

Raising gentle giants

Interview with Anatolian shepherd breeder and author Gilles Galand

By Laure-Anne Viselé, April 2010

The 'Chenil des Poteries' is run by 75 year-old breeder Gilles Galand. The multi-disciplinary dog enterprise includes a pet food shop and a dog breeding business for briards and Anatolian shepherds. The focus of my visit was the Anatolian shepherds breeding business.



About the interview: Mr. Galand's unrivalled reputation as a breeder reaches far and wide throughout Northern Europe. He has bred multiple award-winning dogs, and even wrote a book on the breed. Our family dog being an Anatolian shepherd, I am a big fan of the breed, so I came to find out more about the life of a successful breeder.

About the kennel: The kennel is located in rural Belgium, close to Mons. As you arrive on the premises, you are greeted by two painted portraits of a briard and an Anatolian shepherd respectively. Before you even reach for the doorbell, a concert assorted barking announces your arrival. Once I had been introduced, I was touched to see that the giant guard dogs acted like 180-pound puppies.

The pens in the breeding and pension area are rather large, and testify to Mr. Galand's dedication

to his dogs. Many pens have promontories for the dogs to climb on, which Anatolian shepherds are reputedly fond of. The domain is bordered by Mr. Galand's own woodland area, where the dogs can stretch their legs and burn some energy.

About Mr. Galand: Mr. Galand is quite the character. His continuous baby-talk to the giant dogs speaks volumes about his devotion to them. He is a proud autodidact, and clearly does not suffer fools gladly. He speaks candidly of his nonsense approach in a world that is so influenced by regulations, politics and academia.

About the job

LAURE-ANNE – What is a **typical day** like?

GILLES GALAND: Come rain or shine, you have to start cleaning the pens at 7am. The ensuing rounds of husbandry and administration tasks will keep you busy until 8pm on a good day. Some days are heavier, like yesterday, when I stayed up all night to help one of the bitches whelp. She gave birth at 5am this morning and it all went well!



L-A – In this day and age, would you say it is **financially viable** run a dog breeding business?

GG – I would not encourage people to get into it for financial gains, as the rules and legislation can be truly stifling. Nearly all aspects of the work are regulated nowadays: from waste disposal, to vaccinations, to the construction material for the pens, to the cleaning routine, to feeding (e.g. you can't just take the left-over meat from an abattoir for risk of food poisoning). If you really want to get into a canine profession, the pension business is most profitable when you look at the hours invested.



L-A – What sort of a relationship do you have with the **vets**?

GG – As a breeder, I am given to frequently see them. I myself have become a dab hand at some interventions, like assisting with the whelping. As a breeder, you sometimes have to call upon the research branch of veterinary medicine. Once, when I was at a loss about a fertility problem, I sought the help of the Veterinary University

research department. After weeks of research, I solved the problem myself as it turned out. It is really important to have a good relationship with your vet's, though, even if your opinions can occasionally diverge with theirs. My hands-on knowledge of the canine diet, for example, does not match the standard veterinarian standpoint 100%. On a personal level, my own veterinarian has become a good friend.



L-A – How did the dog **passion start** for you?

GG – One day, when I was four years old, my uncle he took me to an agricultural exhibition. There, I swore I'd seen a 'Bouvier des Flandres with a long tail'. That was unthinkable at the time, as they all got had clipped ears and tails. I could not get that dog out of my head until, one day, my uncle came back with what turned out to be a blue briard puppy. That is what started my love for briards. Fast forward a few months and my family had one giant (salt and pepper) schnauzer, one (gray) Bouvier des Flanders, and one (gray) briard. Three very large mouths to feed for a working class family at the beginning of World War II. My father declared that they would have to 'go and live on a farm', a euphemism for putting them down or abandoning them. We begged and begged and, against all odds, the dogs were allowed to stay. They thrived on leftover goat milk, potato peel, and garlic. This speaks volumes about today's approach to animal care: despite the fact that these dogs never got vaccinated, and only saw the vet's once, they lived to 15, 16 and 17 respectively.

Some background about the breed

L-A – There seems to be some confusion about the **breed name**. They are sometimes referred to as: *Coban kopegi*, *Karabash*, *Akbash*, or *Kangal*. What is the difference?

GG – *Coban kopegi* is the Turkish name for the breed. It essentially means 'sheepdog'. *Karabash* is the common beige type with the black mask, and *Akbash* is the plain white type. *Kangal* is the name of the village from which, reputedly, the breed originates. For that reason, the breed is sometimes referred to as 'Kangal'. Strangely enough, most of the Turks I meet in my line of work claim to have

grown up in Kangal. To my latest count, that would make Kangal a virtual metropolis!

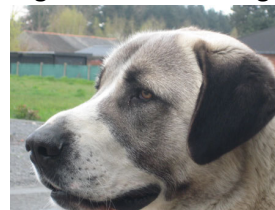


L-A – What kinds of **coats and patterns** are allowed in purebred Anatolian shepherds?

GG – The coat length can be medium, or long. Interestingly enough, one of our dogs has long hair, despite being born to two short-haired parents.



The most common coat pattern is beige with a black mask (the Karabash type). We also breed bi-colours (white, black, camel or brindle tones). Our brindle dog is also interesting case: he was born after five generations of the Karabash type. We do not breed the white ones (aka Akbash), as they have a reputation for irritability.



L-A – I read in your book that their **life expectancy** could be up to 20 years. This is a very ripe age for a large breed. How do you explain that?

GG – I am convinced their longevity is related to their dietary habits. The Anatolian shepherd is not a voracious eater, and, given a balanced diet, it can easily live on average fifteen years, even in a sedentary lifestyle. When you look at 100-year old humans, do you ever see fat ones?



L-A – Do they make **good guardians**? Using our own family dog as an example, I cannot imagine that he could hurt a fly.

GG – In burglary attempts, these dogs will typically corner the thief by threat only: staring raised heckles and growling. Recently, customers told me that their dog kept a thief in check in that manner until they came home an hour and a half later!

Anatolian shepherds are really not quick to bite, and their temper is not easily roused.



L-A – Our own Anatolian Shepherd seems amazingly accepting of even intact male dogs in his territory. Is this **low territoriality** a breed trait?

GG – This is a surprising trait for the breed, as they are actually rather territorial as a rule. I have even heard of one of the dogs I had sold frequently returning to its old home after a move.



L-A – Are they well-adapted to our **climate**?

GG – In native conditions, they face temperature ranges from -40C to 40C. As long as they have shelter, shade and water, they can take rather a lot of temperature variation. If you are building a kennel, I would avoid tin roofs, of course. As it does make the pen uncomfortably hot on warm days.



L-A – As a large breed, are they particularly affected by **hip dysplasia**?

GG – For a large breed, they have a rather low predisposition to HD, but I maintain that HD is not strongly genetically determined. This is backed up by authorities on the subject I am ready to quote. What is genetically determined is a sensitivity to the condition, not the condition itself. I believe that moderate exercise in the first 10 months of the puppy's life, and a suitable diet (especially low in fat, calcium, phosphorus and vitamins) are the best prevention.



L-A – How do the Anatolian shepherds that you breed **compare with the native ones in Turkey**?

GG – The European specimens tend to be taller (80 to 85 cm at the shoulder, as opposed to 75 cm in native conditions). This could be related to the fact that, in their native environment, they have to scavenge most of their ration, so they may suffer food shortages at critical stages in their development.

About animal husbandry

L-A – What do you **feed** your dogs?

GG – I have special kibble imported. It has no fillers in it (i.e. carbohydrates), and is composed of 70% meat and 30% fruit and vegetables. I am particular about food that has not been processed at more than 90C, as I am convinced that higher temperatures affect the nutritional value. Most commercial food nowadays is processed at 220 degrees. I also often feed them fresh meat (at room temperature). I fast them once per week.

I had a low fertility conundrum at some stage (well, not me, the dogs!), and after a lot of hair splitting and formal research by the veterinary university, I started experimenting with their diet. It turned out that food was the problem. Now that I have found the optimal diet, I have not had a problem since.



L-A – Do they require much **physical exercise**?

GG – They require about three sessions of moderate exercise twenty minutes per day. Sudden, intense exercise, or extremely long bouts of exercise are not ideal.

About breeding

L-A – **How many pups** does a typical Anatolian shepherd litter have?

GG – It varies enormously. It can literally range from 1 to 14 pups.



L-A – Is there a **gender bias** in the demand for pups?

GG – Yes. The demand for pups has a male to female ratio of 10:1. There are ways of influencing the odds, though, by carefully timing fertilisation in relation to the bitch' cycle. The earlier in the cycle, the more males in the litter.



L-A – How many Anatolian shepherd pups do you **sell per year**?

GG – Between 80 and 120.



L-A – Do you conduct formal **temperament tests** on the pups?

GG – I know Campbell's tests well (whereby specific temperament traits are tested to predict the pup's

future character). From what I have observed, though, the pup's adult character is 80% education.



L-A – How do you deal with **sub-standard pups** that will not get a pedigree?

GG – If the fault is severe, we have to euthanise the pup to avoid passing on the trait. If the fault is milder, I try to find good accommodation for the pup among the local farmers.



L-A – Do you use a **formal socialisation programme** on the puppies?

GG – No, but because of their husbandry needs, I manipulate them several times daily (worming, chipping, checking, vaccines, weighing, etc.), which allows me to detect the shier ones. I invest more time in socialising those.



L-A – **How old are the pups** when they **leave** for their permanent family?

GG – Between 2 and 3 months of age.



L-A – Can you import founder stock **directly from Turkey**?

GG – Not easily. The process of importing a dog from Turkey is heavily regulated. A lot of people import them illegally (they snuggle pups in the country by sedating them), but these would not get a pedigree.



L-A – Do you have strict **criteria for prospective owners**, in terms of temperament, free time and garden space?

GG – Prospective buyers must complete an official form that gives out that sort of information. To be honest, the surface area of the garden does not matter to me that much. Even in a giant domain, a dog will just rest all day unless it is encouraged to take physical exercise.



L-A – Do you often have to **reject prospective buyers** because of their intentions to exploit their dog for unethical means?

GG – Not often, but then again, I do not get the types that want a fight dog in the first place. I guess these people would sooner obtain their dog through unofficial routes.

Some families, like first-time dog owners, are clearly not suited for Anatolian shepherds. I try to tactfully discuss alternative breeds with them, or I explain that there will be a long delay before I find them just the right pup. I do not want to offend people.



L-A – Would you readily **take a dog back** from its owner if there was a problem?

GG – I have a return clause that allows owners to return their dogs for a definite period after purchase. But I avoid accepting returns beyond that date. Given half a chance, people can come up with all sorts of excuses to return a dog they bought without thinking ahead. Some reasons are more valid than others. They range from the redecoration of the house, changing jobs, moving house, a divorce, or an allergic child. I would be flooded if I took all these dogs back.



L-A – How many **other breeders** are there in the country (Belgium)?

GG – There aren't any. People come from far and wide to get these dogs. Even important personalities like French actor Jean Rochefort.

In conclusion: Despite the dog breeding profession being so controversial these days (in light of the overflowing shelter system), I tried to give my readers an objective view of that ancient profession. With his years of success, Mr Galand is certainly a proud representative of the profession, and has decades of experience to contribute to the fields of canine genetics, animal husbandry and nutrition.

For more information about the kennel and pension: <http://www.elevagedespoteries.be/>