

Sports Illustrated Vol. 34 March 15, 1971 p. 74-77

“NOBODY TOUCHES ME WITH IMPUNITY”

That is the warning, in Latin, that is posted over Robert Abady's kennel. It refers to the fierce bouviers des Flandres guard dogs he raises, but the motto might well be Abady's own

by ROBERT H. BOYLE

Whenever Robert Abady, a slender, intense artist and breeder of immense working dogs known as bouviers des Flandres, appears at a dog show, no one knows what to expect. Once, when Abady feared he would be late with a dog at an outdoor show, he shot his car around the admissions gate, swept by several rows of startled officials, gunned across an open field, bounced over a log-nearly demolishing the Popular Dogs stand in transit-and, slammed on the brakes at ringside. After giving his dog, Ch, Marc de la Thudinie, to an embarrassed handler, Abady raced the car around the ring, parked in front of the Popular Dogs stand and coped with the angry army descending upon him by cautioning, "if you have something to say, say it in gentlemanly fashion. Otherwise I'll report you to the bench show committee."

Abady, symbolically, lives in Stormville, N.Y. but he was educated in French schools and is all gall. Doggy people either love him or loathe him. The latter group includes the American Bouvier des Flandres Club, which steadfastly refuses him membership. "They won't let me in because they know I'd wipe the floor with them," he says.

To just about everyone in dogdom, the American Kennel Club is the ultimate power seat, the White House, Vatican and Kremlin rolled into one, but to Abady the AKC is a dilettante organization," composed of "pompous idiots" who do not have the true advancement of the breeds at heart. In 1965 the AKC suspended him for life for allegedly striking a woman handler and kicking her dog at a show in Connecticut. Among other things, this penalty made dogs from his kennel, Vuilbaard Bouviers, ineligible for AKC registration, but Abady sued in federal court and won reinstatement- an unprecedented victory.

Abady gives unhesitating voice to his opinion that the dog-show game is shot through with stupidity and politics. In his gentler moments he says most judges are

"semi-Mongolian idiots." Once, when a judge who had been brought over from Europe rendered what Abady, who speaks 11 languages including Arabic, deemed an absolutely rotten decision, he offered to debate the judge on all the points involved. "I challenged him in French, in Flemish or in any language he wanted," says Abady, afire at the memory of it. "It didn't make any difference to me. The guy backed down. I told him he was obviously an incompetent. When I get an audience, I am really at my best." But all Abady got that day was a kick in the shins from one or the judge's supporters. .

Abady's controversial convictions reach beyond the show ring. It is his deep belief that "most people involved in dogs are fruitcakes," and he adds that the average American dog, be it family pet, show dog or field dog, is in "miserable condition." Abady's admirers, though they may cringe at his outspoken assaults on the canine Establishment, hail him as a great guru of dogs, a true authority on the breeding of dogs, the health of dogs and dog nutrition. "I think, Abady is the most important thing that has happened in the dog business in the last 10 years." says Jacquin Sanders, a breeder of bull mastiffs. "His nutritional ideas are extremely advanced. His dogs are in fantastic condition. The breed looks completely changed from five years ago when I saw Bouviers limping around the ring."

A number of guard and attack dog enthusiasts regard Abady as a seer and his attack-trained bouviers fetch several thousand dollars each. "Every time there is a murder in New York City, Cleveland or Chicago we're inundated with phone calls," Abady says. "So that's good for business."

The bouvier des Flandres, native to Belgium, the Netherlands and northern France, is a shaggy, bearlike dog with cropped ears and tail and a heavy beard. In Belgium a show championship cannot be awarded to a bouvier unless it has won a prize for tracking or as an army, police or guard dog. The male is big, up to 140 pounds, very strong and agile. It is a good jumping breed. A bouvier holds the world record for scaling a wall: 16 feet. Originally bred in Flanders to herd cattle -bouvier literally means cattle dog -the dog is supposed to be of calm temperament. "The bouvier does not have a chip on his shoulder," says Abady's wife, Isabel, an assistant professor of French at Vassar. "He does not want to be nasty. He is gentle and friendly and marvelous with children. He is only aggressive when someone threatens his people or his property. Our kennel motto is *Nemo me impune lacessit* [Nobody touches me with impunity] The bouvier protects not because he's vicious, but because he is your dog. He does what is needed."

As an example of the dog's measured response to a situation, Abady cites the time a plumber came to his house a day late when no one was at home. "There were seven dogs in the house," Abady recalls, "and the plumber was pinned to the living-room wall for eight or nine hours. When we came in, he was ashen. The dogs didn't hurt him, they just wouldn't let him move even though he was only a foot and a half away from the door. Of course, he should have come the day he said he would."

Then there was the time Abady went into Manhattan with Picot, an untrained year-old male. "I took him into the Figaro, a coffeehouse in Greenwich Village," Abady says. "You could take a dog in there, eat, drink coffee and play chess in a relaxed atmosphere. A guy who seemed about eight feet tall and wearing an orange motorcycle suit came in and sat at the next table. He ordered a hamburger and French fries. Picot was , curled up at my feet. When this guy's order came, he got up and leaned across me to get the ketchup. It was a very irritating and insolent gesture, as though he wanted to pick a fight. I did nothing. Shortly after that, he came back for the pepper and salt. I did nothing. As he was eating, he dropped one of his French fries on the floor and kicked it toward Picot. I kicked it back. He kicked again. I picked it up and said, "Don't feed the dog without the owner's permission." I threw the French fry back at him and, by accident, it landed on his plate. Get the picture? He stands up and pushes the table aside. I stand, and suddenly I hear this high-pitched shriek from this huge guy. I didn't know what was going on. The place was absolutely still, and all I wondered was how a big guy, an enormous guy like this, could scream in such a high voice.

"What had happened was Picot had grabbed the guy by the hand. The guy fell over a bannister, his hand bleeding, rushed into the bathroom and then shot out of the Figaro. There wasn't a sound in the restaurant. Not a sound. It was eerie. I didn't know what to say. Should I offer to pay his check? The waitress comes over, silently gives me my check, I pay and I leave with Picot. I didn't know whether I could ever go back, but a few weeks later a friend of mine went in there and he told me, "Hey, there's this legend about this guy who went into the Figaro with a bear! And the bear tore this motorcyclist guy apart! The guy was all covered with blood after the bear chewed him up, and they had to carry him on a stretcher to an ambulance." It turned out the manager was delighted, because motorcyclists had made the place a hangout and annoyed his customers.

Abady, who is 32, was born in Curacao in the West Indies. He is of Dutch, French and English extraction. His father was a wealthy entrepreneur who invested in various enterprises ranging from ranches and department stores in Latin America

to tea in India. Abady, spent part of his childhood in Egypt; later his family moved to France and Italy. But wherever they went, Abady had horses and dogs. He credits a great deal of his knowledge of dog anatomy and structure to his experience with horses and also to his artistic training, "Robert's forte is his artist's eye;" says Isabel. "He is extremely visual."

Abady's education was classically French, and when the family moved to New York he attended the Lycee Francais which was for him "a terrible school. It was too rigid and I was basically rebellious." Once when he was briefly living on his own after a spat with his father, he was called in by the headmaster and informed he was going to be expelled. "I said, O.K., I won't pay the bill." He remained in school.

When Abady was 16, he had his final break with his family. "My father told me there was a big place waiting for me if I wanted to get involved in his affairs. He told me what they were, but they were not too engaging to me at the time. I was torn between medicine and art. My father didn't think very much of physicians generally, and when I told him I wanted to be a painter he thought was insane. I packed my bags, rented an apartment and took a job as a salesman. I wasn't much of a salesman so they suggested I look for other work. Those were troubled years for me. I didn't know how hard it was to make one's own way in the world. I worked at various jobs and gradually I started to sell paintings. Little by little I didn't have to work part-time."

Abady studied with Maximilian Auel Rasko, whom he regards as "one of the last great masters of the century." From him Abady absorbed the principals of anatomy, composition and design, elements that are lacking, he says, in modern art, which he considers a "hoax." At 18, Abady's work was presented at a number of big shows, including that of the National Academy.

Abady's father died shortly after he left home and a quarter of a million dollars was placed in trust for him until he reached 21. Fearing that the trust fund was being mishandled, he sought to get his money. "I got a few thousand here and there to keep me quiet," he says. Then I was told that's it." Knowing that he was due a considerable sum from one of his father's former business associates in Curacao, Abady went there. I realized that there was no way that I could get the money legally," Abady says. "but I knew that this man was tremendously superstitious. so I began a campaign of terror. In the evening I planted speakers in his garden just outside his bedroom, and I would hide in the shrubbery with a mike and say, "This is the great spirit speaking." He was a Rosicrucianist or something. I would speak

in Papiamento, which is a dialect I picked up at the time, and I would say, "You've been a very bad man. That fellow Robert is such a nice boy, a young man at the beginning of life, and you're taking his money. He's really trying to work hard, and he's going to school. Do you realize your soul is going to burn?" This guy got so scared he capitulated."

Comfortably fixed, Abady went to Germany and Holland. There he studied and painted and came to know the bouvier. In 1963 he returned to the U.S., where he met Isabel in a Philadelphia junk shop while he was seeking objects for still life. Isabel, who had studied for her doctorate at the University of Montreal, was then teaching at St. Joseph's college. They bought bouviers, got married and purchased a farm in Quebec.

"Soon the whole place was crawling with bouviers," Abady recalls. "They were all terrible. I was very disenchanted. I had started to learn about bouviers in creative way. They were supposed to be courageous. These were very shy. I was determined to find out if the dog really had the character that his heritage suggested. We sold the farm, sold all our dogs or gave them away and started from scratch."

The Abadys moved back to the U.S. and settled in Stormville, 50 miles north of New York City. Passionately committed to raising better bouviers, Abady got in touch with breeders in Belgium and flew over to buy dogs. He was discouraged at the first kennel he visited. "The dogs were much handsomer than the ones here, but they were very, very timid," he says. "I looked at them in complete disgust and just walked away." At the next kennel he visited, Posty Arlequin, he paid several thousand dollars for three handsome bitches, and then he saw Marc, a 2-year-old male at the Thudinie kennel of Justin Chastel. To see if the dog had courage, Abady donned a protective suit of heavy canvas and leather and asked Chastel to send the dog on the attack. "Marc barreled into me, knocked me over and tried to kill me," says Abady. I knew this was the dog I wanted. This was the beginning of a new strain. Chastel did not want to sell Marc, who was the sensation of show rings in Belgium and France. But after five cognacs he agreed to let the dog go for a bit less than \$6,000, including shipping.

In the U.S. Marc promptly won his show championship. ".Marc won a lot," Abady says. "But not until Dog World ran a story on Marc did he get the recognition he deserved. When the article appeared, he started winning working groups almost overnight. That is how susceptible many judges are to publicity. Before that, no one looked at him much because he was a bouvier and bouviers hadn't won in

many, many years. Marc is a great dog and he should have won on his own merits." Marc, along with other Vuilbaard Bouviers, has been handled in the ring by J. Monroe Stebbins Jr. "He's an excellent handler," says Abady, "but he wishes we wouldn't show up at ringside. He has no desire to be associated with the dramatic side of our kennel."

Although Abady has bred a dozen champions since he bought Marc, he remains skeptical of the show circuit. "It is obvious to me," he says, "that it is impossible to make judgments that are absolutely concrete because of the system. Judges are not really trained, they're not schooled in esthetics and they're not schooled in structure. There are no classes to explain dynamics and all the principles that exist in dogs. To become a dog judge, you have to become a busy-body and get involved with a breed club. Eventually you get assignments and are considered an expert by a lot of other nonexperts. There are no standards that are really plausible. There are some good judges, judges who seem extremely knowledgeable. These are people who have done a great deal of research on their own. A lot of handlers become judges. Some know something here or something there, but they usually do not have the cohesive overall ability to go over a dog in detail. We've seen some outrageous things happen; top working dogs that have been lame, lame for years, some judges will throw out of the ring and other judges will confer the highest awards on them,

"The whole dog game should' be reorganized. The American Kennel Club should be completely divested of its autocratic power, The AKC treats everyone like little children. There should be rules of conduct at shows, I agree with that. But there should also be the possibility for people who have serious grievances to bring them to a board that is independent.

"People want to know that the winning dog is the one after which the breed should be patterned. That's essentially what showing should be all about. But breeds take turns for the worse because winning dogs sometimes shouldn't win. People read that this dog has six best-in-shows or 50 group wins, and they'll send , their bitch over to be bred and the dog could have 10,000 faults. This does a tremendous disservice to purebred dogs. It is perpetuating dogs for reasons that have nothing to do with dogs. It has to do with politics. It has to do with money. It has to do with influence. So dogs don't make the progress they should."

Although Abady has a poor opinion of the showing, he regards attack training as superb sport. His only difficulty is finding a steady supply of "villains." A villain is the fellow who serves as the bouvier's object of attack. He should weigh at least

200 pounds, because a hurtling bouvier can easily knock down a lighter man. Once the villain is knocked flat, the dog can burrow underneath the protective suit and do severe damage. "You find villains anywhere you can get them," Abady says, "Anyone who talks big and thinks he has guts. We pay \$4 an hour, but when a villain sees an enraged dog coming at him for the first time, he wants to raise the price." It takes about a year to train an attack bouvier, and only the most stable dogs are taught. The first thing that the bouvier must learn is how to bite properly. Abady trains his dog to bite the calf, the thigh, the arm and the crotch. "When we say a bouvier bites," says Abady, "it doesn't mean the dog just puts his teeth into someone. A bite is a trained procedure. A bite is a lethal assault. For a dog to bite, it is not enough to slash or nip. A dog is not really effective that way. For a dog to bite effectively, he must apply pressure and break bones and tear muscles and not let go and quit. When you first start training a dog to bite, he may exert 100 pounds of pressure. That's meaningless. A bouvier that has been taught to bite will exert up to 1,000 pounds of pressure per square inch, and it takes only about 300 or 350 to break the average human forearm. The bouvier has to learn to throw his weight into the bite, his shoulders into it, his neck into it. And he really has to tear. The first time he shakes his head, everything goes with it. This is our whole concept. If a bouvier gets you in the thigh, you'll be unconscious in about five seconds. You couldn't stand the pain. If a dog comes in and slashes, you have a chance to break his head, but if a dog comes in and holds and starts tearing and breaking things, then it's all over, because you can't get him off you.

"A bouvier bite is a studied thing. It really doesn't matter where he bites you. If he got you on the big toe, you'd probably lose consciousness. Shepherds and Dobermans are slashers, they have a longer jaw, so instinctively they want to let go. They do not have the same jaw structure as the bouvier." Abady speaks from experience about the bouvier bite. While photographing an attack lesson in France, he got a little too close to the villain. The bouvier wheeled off target and grabbed Abady in the thigh. A doctor used 27 stitches on the wound and Abady limped for months.

In the early stages of training, the bouvier is held on a special leash of whale hide or latigo leather. "The leash is very pliable," says Abady, "and its vibrations will give you an idea of what's going on in a potential attack situation. You can feel the bouvier quiver and tense up. It's as though an electric signal is given through the leash. He should do nothing unless there is direct assault on you or unless he is commanded. I don't use complicated verbal commands. The command to be on guard, the last step before an all-out assault, is "Cha," which is said just under my breath. It means nothing in any language. 'Cha' is enough, and the dog is like a live

wire. The command to attack, very good insofar as it's so subtle that no one would ever know what is happening, is "Tsk, tsk." That's it. Suddenly the dog turns into a cannon ball."

Dr. Stephen Wilder, a Manhattan psychologist who walks through Central Park because he lives on the West Side and practices on the East, has two of Abady's bouviers. "Bouviers are very much a part of my life in the city," Wilder says. "I think Robert's bouviers are the best of all the dogs I've seen, and I've tried shepherds, Dobermans, rottweilers and Rhodesian ridgebacks. " None has the stability or temperament of my two bouviers. You have to have a dog that is very calm. City living is complicated. If the dog went at everyone who looked or acted strange, he'd get you into an awful lot of trouble very easily.

"Bouvier attack training requires a very complex set of discriminations. Why should the dog attack the 101st stranger and not the first 100? The bouvier has two attributes that are seemingly contradictory. One, a tremendous amount of stability, and two, a predisposition to protect, to bite without hesitation when required. These dogs have a deep , sense of territory. When I let them off the leash, they're never more than 40 feet away from me. With my wife, the dogs are never more than 10 feet away."

A year ago, while, walking home through the park one evening, Dr. Wilder found himself being followed by a group of teenagers. They caught up to him and demanded money. "When I refused, one kid reached into his pocket and flicked out a switchblade knife," Wilder recalls. "It was like a signal and they started to surround me. I had Rocco, my trained bouvier, a young bouvier pup and another dog with me. I didn't want to challenge these kids, but I suggested that the first one who came at me probably would die and that three or four others wouldn't go through life looking the same. Rocco had oriented himself in a certain way. He doesn't rave or jump around. These dogs have an understated way that people don't understand. Rocco's neck arches, his ears stand. his gait changes. I started walking backward, and Rocco kept doing figure eights around me to make sure no one came close. No one did."

Abady recalls the occasion on which he drove to the East Side of Manhattan to deliver a painting, leaving a bouvier bitch to guard the car. "I parked the car about a third of a block away," he says. "It was a warm evening, and I left the dog inside with another painting and a few odds and ends on the front seat. I delivered my painting and it was getting dark when I came out. I remember passing a row of cars and seeing a man trying to get into a car that I had thought at first was mine,

but in the dusk I figured I had made a mistake. I tried to remember exactly where I had parked, I knew it was on this street and I went back again.

"All of a sudden it dawned on me that the guy had been getting into my car. I looked, and he seemed to be in the same position he had been three or four minutes before when I first passed him. I was very puzzled. All of a sudden the terrible thought occurred to me that something was going on with this guy's arm. The car was shaking and quivering. Here was this guy moaning as though he was in pretty bad shape. The dog had nailed him right in the shoulder. I tried to extricate him, but I couldn't get him out. I went inside and tried to get her to release him, but she wouldn't. She was just braced in there.

"I figured I better get a cop. After a good five or six minutes, I finally got the police. Here they came in a patrol car. They get out as big as life. "O.K., where's the guy?" they asked. I said, "He's in there." So a cop opened the door, grabbed him and said "O.K., c'mon, buddy. " Then the cop said, "God, what's in there?" I said, "That's my dog." One cop said, "That ain't no dog, that's a bear!" The familiar-bear nonsense. I said, "You just hold him and drag, and I'll get in the car and release him." But the cops jumped in the patrol car, slammed the door and rolled up their windows. Can you imagine that? Then one cop rolled down his window a little bit and said, "When you get him out, call us."

Finally I got the guy's arm loose. It was an ordeal. I had to pry her and coax her and tell her she was a good girl. She was very bloodthirsty this dog, in any case. Finally, the cops got the guy and took him away. He was delighted to be arrested."

In the course of the last six years, Abady has spent almost \$250,000 on his kennel and now makes a good living from dogs. "Most of the money is from the peripheral activities that concern dogs," he says. "Training, of course, is very lucrative, and word of good training spreads fast. Up to now we have trained only bouviers, but we are expanding to take in any dogs. Boarding is very important. We have a lot of consultations on nutritional problems, and we have a mail order business selling nutritional supplements."

To a growing number of dog fanciers, Abady is a recognized expert on condition and nutrition. Not long ago he visited an acquaintance who was very proud of his Labrador Retriever. Abady looked at the dog, felt the stomach, checked the coat and peered down the throat as the owner beamed. "Your dog is not well," Abady said. "He has tonsillitis, the gums look pale, the coat is terrible and he lacks vigor.

Have your vet check for worms.” The veterinarian reported that the dog had the start of an infestation of hookworms.

“You hear this country has the best nourished people and everyone is healthy,” said Abady. “Then you see people who are nervous wrecks, they tire easily, they’re not healthy. It’s the same thing with dogs. Dogs are not always in top shape. For the most part they are in awful shape. They are eating rations that are inadequate. Dog owners and veterinarians are brainwashed by big companies. The rations are helpful in the sense that they are balanced, but over a long period of time I would say no dog can really do well on them. Let’s assume that a dog has worms. The intestine is upset, and the dog can’t synthesize vitamin C normally. So he starts to develop certain serious symptoms that are not picked up by a vet because he is not nutritionally oriented. The B complex is interfered with. This becomes chronic, and you start to see the results: wear on the inside of the gum, pigment is lacking, the dog lacks luster, he starts to have bad breath, which is mostly caused by niacin deficiency.

“Because the dog has bad breath, the modern notion is to give him chlorophyll. No one bothers to think that maybe the dog has some trouble with his intestinal tract. Then the dog becomes susceptible to certain diseases and infections. This is automatic. Say the dog picks some mixed bacterial infection. Essentially dogs are very hardy, and they generally have much better defenses than people do. But unless the dog has enough proper nutrition in his rations, the infection is going to take hold and attack various organs. Say he gets tonsillitis. You go to the vet, and he says, “O.K., your dog has tonsillitis.” He may not realize it's an ascending infection coming up from the intestines. So he treats the dog for tonsillitis, the symptoms disappear temporarily and the dog is still in as lousy shape as before.

"Or maybe the vet will give him cortisone, the big panacea now. Cortisone is a very dangerous drug and most veterinarians don't know the side effects of it. I'm not saying one should not use cortisone-it's been a lifesaver-but you better know what you're doing. When you inject cortisone, you establish a tremendous imbalance between cortisone and deoxy cortisone, which is one of the hormones secreted along with cortisone by the body. Then you have big problems. The deoxy cortisone's function is to isolate bacteria and keep them encapsulated. When you give a lot of cortisone you reduce inflammation quickly and take away obvious symptoms, but what you are also doing is releasing all the bacteria that have been encapsulated, and then very often the dog is overwhelmed by the infection."

Abady has his own laboratory. "I was forced by circumstances to become my own vet," he says. "Our mortality of newborn puppies is maybe 2%. It was 60% when I didn't do the work and when I wasn't my own vet," There has been such a demand for Abady's nutritional supplements that he is planing to start a company to sell them in packaged form. The first half dozen kennel tested supplements are specifically formulated to meet various needs or problems. There is a supplement to increase the stamina of hunting dogs, another for pups of large breeds ("to give them the chance to grow up to their genetic potential"), supplements for breeding dogs, a supplement for lactating bitches of all breeds and supplements for dogs under stress or in a diseased condition.

"We're not interested in making money for money's sake," Abady says. "We want to break new ground. We are always looking for things that will work better than anything has before."

Meanwhile, no one had better give him any trouble. Robert Abady's bark is no worse than his bite.