

Love of dogs gives a leg up on career

By **ROB WEAVER**/Staff writer

The little brick house on the west side of Lawton with the spacious yard, swimming pool and raised wooden deck has gone to the dogs.

As you walk up to the house, the din of barking begins. Only after the mild-mannered, blond owner shakes hands with "strangers," do the dogs quiet down and resume panting.

How do the dogs know when to bark? How do they know when to stop?

The answer is simple. They've been trained.

Matthew Zehfus is Lawton's most well-known dog trainer. A trainer for more than 11 years, Zehfus came to the United States 6½ years ago from Pirmasens, Germany, a small town near the French border.

Since then, he has trained an estimated 1,000 Lawton dogs. He trains not only house dogs, but he trains police and drug dogs as well. In addition, he trains coyotes and mixed wolf breeds.

Every dog has his day and Zehfus realized the American dream when he started his business from nothing.

Zehfus taught at a K-9 college in West Virginia for the first year and a half he was in the states. Then he came to Lawton and has remained here since. He has no plans to leave.

"Everybody associates a German with a dog person," he said. "I've had job offers in California, Nevada and other places. I stay in Lawton because I like the people."

Even before he became a trainer, Zehfus's love for canines was strong.

The first dog he ever owned was what convinced him to become a trainer.

"My first dog was a bull terrier.



"Patience," he said. "Every dog is different, like a kid. Just because the dog doesn't listen, it doesn't mean he's stupid."

Trained himself by other trainers in Germany, Zehfusf believes that just because dogs are pets, they shouldn't lead a dog's life. Zehfusf subscribes to the German approach to dog ownership.

"Germans treat dogs like part of the family," he said. "Really, they treat them like kids. They spoil them, work them and teach them."

"Germans take their dogs anywhere. They go into restaurants or go shopping with them."

Zehfusf knows that Americans look at owning a dog differently than Germans do, but he says that's changing.

"Americans are starting to come around," he said.

Zehfusf has a particular philosophy about Americans.

"Americans will welcome you with open arms," he said. "But if you do something that takes away their trust, you're finished."

This philosophy mirrors the general attitude of American dog owners. Often when dogs come into a family's home for the first time, they are not housebroken; they urinate on the carpet and chew on furniture. Many first-time dog owners are eager to get rid of their new pet.

The man who loves dogs is Matthew Zehfusf, pictured with his own world-class bred Boris. Boris, who dotes on Matthew's every action, is truly this man's best friend.

Zehfusf encourages all dog owners to be patient, or get their pet into training.

"I start training dogs at eight weeks," he said. "If you wait any longer they have already developed bad habits."

But can you teach an old dog new tricks?

Zehfusf says it's possible. He's currently training a 7-year-old dog.

However, not all dogs are capable of being trained to the same extent.

"A good dog is stable, he's sound," Zehfusf said. "The best dogs are very intense, very eager. They also must have good focus."

For dogs, "focus" is the trait by which a dog will pay close attention to his master at all times.

"German shepherds, Dobermans and Rottweilers are the best working dogs," he said.

It's no surprise, then, that most police dogs are one of these breeds. Zehfusf says that it normally takes two years or more to train a police dog. He's trained them not only for personal protection and tracking, but for drug-sniffing.

"I trained one drug dog who veri-

So what's the most important trait to have as a dog trainer?

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fied marijuana and cocaine," he said. "He's more famous than me."

Zehfusf's pride and joy, though, is Boris.

Registered as Benno von der Nordsaar, Boris is a 1½-year-old Rottweiler. Imported from Germany, Boris was born to a 2nd and 4th

CHELLE BENTLEY/staff

Grand World Champion. Zehfusf spent two years and \$1,700 dollars to obtain Boris.

His love for the dog is undeniable. Boris and Zehfusf train in the field behind Zehfusf's spacious yard, bought with dog training in mind. The pair perform a sequence of commands that appear to be a complicated dance.

The "dance," however, is a demonstration of the dog's ability to obey at all times.

"I could walk in the house and leave him lying there for two hours," Zehfusf said. "He'd still be there when I came out. He's a superior dog."

Not all people love dogs as much as Zehfusf does.

Many people find dogs to be unclean animals or are simply afraid of them. Zehfusf says that fear is the worst thing to show a dog.

"Don't be afraid of a dog," he said. "When people are in fear of something, they give off pheromones."

Pheromones are chemical substances that the body secretes as a response to certain stimuli.

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"Dogs pick up on pheromones," he said. "They know when you are afraid of them and that can encourage them."

To help the faint-hearted, Zehfus has held seminars for kids, and adults, on how not to be afraid of dogs.

In his spare time, (sometimes he trains as many as 14 dogs a day), Zehfus is writing a book about, what else, dogs. The book will explain how to select the right breed and then how to care for and train a dog.

Zehfus trains all of his clients' dogs using a one-on-one technique. He works seven days a week and trains dogs in various ways.

His training covers many areas. Not all dogs are trained in each area, but dogs that are sound can be trained in more than one. He trains dogs for on-leash obedience, off-leash obedience, advanced obedience, competition, show, personal protection, home alert, search-and-rescue, and schuzhund, a sport-type training.

Schuzhund combines many areas of obedience and skills. Few dogs are able to acquire the schuzhund level, he said.

Zehfus's customers are as varied as his students. Customers hail from Oklahoma City, Duncan, Snyder, Marlow, Anadarko, and as far away as Stillwater.

Always eager to talk about canines, Zehfus simply says, "I love dogs." Even his phone number lets you know that — 536-DOGS.