

The **Montana Pioneer**

The Best Read Around

NOVEMBER 2020

**Bred
to Love,
Trained
to Protect**



Also in This Issue:

Quenby and the West of Wayland Band

The Final Rule of the Desert Island



Dogs in training at Svalinn in Paradise Valley. Photos by Ted Wells.

Could Your New BFF Be A (Svalinn) Dog?

Cross-breeding and training make for exceptional canines

■ BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

Who doesn't want a friendly, loyal companion—someone who loves you unconditionally just for being you, who looks out for your welfare and is always overjoyed to be with you? It's a lot to ask of a friend or life partner. What if your best friend can't converse with you, but is keenly intelligent, loving, hardworking and can intuit your needs and feelings? What if that friend is a dog—one who could defend you against an attack or assailant? That would be a Svalinn dog, bred to be obedient, stable and devoted—and, should you need it, a personal protection asset.

In Norse mythology, Svalinn is a legendary shield that stands before the sun. According to co-founder Kim Greene (whose business card lists her title as Alpha Female), the enterprise was 'bred from necessity.' The Princeton University graduate was serving in Afghanistan in 2004, where she worked as a junior policy advisor to President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. There, she met her former husband, a Green Beret providing security and protection services that included deploying dogs. Kim was smitten, but not keen on dogs. Growing up in New Hampshire, in first grade she'd

gotten a bad case of poison ivy from a dog and hadn't touched one since. "For me, a condition for marriage was a no-dog policy," she recounts. "I lost." Within a year, the couple had married, moved to Nairobi, Kenya, birthed twin boys and started Ridgeback, a business that employed dogs. "We had a Fedex family," quips Kim.

Ridgeback imported two protection dogs from North America and purchased a breeding program. The business became personal when, as a young mother driving a Land Rover in a dangerous city with two kids in car seats, Kim realized she would need a firearm, a bodyguard or a protective dog. "I chose the dog." Actually, two dogs, Banchee and Jack, rode shotgun with her and her sons, Rhys and Tor, now 14. In addition to assisting people with security needs, the Greens trained dogs for search and rescue, for the military, and for conservation efforts in Kenya. After living in Africa for eight years, the family moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Their business had been rebranded as Svalinn, and they had begun cross-breeding German Shepherd, Dutch Shepherd and Belgian Malinois bloodlines. "Pure breeds don't hold up to the test of time,"

says Kim. "German Shepherds can have hip dysplasia and ocular problems, the Malinois can be too much for most people to handle... we want to retain the capability and add stability. We're making them a heartier, longer-lasting asset. I say it somewhat jokingly, but at this point Svalinn dogs really are a breed apart."

Moving to Bozeman in 2014 with her family, Kim was overjoyed with the sense of community she found, not to mention the landscape. "Having lived in wide open spaces, it wasn't an option to move to an American strip mall city," says the skier, long-distance bike enthusiast, climber and businesswoman who, along with her business partner, Holt Price, now runs Svalinn, located on a 167-acre ranch property in Livingston.

It's hard to keep your eyes on the road when driving up to 'boot camp.' They want to wander, take in the expanse of stunning panoramic vistas. Pulling in, you see the arena, a structure which houses 40-60 dogs. You notice the barn and the caretaker's home, which also serves as office space. Behind a ridgeline to your right are 80 acres used for tracking training. And front and center, comprised of benches, ladders, spools, tables, tires and slides, is a circular obstacle

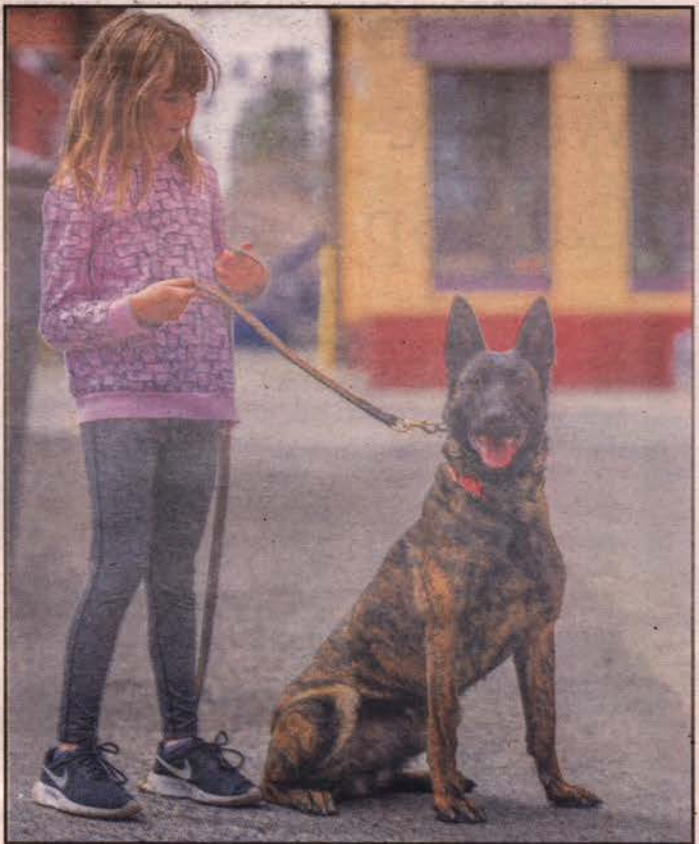
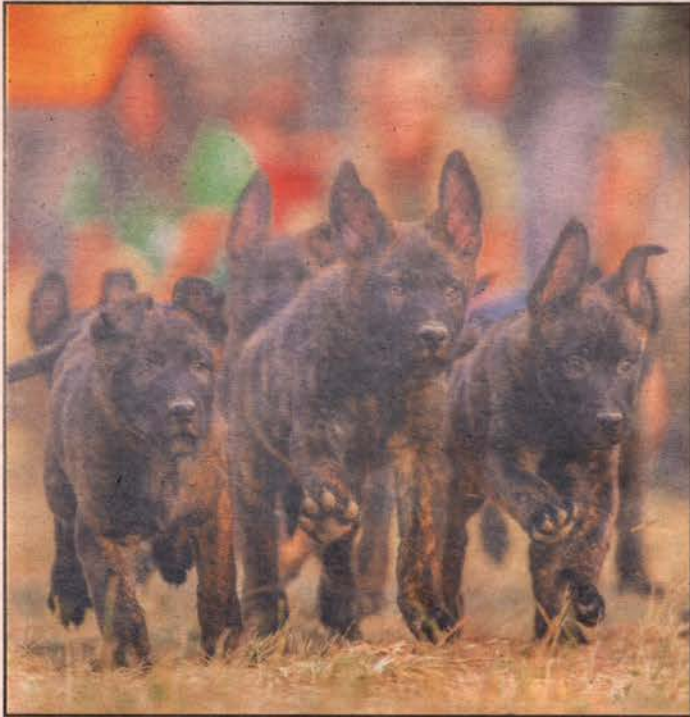
course known as The Phoenix. Requiring deliberate, cautious yet quick foot placement, it changes each day, literally keeping dogs-in-training on their toes. "We're developing elite athletes," states Kim. "This refines their intrinsic musculature and balance." She notes that when they leave Montana, many dogs will need to negotiate escalators—and there are only two in the state. Just now, there are four Svalinn dogs poised to be put through their paces. Others are on their way to town, to practice sociability.

Ashley Coulthard is one of 13 canine handlers on the ranch, of which at least half are women. He's working with three-month old Rooster, a puppy from the 'Wild West' litter. When a litter is born, the handlers meet to brainstorm naming themes. "We keep it light and fun," says Greene, turned off by the way working dogs are usually marketed as menacing. Svalinn naming themes include Country Music Singers, National Parks, Montana Breweries (a litter with distinctively expressive eyebrows), and the Disney Villain litter, which tends to waddle, strutting its stuff.

Handler Rachel Harris is monitoring Ariel, from the Outer Space litter, and Alyssa Durkee is charged with Lockhorn and Highlander, both 'Brew' boys, along with their sister, Kessler, who at the moment is under Greene's supervision. Kessler and Highlander have already been 'reserved' for adoption. All Svalinn dogs are hand delivered to their new owners, most at two-and-a-half years old. "They are fully trained within 15-18 months, but are not fully mature," remarks Alyssa. "A one-and-a-half-year-old dog is equivalent to an 18-year-old human." One poised paw lifted, Kessler sniffs. "Dogs smell in technical color," remarks Greene. "They have about 300 sense capabilities, compared to our six." She notes that Kessler is "super athletic, very sweet and highly obedient." But she can't seem to stop stroking Highlander's ears and patting his chest. "He's a very silky boy," she smiles. "He reminds me of Jack." Kim lost Jack in January and hasn't been able to bring herself to deeply bond with another dog—yet.

Four small grey benches are moved to the center of the circle, to demonstrate foundational obedience. "Hup," commands each handler in succession. The canines jump up and take a seat. "Good sitz," they're praised. There are no treats, no toys; they're working for love and affection. "That will be helpful in

...Continued



(Top left): Litter at play.. (Right): Svalinn dog with companion. (Photos courtesy of Ted Wells)

the back country when you're out of treats," comments Harris. Jumping back down to sink into slushy, sticky snow is slightly less precise. "Sitting in the snow is cold on anyone's bum," says Durkee. "Not fun."

Having exhausted little Rooster, Coulthard returns with eight-month-old Rico, part of The Napoleon Dynamite litter. He's whimpering in youthful excitement, surprised when a blue tarp hanging from a high ladder thwaps in a gust of wind. It's there for just that reason. "We try to anticipate stimuli the dogs will encounter out in the world," says Kim. "A new trash bag liner snapping open sounds like that." Is there a difference between male and female in choosing a protector? "We advise clients to look at the plumbing last," says Durkee. "People have the perception that males might be more protective, but it comes down to personality. You can have some hardcore females." And size matters: smaller is often better. "Fifty-seven to sixty-four pounds is a good travel size," states Greene, noting that many of the dogs will go to women, and all will accompany their owner families wherever they go.

Greene and Price prefer to hire handlers without prior experience. "In identifying prospective handlers we look for a calm demeanor, for people who are going to connect here (Kim touches her heart); you've got to have the connection, and pa-

tiency. This is not just dog obedience, not just socialization. This is a boutique model; there's a lot of time on the water with each dog." It takes roughly 2000 hours of training to produce these magnificent creatures, along with lots of affection and a lifestyle as close to Nature as possible. Each

"...In Norse mythology, Svalinn is a legendary shield that stands before the sun..."

doghouse is a 10-12 foot diameter circle, so the canines can get close but can't touch each other. The floor is earth, not concrete; there is no bleach used in cleaning. "We want them to be able to dig and rough and tumble on undulating terrain," says Coulthard. Grooming is minimal to keep natural oils in their coats. "Shampooing will strip that away," cautions Harris. In spring they'll shed for about two weeks; crossbreeding limits what would be significant shedding from, say, a German Shepherd. Along with an annual check-up, height, weight and ears are checked monthly. Nails are naturally filed when the dogs track or climb

walls. Their diet is raw meat and some dry kibble, since that's what most owners will feed them. The ranch orders about 600 pounds of quality scrap meat each week, which, along with the bone and fat, supplies the dogs' nightly gorge, just like a wolf pack gathering over a carcass. Once a week the animals fast to fully digest what they've eaten.

Each handler is given a pod of five or six dogs to work with for a month. "It may be four adults and two puppies," says Harris. "You pay attention to each of their needs; at the end of the month we meet to discuss our experience, make sure we're on the same wavelength so when we transfer a pod all the handlers have seen a dog progressing. It's really like a classroom—we're teachers and you have to work with all the students—your problem kids as well as your favorites. The pods prevent an end-all-be-all bond with a single trainer."

Asked about the challenges of the job, Durkee responds; "Because they are working, they pick up on your intent and vibe, so if you have things going on personally you have to separate out those stresses—you have to focus. The mental aspect of this job is the most difficult." Harris nods, adding, "you need to keep yourself in that right state with co-

workers too. The job is super mental. We teach dogs in a wide variety of development, so you have to have patience. You want them to learn a skill and it's your duty to help and guide, but not do it for them." Knocking some mud off her boots, Durkee chippers: "We have our newest litter, so you start and end your day with puppies. Kessler can sit in her place, so it's fun to get a break with the puppies; it's really cool for us to welcome tiny furballs and see them grow and progress. Just over a year ago Kessler was a goofy pre-teen, knocking into you. At two years-old, here is a distinguished animal that is so in tune."

Kessler is indeed sitting in her place atop a stool, but she seems a bit anxious. Her brow is furrowed and her belly shakes. She even whines a bit. A protection scenario is about to be simulated. "She knows something is up," says Durkee. Coulthard is in the nearby bite suit room, preparing. "Feel this," he says. The jacket sleeve is seriously thick. He fingers another with loose threads hanging off the forearm like fringe. "We have different materials for different aged dogs," he explains. "A puppy's jaws aren't going to be able to open as wide as those of an older dog. We don't

Continued on page 21

Feature, cont.

Continued from page 13

use Kevlar in any of our gear because that could injure a dog's jaws." One of Svalinn's most important precepts is to train protection 'on intentionality.' The dogs can literally smell someone's malintent. "The person in a bite suit has the hardest job on our ranch," says Kim. "Your stress levels have to go way up to create that intense bad energy. As a handler, you have to role play as well."

While most Americans focus on in-home protection, Greene points out that many potential dangers lurk elsewhere. "A bite suit is just one piece of equipment," she says. "We'll have five guys in suits lined up and ask one of them to think dark thoughts; the dog has to discern the bad guy. We test the bite and the fight in a dog. We want that dog to respond in force, create space and time for the family to move to a safer spot." "It's security on autopilot," comments Tony Peterson, host of the Sporting Dog Talk podcast.

As you might imagine, these elite dogs are not inexpensive; yet, says Harris, "if anything, we're running into a supply issue. We have dogs pre-sold; people are waiting six months to a year for dogs." Greene notes that the U.S. has the most dog owners of any country, and that at this time of uncertainty people are re-evaluating their priorities. She is often asked how hard it is to part with a dog she's spent so much time and energy with. "It's just the opposite!" she exclaims. "Nothing makes your work feel lighter, happier and richer than connecting a dog with its forever family." She mentions that roughly half of new owners rename their dogs, something you might imagine would be confusing for the animal. "Dogs are seeking their forever home; they know the difference between the people who trained them and their family," assures Kim. "After spending one night in their owner's bedroom, they know to whom they belong, and easily adapt."

Besides, as she puts it; "We don't have a fire and forget relationship. The first three months are crucial; we train you in our operating system. We go with you to visit the vet you've chosen. The mobile training team arrives once a year to tweak lead management, vocal commands, and even set up a protection scenario to assure you that your amazingly loyal, loving pet does indeed remember its job as protector." He or she didn't forget; it's just that a Svalinn dog is a world class, quiet professional.

