

# Pupils Leave Lasting Mark With Lawton Dog Trainer

By Mark A. Hutchison  
Lawton Bureau

LAWTON — Matthias Zehfuss traces fingers over arm scars received during 10 years of training some of the world's most vicious and intelligent canines to protect their masters, sniff out drugs and track criminals.

He fondly recalls a 70-pound brute named Bronson, an English bull terrier that was leery of men, adored women and somewhat resembled Spuds Mackenzie.

"I had company one day and I was putting him out. He jumped right up and latched on," Zehfuss said, referring to prominent bite marks on his right wrist.

"I even had a coat on. His teeth went right through the sleeves. Blood everywhere."

On another occasion, he was training a German shepherd to attack the gun hand of a would-be assailant. The dog was a bit too aggressive.

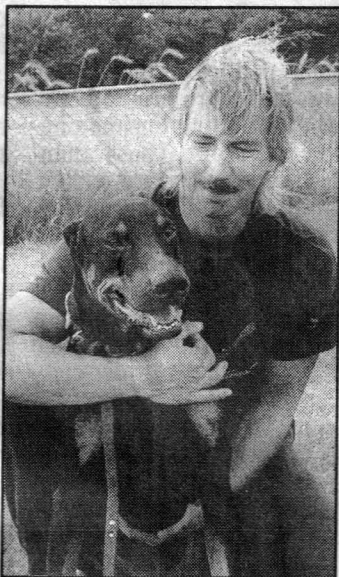
"I stopped counting at 16 the number of times I've been bitten," Zehfuss said.

"I imagine I've trained well over 1,000 animals."

In handling dogs ranging from scruffy mixed breeds to purebreds, Zehfuss claims to be one of few trainers who can teach any dog — young or old — a variety of functions.

After working with canines in Germany, he's settled in Lawton and offers services to dog enthusiasts who know his reputation and don't mind paying for it.

Born in the city of Pirmasens in what was West Germany, he developed his passion for dog training by reading books. With his newfound knowledge and \$1,300, he purchased Bron-



— Staff Photo by Mark A. Hutchison

**As a struggling young dog trainer, Matthias Zehfuss barked out commands to his Doberman, Champ, to attract attention from neighbors.**

son and rubbed elbows with members of the Schutzhund, an exclusive club of dog trainers.

He learned the mechanics of his profession and formed a partnership with Joachim Frombach, a policeman who moonlighted as a trainer.

After leading Bronson to the 1986 world champion title, Zehfuss married a U.S. Army soldier who was transferred to Fort Sill. Two days before they departed Germany, he sold his prize terrier.

Wanting another pupil, he purchased a Doberman pinscher in Calera, and drew attention from curious dog owners as he issued orders in German to Champ outside the family trailer.

"I couldn't speak a lot of English, but I knew they were

asking me if I could train their dogs," Zehfuss said.

He spent three months at the West Virginia Canine College honing his skills, then returned and divorced his wife. Having no money, he sold his electric razor and hocked his ex-wife's leather coat, pocketing \$47.50.

With a business degree from a German university but a limited English vocabulary, Zehfuss knew he needed to be self-employed. Ads were placed in the local newspaper, and soon he had his first customer — the owner of a Rottweiler puppy. Business bloomed as satisfied clients — 80 percent of whom are military — spread the word after they'd transferred from Oklahoma.

Zehfuss eventually was named Lawton Businessman of the Month. He's received phone calls from as far away as Germany from dog owners seeking instruction.

"When I was struggling, my father and friends in Germany kept calling and telling me to come home," he said. "I told them I had to make it on my own."

He returned to the West Virginia college in 1990 and taught a year before coming back to Lawton with a new wife, Tonja, and three daughters.

Today, he trains 50 dogs a week in obedience, conformation, protection, drug-sniffing, search and rescue, and man trailing.

Lessons range from \$50 for an eight-week puppy kindergarten course, to a one-year Schutzhund program, which Zehfuss says is the "most highly advanced training in the world." It combines the knowledge of tracking, on and off-leash obedience and protection.