

Out On The Town With Ron Halling and the GSDCMSP



By Susan Smith

Imagine yourself a Pomeranian owner out for a stroll with your beloved pet on a fall Minnesota morning. Up ahead you spot another walker approaching with his large, powerfully-built German Shepherd Dog-- on leash and seemingly well controlled. But alarm bells blare in your head nonetheless because German Shepherds seem like unpredictable land sharks, and, fearing for the safety of your small dog, you quickly scoop him up and scurry to the other side of the street. Whew, danger averted!

Now, let's switch up that scenario a bit. Instead of one GSD up ahead, you suddenly become aware of a group of German Shepherds and their owners advancing toward you, a big group—in fact, you can't even see the end of the line! This was the reality on Sept. 17, 2017, when 55 German Shepherds and their owners assembled for the largest such walk ever in Minnesota-- maybe even the nation.

Who would organize such a sizeable party of German Shepherds in the heart of a busy city center? That would be Ron Halling, long-time Minnesota dog trainer and member of the German Shepherd Dog Club of Minneapolis and St. Paul (GSDCMSP), doing what he does devotedly and consistently for GSD owners in the Minnesota metro area and beyond. Truth be told, it was a quiet walk with well-mannered dogs and their owners enjoying the camaraderie and crisp fall temperatures.

And save for the size of the assembly, it wasn't anything new. Halling has been leading monthly group walks for GSD owners since December 2015, attended by anywhere from five to fifty-five family and dog combinations.

No one who is aware of his dedication to the German Shepherd breed was surprised that Halling was honored with the Don Cliff award at this year's German Shepherd Dog Club of America (GSDCA) National Specialty. This recognition is presented annually to one member who *“demonstrates good sportsmanship as an exhibitor, whether winning or losing, gives of time, energy and/or means to the sport of dogs and the German Shepherd Dog, demonstrates kindness and consideration for newcomers in the breed by encouraging and supporting their growth of knowledge in the breed, is active in conformation or performance, maintains high ethical standards in all circumstances . . .”* Anyone who knows Ron Halling would say that this description fits him perfectly. And as for the “winning” part, it should be noted that in 2013, Halling and his German Shepherd Zephyr's Adelaide Princess UDX3 OM2 CD, earned the prestigious and difficult to obtain title Obedience Victrix at the GSDCA National Specialty Show. This title is awarded to the dog earning the highest combined score in the Open B and Utility classes at the show, and there is only one such title awarded annually.

Each month, with assistance from his wife, Ann, Halling facilitates workshops in the Minnesota metro area for GSD owners in which training is provided on a myriad of obedience and behavioral topics depending on the needs of attendees. Then, usually a week later, Halling hosts a follow-up group walk so owners can, as he explains it, *“work their dogs in a real life walk surrounded by neutral dogs to further their social skills in a pack environment.”* Location varies, with sites selected based on input from the attendees. To include everyone, he asks for suggestions that include routes in the north, south, east, and west metro area. Including a variety of locations encourages people who live on the outskirts of the Twin Cities (St. Paul and Minneapolis) to attend, increasing the feeling of being part of this diverse, enthusiastic group.



Ron Halling leading the dog walk in Minneapolis.



In March 2016, a Minneapolis FOX news affiliate covered one of Halling's group walks. The engaging video footage is still available on the station's website at www.fox9.com/news/minnesota-nice-germanshepherd-club-rolls-deep-in-the-twin-cities. Explaining why FOX9 elected to do a news feature on the group walk, anchor Kelcey Carlson said, "I do a segment about good things happening in the community, and this is certainly one of those things. To see German Shepherd owners coming together to help the dogs socialize was quite a sight around Lake Harriet. No matter the hobby, group or interest, people are always better together, and Ron's group is a great example of that!"

While Halling appreciates the publicity his efforts have generated, his emphasis is always on public outreach and awareness rather than on personal accolades. When peoples' perceptions about German Shepherds are shaped by encounters with calm, well-trained and polite-mannered dogs, everyone wins, especially the breed.

One frequent walk participant is Lisa Cirks-Veit, who began attending in 2015 and now serves as assistant to Halling. "The coolest thing about the walks is how so many GSDs can start out barking and being uncomfortable, but within 10 minutes all are walking together with no issues. People are always stunned when the group goes walking

by; they videotape us and take photos!" Cirks-Veit is a co-founder of Saving Shepherds of MN, an active GSD rescue group, and she believes Halling's workshops and walks are integral to the success of her group's clients. "I always encourage all our rescue adopters to attend this workshop and then the walks; so many have attended, and so many continue to come, and the reason they do is that it really does work and is so much fun!"

As Cirks-Veit pointed out, dogs participating in the workshops and walks are at all stages of training and socialization. Halling's philosophy utilizes the pack theory. The dogs assimilate to each other first at the lecture and again when preparing to walk. While a reactive GSD strolling alone with his owner might view a small dog approaching on a retractable-leash as a perceived threat, when that same GSD is with fellow "pack" members on the group walk, the smaller approaching dog is simply ignored.

Owners attending Halling's workshops or walks soon discover that this trainer has a vast repertoire of methods to address a myriad of canine behavioral issues, and they all stem from his understanding of what makes a German Shepherd tick. GSD owner Meridith Kjellberg's experience with her dog, Kit Carson, exemplifies Ron's approach. According to Kjellberg, on his second vet visit, then -puppy Kit reacted with what appeared to be aggression toward a male veterinarian. Concerned, Kjellberg followed the vet's recommendation and contacted a behavioral therapist who subsequently suggested that herdog be placed on medication and kept away from people. Shaken and worried for her dog, Kjellberg was referred to and contacted Halling, who then made a house call to meet Kit. "I had Kit crated when he arrived, still not sure if my pup was indeed an unpredictable dog with a behavioral problem, and explained to Ron what had happened," Kjellberg recalled. "He told me to let Kit out, and within a minute Kit was leaning into him, letting Ron love him up."

"Ron helped me understand the complexity of this breed: the intelligence, the sensitivity, and the instinctual drive to protect one's owner. This explained what happened that day at the vet -- Kit felt that I could be threatened by this man approaching us, and in such a small space with no place to go he reacted with a "stop right there" growl. It was also helpful for me to understand he was still a pup, with lots of his own learning still needing to be done. Before Ron intervened, I had seriously considered having to get rid of Kit, as I did not want to have a vicious dog that I could not control. Well, with Ron's help, Kit has developed into the most delightful and beloved family member that I could have hoped for - everyone loves him. Ron has a strong intuitive way with dogs, as well as a strong dedication to his students, and my experience proves this."

While the Don Cliff award brings national recognition to Halling's efforts on behalf of the breed, his contributions have been recognized and appreciated locally for a long time. Peggy Simerson, President of the GSDCMSP, explained what sets Halling apart as a trainer. "Ron's classes and walks offer something that most obedience classes do not. Basic classes teach the fundamentals of obedience in a controlled environment, whereas Ron teaches confidence in the owners in real life settings such as walking in a park and meeting other people and dogs. Ron is a unique resource in our area specifically for GSD owners. He teaches people to be confident with their dogs, and that is so important. He has also been a resource that breeders have used to do home visits to help their clients with specific issues. Ron is a problem solver, devoted to helping owners, and a great asset to the club."

Halling noted that the comment he hears most frequently at the workshop and walks is this: "I had no idea other people had the same issues as us." When all attendees feel included and engaged, everyone becomes part of the solution rather than the "problem dog owners" they felt like coming in, Halling explained. "I think everyone feels accepted no matter what their dogs look like, what their issues are. There's always a place for them."

