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PLATZ, AXEL,

Axel the German Shepherd is a screen star who can be nice or nasty on command. "Down, boy" isn't enough

BY A.F. LIGHTBOURN

Put your fist out towards him when he rushes at you," Wolfram Klose cautioned, "so he doesn't get your leg."

That's when I started worrying.

Although I was wearing a well-upholstered arm guard, I had no protection on my legs — and a grab there with 42 pearly-white teeth would definitely cause some discomfort, considering that Axel's biting power is rated up to 700 pounds per square inch.

Normally, I wouldn't ask to be attacked by any dog. But Axel is pretty special. The 90-pound German Shepherd is Canada's rough-diamond version of Rin Tin Tin, Lassie, and the whole clutch of Disney dogs, including Old Yeller, Big Red and Savage Sam. "Rough-diamond" because, unlike his current American counterparts, Axel is no pampered, never-lay-a-tooth-on-you studio dog.

He is naturally friendly. But if his owner tells him to, he'll tear your arm off.

During the past two years, Axel has collected a list of TV credits that would make many human actors envious — and this spring he will make his movie debut in the feature film *Sunday In The Country* starring Ernest Borgnine, Michael J. Pollard, and another film newcomer, Canadian actress Hollis McLaren.

"Ready?" Klose asked.

"Ready."

Klose snapped the attack command in German: "Fass!"

In an instant, Axel changed from the tail-wagging, friendly fellow I'd been petting minutes earlier, into a growling, fangs-bared fighting machine.

With a thud he caught my hand — the padded one, thankfully — and anchored his fangs deep into my burlap fist.

"Get him mad," Klose urged. "Try to

shake him off."

Well, I thought I was doing a pretty good job — of getting him mad, but as for shaking him off, the more I shook, twisted and shoved, the deeper his teeth dug in and held firm.

We fought each other for more than a minute. Then just as suddenly as it had started, at a crisp command from Klose — "Platz!" — Axel released my hand and sank to the ground. Poised, however, to renew the assault if necessary.

Then, again on command, he returned to the side of his master for an appreciative pat.

"Not bad," Klose announced. "Not bad at all."

I wasn't sure whether he was talking to me or the smiling dog but, at any rate, I felt initiated.

Chances are you've seen Axel at work one time or another tracking down desperadoes on the CBC's *The Collaborators*, being cruelly done in by a knife-wielding villain on CTV's *Police Surgeon*, or baring his fangs as Dracula-turned-wolf on the CBC's recent television adaptation of Bram Stoker's classic 19th-century novel *Dracula*.

A difficult scene done in one long take

It's got so that when the CBC has a job for a dog with brains and training, somebody automatically calls for Axel. "We get him because we know he's absolutely dependable," says CBC special effects man Doug Wardle, who has spent 15 years lining up lions, tigers, leopards, crocodiles, snakes, lizards — and dogs. "As far as I know, there aren't any other dogs available who'll do as well as Axel. People will tell you they have a dog who'll do this and that, but once you get the dog in a studio, it's quite a different matter.

"If a dog just has to be there, we can pretty well use any dog. But if he has to go from Point A to Point B, then we call Axel."

Before he began acting, Axel had gained considerable reputation among Canadian dog fanciers by earning his three obedience trial titles (CD, Companion Dog; CDX, Companion Dog Excellent; and the ultimate UD, Utility Dog) in a record 4½ months by the time he was 14½ months old (he turned 5 last week).

In late 1971, the CBC was desperately looking for a well-trained German Shepherd to act as pet and protector to actress Frances Hyland in the television drama *Aunt Hilda Sends Her Love*, which appeared in the *To See Ourselves* series.

"We even tried the Ontario Provincial Police to see if they could lend us a dog," Doug Wardle recalls, "but they have to keep those dogs on hand in case they're needed. So, after much phoning around, Norm Hersch, one of our effects men, heard about Axel through the Canadian Kennel Club."

But the big question was whether Axel had the temperament to work well when surrounded by bright lights and crowds of technicians and actors. As many producers have discovered, some of the best-looking, purest-bred animals are often too high-strung for movie work.

The answer, in Axel's case, came quickly.

The Aunt Hilda plot centred on a woman, her dog, and a salesman, whose chance meeting on a beach turns into a comedy adventure when a dog-napper turns up.

Frances Hyland particularly recalls one scene: "It was a long, six-minute master shot — a scene shot without interruption — in which Axel and I had to walk along the beach together, sit down, play and generally establish the relationship for the viewers." Normally, such a shot takes a lot of re-shooting

before it's done just right. "We did it in one take," she says, "which is really remarkable."

Some of the crew were a little anxious about Axel during the first film because of his reputation as an attack dog, and they were careful to avoid sudden moves.

Klose couldn't take his first dog anywhere

"For the attack scene, when Axel was supposed to get the dognapper," Klose says, "we used a dummy leg and shot a close-up of it, but we couldn't get any of those guys to hold the leg while Axel attacked it." So Christa Klose, Wolfram's auburn-haired wife, became the official leg-holder.

"The thing about Axel that a lot of people don't understand," Mrs. Klose says, "is that he'll attack only on command from Wolfram, or if he thinks that one of our family is being threatened. He would never think of just going around biting people."

"Ever since he was a puppy, we've worked on this socialization thing with Axel. We made sure that he was used to people by taking him every place with us — to the airport, to the shopping centre, even to the drive-in movies."

Another thing that some people fail to realize is that it isn't just Axel — it's Axel and Klose, a team. And to understand Axel, you have to understand Klose, a shy, dark-haired, 6-foot, 190-pound, 33-year-old individualist who in ten years in Canada has carved out a good life for himself, his wife, and their two young sons.

As a rule, Axel is a friendly, beautiful German Shepherd. But comes a word from trainer Wolfram Klose (right), and...

PLATZ!



Klose was raised in Havelberg, Germany and his 60-unit boarding kennel and dog-training academy on Highway 115 near Orono, Ont. now bears the name Havelberg Kennels. And Axel's full name is Axel vom Havelberg.

"When I was 17," Klose recalls, "I heard, well, we all heard rumors that they were going to build a wall so we couldn't get out of East Germany. I decided I wasn't going to be walled in. I was going to get out into West Germany before that wall was built."

Posing as a worker returning to East Berlin after a holiday weekend, Klose joked his way past the Russian and East German guards on to a train that would pass through West Berlin. "If I'd been caught, the penalty was two years in prison."

He slipped off the train into West Berlin and after six weeks in a processing and resettlement camp, he was flown into West Germany, placed in another camp, and finally released.

Before coming to Canada in 1964 with his wife, Klose had dreamed of becoming an architect, had worked as a construction laborer, and, finally, served as a West German policeman for five years. "He always knew he had to do something different," Christa Klose says. "Something more than just a 9-to-5 job."

But it wasn't until he came to Canada that Klose discovered he had a gift for training dogs. "I'll never forget the first dog we bought," Mrs. Klose laughs. "We were told he was a German Shepherd, but we waited forever for its ears to come up. And finally, one did — when the wind was coming from the right direction."

"I had the wrong philosophy back in those days," Klose says. "I thought I needed a one-man dog who nobody else was supposed to touch. As a result, the dog was overprotective, didn't socialize and I couldn't take him anywhere."

Realizing his mistake, Klose bought a purebred German Shepherd, Teddy,

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"YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO THINK LIKE A DOG"

and began training him in earnest, attending obedience classes and shows. "After a while," Mrs. Klose says, "people began noticing that Wolfram had a knack for training and they started asking him to train their dogs." So Klose quit his job as a factory worker and began training and boarding dogs full-time.

During the past two years, he has trained more than 200 dogs for obedience, guard and retrieval work.

Occasionally, when he gets a call for a dog other than a German Shepherd for film work, Klose brings in some of his star pupils. In the CBC drama, Ticket-Of-Leave Man, he had a mongrel and a spaniel on the payroll.

Mrs. Klose believes that some people are just born to be trainers. "It isn't done with strictness alone. You have to have a certain touch for it. In fact, you have to be able to think like a dog."

Klose says what's needed is a mixture of firmness and tolerance. "I always tell people it's like bringing up a child. You have to give the child love and discipline. And you have to do it instinctively. You can't always be running to a book to tell you what to do."

Axel's reward for working well in a film scene or at an obedience demonstration is a love-pat and a few words of praise. And then home to a pound of raw meat mixed with about a pound of dog meal, his daily diet. "No other treats," Klose says.

His training methods have paid off, particularly in Axel's case. Last year, from his TV and movie work, Axel earned \$4,000.

Before director John Trent heard about Axel through the CBC, he said he was having an "incredible" time trying to find the right dog for the film Sunday In The Country. "We auditioned about ten dogs," he said. "Everybody said 'Ah, yes, we have just the dog for you. It'll stand on its head, it'll recite the letters of the alphabet, it'll do anything you want. A terrific dog.'"

"So we go out and we discover the only thing the dog will do is occasionally sit down, which doesn't help."

When the CBC recommended Axel, Trent sent his assistant director Tony Thatcher out to Orono to have a look.

The plot of Sunday In The Country revolves around three bank robbers who, during a getaway, invade the home of a farmer, played by Ernest Borgnine. The farmer believes in protecting what's his with a shotgun — and dogs.

Axel's part demanded that he be a quiet, friendly farm dog, trotting happily behind his master; then later, an obe-

dient, controlled guard dog, who intimidates with a look and a growl; and finally, a merciless man-stopper.

During the audition, Axel had never looked better. He leaped over six-foot hurdles effortlessly, scrambled up seven-foot ladders, tightroped across a ten-foot wooden catwalk, and hurled himself eagerly through steel hoops to impress the film man.

But Thatcher still had some doubts, Klose says. "He kept asking me how come Axel's so friendly."

Thatcher wanted to see the real stuff — an off-leash attack on a fleeing man, because that's the way it was going to be in the film.

"I'd better put the muzzle on him," Klose suggested.

Thatcher said not to bother about the muzzle. "The idea was I was supposed to break, and Axel was supposed to stop me."

They rehearsed it, and each time that Thatcher bolted, Axel went for him and Klose froze him in mid-air before he could do any damage.

Then Thatcher wanted to try it with Klose farther away from the dog because of camera angles. So they tried it, giving Thatcher an 80-foot headstart. Thatcher was to run and, just before the actual attack, freeze.

"Wolfram said if he goes for you just stand still," Thatcher recalls, "because most damage is done when a dog bites and tears with you pulling away from him."

When Axel hits, he's not really being malicious

But Thatcher couldn't stop quickly enough, and Axel nailed him in the leg, tearing out a chunk of his jeans and drawing a goblet of blood. "It was a case of finding out what would go and what wouldn't," Thatcher says. "And the dog just did what he was supposed to do."

Thatcher was delighted. He had found just the combination he wanted — a well-trained dog that could be both friendly and, when the situation called for it, aggressive. But there was no doubt that in the attack sequence, Axel and his mother Senta, who was also brought in for the attack, would have to be muzzled.

"We worked with wire muzzles," says Hollywood stuntman John Cardos. "And had we not had them, you know, a person could have gotten chewed up pretty good."

Axel made like a man-killer on Cardos' back while Senta took care of his legs. Cardos wore no padding. "Sure you could feel them," he says, "because even with the muzzles, they get their

bites with those little teeth at the point of their nose."

Normally for such a scene, Cardos says, Axel's part would have been played by two dogs — one for the attack, and the other for the gentle scenes — or they would use dogs trained to leap on a man's back, knock him down, but never lay a tooth on him. Cardos, however, was impressed with Axel's training, disposition and intelligence. He said his 4-year-old son John-John was playing with Axel on the set "and when a little kid can play with an animal, it's pretty good".

Axel's ability to play both the tough guy and the nice guy in Canadian films follows in the same tradition as the two most famous German Shepherds in film history — the legendary Strongheart, who rose to fame in the 1921 film The Silent Call, and Rin Tin Tin, the dog credited with saving Warner Brothers Studios from bankruptcy during the 1920s.

Film historian Raymond Lee described Strongheart as a German army dog who had been "trained to kill with his fangs as a soldier kills with a bayonet". Writer-director team Larry Trimble and Jane Murfin brought Strongheart, whose kennel name was Etzel von Ceringen, to Hollywood in 1920 and, with a combination of love and training, transformed the 115-pound military dog into Hollywood's first great dramatic canine star in such films as Brawn Of The North, The Love Master and Jack London's White Fang.

Rin Tin Tin was one of five German army pups discovered in an abandoned, heavily-shelled war-dog station in France during the First World War by an American corporal named Lee Duncan. After the war, Duncan took his pup to Hollywood, where Rinty eventually earned more than a million dollars in such film hits as The Night Cry, Clash Of Wolves, A Dog Of The Regiment, and The Man Hunter.

Like Axel, Rin Tin Tin worked only to please his owner-trainer. But Rinty didn't have Axel's disposition. In his book, Not So Dumb, Raymond Lee wrote: "Rinty was a one-man dog. Only Lee Duncan could control him. After the scene had been taken, he would be a different animal entirely. He might bite the very actor he had just played an affectionate and touching scene with."

When I was wearing my padded arm guard and Axel hurled himself at me, I knew with absolute certainty that Axel was working without the slightest trace of malice.

It was an odd sensation. He was chewing away at my arm and I knew he was just doing a job — and was doing it out of love for a man to whom he had given complete allegiance — creating that enviable bond that only a person who knows and loves dogs can really understand.