious, aggressive dogs that show increased aggression in peaceful situations, as well as dogs that are sensitive to shots being fired. The description makes it easier for the dog owner and other persons involved to follow the results of the character judgement. By awarding reliability ratings, it is possible to add more weighting to more significant behavioural situations. Furthermore, the reliability ratings make it possible to gather statistics and monitor the character judgements more closely.

**How will the character judgement be supported?** After the SV BV unanimously decided in May 2014 to introduce the SV’s character judgement, the core team worked procedure and content of the character judgement. Since then, the VDH has required its pedigree dog breeding societies to carry out random behaviour tests. There are many parallels between the VDH procedure and our concept, whereby attention is also paid to the individual breeds’ coping strategies in assessment situations, as well as breed-specific characteristics as part of the assessment.

In 2015, several pilot events were held in the SV and the experience gained during these events was then evaluated by the core team, implemented accordingly and the assessment sheets were modified as necessary. The pilot events were open to the public, meaning members had the opportunity to learn more about the assessment. At the same time, the core team also paid great attention to training judges as character judges so that there are now a total of 38 character judges (WBU) throughout Germany who have passed the training and are available to carry out the assessments. The core team determined that the character judgement is a main society event in the public eye–similar to a breeding survey.

On the occasion of the SV BV in May 2016, the character judgement was first introduced on a voluntary basis. At the same time, the core team were tasked with developing the work element of the breeding examinations (ZAP). The concept was presented in several countries around the world and was very well received. So much so, the WUSV decided to use the character judgement as a basis for harmonizing the global implementation of standardized breeding and training for German Shepherds in line with the SV’s applicable constitutions and regulations (Agenda 2025).

**What lies ahead for the ZAP?** After the character judgement (ZAP part 1), the alternative path into breeding is, of course, a work element that is fit for working dogs, whose assessment is far more focused on our dogs’ disposition and health. This assessment can be made from the age of 18 months. If a dog does not pass the assessment, it is possible to repeat the work element twice.

As a result, traditional evaluations based on points will no longer be required. In line with the WBU, a dog’s work in the individual sections/exercises will be described using adjectives and reliability ratings. The adjectives and reliability ratings will be entered in SV DOxS. This provides breeders with guidance when planning future litters. However, statistical evaluations relating to behavioural traits in various breeding lines are also possible using the corresponding reliability ratings.

**A new alternative path into breeding (ZAP)**

As with the IPO examination/breed regulation, the ZAP work element consists of the three established sub-sections, whereby the focus is on the dog’s skills in cooperation with their trainer:

**I. Nose work:** How intensely does the dog work (following the tracks) – and how does the subject solve any problems that may arise while out on the tracking course (working at angles, objects)?
 **II: Obedience exercises:** (The dog is on the lead out on the field): How does the dog work with their handler (dog/handler interaction, teamwork), what techniques do they use, how are sound signals implemented, how does the dog retrieve, and last but not least, how does the dog jump?

**III. Defence exercises:** How easy is the dog to handle during the exercises, how intense are the wait and guarding phases, and how can the dog’s defence behaviour be assessed?

At the SV BV 2017, it will be proposed that all GSDs bred within the SV and born after 07/01/2017 must have proof of passing the character judgement as part of being permitted for breeding. Furthermore, it is necessary to decide on the introduction of the SV ZAP at the BV. Regardless of whether the dog is later used for breeding, participating in character judgements must be supported in general. A breeder can already sow the seeds by encouraging those who buy their puppies to enter the dog for a character judgement. The more dogs within a breed that  are checked and statistically recorded, the more meaningful the evaluations and tendencies of behavioural problems within a breed or breeding line will be.

In future, character judgements will be essential and there will be no alternative. The society and its bodies will provide the necessary framework conditions for the assessment, and will also provide the necessary aids and information as far  as possible. Revive the events happening in your local committee and provide this platform. Therefore, if we admonish ourselves in future for all pulling on the same string, we must not forget that we all need to be pulling in the same direction. After all, questions about nature and the future of our dogs are first and foremost human questions, and how we handle ourselves.