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Teaching dogs o

Local trainer enjoys life of canine classes

BY JEANNE GRIMES
STAFF WRITER

Like any good teacher, Matthias Zehfuss achieves success in the classroom through communication with his students.

They respond – with action, not words. For at this school, body language speaks volumes that mere words could never express.

Zehfuss is headmaster, instructor, counselor and curriculum chief. His Zehfuss K-9 Training Center at 6410 NW Birch is strictly a one-man operation and, in the past decade, Zehfuss has taught more than 20,000 classes. He believes he just may be the only licensed dog trainer in Oklahoma.

It's all a far cry from where and how he started out. But then that beginning in the canine world taught him a lot.

Although he's been drawn to dogs and dog people for as long as he can remember, Zehfuss was 20 before he ever had a dog of his own.

It was the kind of dog that might have made anyone else swear off the species for good.

Zehfuss paid 1,700 marks (about \$1,200 at the time) for a bull terrier puppy that he named Bronson. The puppy had an impeccable pedigree – his dam was the best-bred bull terrier bitch on the Continent – and a real attitude problem.

"I thought I knew about dogs," Zehfuss said, "but this dog, he was bad to the bone. Now, I know he was aggressive."

Zehfuss got Bronson when the puppy was just 7 weeks old. By the tender age of 12 weeks, Bronson had turned his walks around the town into skirmishes in a never-ending turf war, growling and barking at every dog he encountered.

One day, Zehfuss borrowed his



Licensed dog trainer Matthias Zehfuss sends his Rottweiler, Bori over an A-frame obstacle on the agility course at Zehfuss K-9. Americanized his first name to Matthew, trains 60 dogs a week at the center.

father-in-law's Fiat and took Bronson for a drive. He left the puppy unattended in the car for just a few minutes while he visited with his parents. When he stepped outside their house, he saw a crowd gathered around the car, and at first thought they were admiring the puppy.

They weren't. As Zehfuss approached the car, he saw the awful truth: Bronson in the act of ripping apart the car's interior.

"I told a couple of my buddies, and one guy told me, 'You need to go into a dog club,'" Zehfuss recalled.

Zehfuss took their advice and

joined a schutzhund club. Schutzhund, a dog sport originated in Germany, is all about training all-around working dogs so they are proficient in tracking, obedience and protection.

"I was the youngest guy in the club," Zehfuss said.

The club president took Zehfuss under his wing and proceeded to teach him about training from the, well, pooper-scooper up.

"The first thing he showed me was how to do tracking and pick up poop on the track," Zehfuss said. "For the first three months, dog training was walking through the woods."

Obedience tricks



JEFF DIXON/STAFF

s, a German import, scrambling Training Center. Zehfuss, who at the school in northwest Law-

Zehfuss made another acquaintance through the club, a man who trained dogs much like Zehfuss does today. The two men began to train together, until Zehfuss sold Bronson and moved to the United States with his then-wife.

Zehfuss was lost without a dog in his life, and once settled in Oklahoma, he bought a Doberman pinscher from a breeder in Calera.

He named the new dog Champ.

"He was one of the best dogs I ever owned," Zehfuss said. "I loved him; he was a tough dog. He was a personal protection dog and I trained him for narcotics. He verified pot and cocaine."

At the time, Zehfuss was living in a mobile home park in southeast Lawton. He worked Champ daily, taking him on walks and honing his considerable obedience skills. It never failed, Zehfuss added, that someone would approach him on these outings and ask how he trained Champ to do all that he did.

The same questions asked over and over would have been annoying had not Zehfuss recognized a career opportunity when he heard one.

"I decided the next time I was asked, I'd charge (for the answer)," he said. "And I decided if I was going to train dogs, I'd do it right."

He turned to publications like Dog World in his search for a school that would certify him as a trainer. He found what he was looking for at the West Virginia K-9 College, which offered an exacting 600-hour accredited curriculum that included lectures and field work in veterinary medicine, canine genetics, agitation, protection, tracking and man-trailing.

He took Champ with him and, after graduating as top student in his class — his final score was 98.5 percent — the college hired Zehfuss as an instructor. Zehfuss spent the next year training others how to train dogs for police work, protection and tracking.

Eventually, he returned to Lawton with his dog training license.

"I could have trained dogs without a license, but I didn't want to," he said.

He hung out his shingle, opening Zehfuss K-9 Training Center 10 years ago last October. His reputation, bolstered largely by word-of-mouth advertising, keeps him busy seven days a week.

He averages about 60 classes a week — all are private, with the exception of one class on Fridays — and said most clients enroll their dogs in puppy kindergarten, basic obedience or off-leash obedience. For more advanced students, Zehfuss offers classes in the schutzhund staples of tracking and protection, as well as agility.

Whatever the class, Zehfuss relies heavily on his knowledge of animal behavior, offering frustrated owners insight into why their dog does the things it does. Armed with this dog's-eye view of the world, Zehfuss specializes in correcting problem behavior.

People have brought their dogs from as far away as Lindsay, Altus and Seymour, Texas. One Tulsa man brought two dogs to Zehfuss for schutzhund training every Sunday for a year.

"How many people do you know who do what they like?" Zehfuss asked. "I never had a second thought (about his dog training career). I love it and I think people know it."

"I like puppy kindergarten. I see little puppies that can't even walk on a leash and, at the end of the class, they're heeling and sitting."

And he likes to do protection and agility, which he considers "one of the biggest confidence builders in dogs."

Among breeds, he favors the working dogs of his homeland — Rottweiler, German shepherd, Doberman pinscher and schnauzer. Zehfuss has titled several dogs in schutzhund, and is currently working with three dogs in training for competition. However, he is semi-retired from the competition ring.

A local television station airs spots featuring Zehfuss' advice and dog training tips on Wednesday mornings. He's also in demand for seminars. The most recent request came from Public Service Co. of Oklahoma, which asked Zehfuss to conduct a seminar for the utility's meter readers who frequently confront dogs on the job.

He is also an author, and has been published in Dog World. The National Diabetes Foundation also published an article he wrote on the incidence of diabetes in dogs.

"In dog training, a lot is involved in technique," he said. "If you can communicate with an animal, it's a lot easier. I have had some problem dogs. We may not get them perfect, but we always get results."