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THE NEW A-LIST MUST-HAVE? AN £80,000 PROTECTION DOG. CALLED KEVIN

Foreign royalty, billionaires and celebrities are replacing their private security with four-legged bodyguards that are also devoted family pets.

Hilary Rose on the rise of the furry status symbol



"Ultra-high-net-worth clients don't want to be seen with bodyguards everywhere they go"

GETTY IMAGES

Kevin is a giant schnauzer. He likes cuddles and walkies and treats, and if you look at him funny he will, on command, have your arm off. Then he'll go back to his owner for a tummy tickle. Highlander is a German-Dutch-Belgian shepherd cross. He weighs 80lb and loves babies and small children, and you would be exceptionally ill advised to make him fear for their safety. Kevin and Highlander were trained by different people, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, but they are both prime examples of the latest must-have for people who have it all: personal protection dogs, the four-legged status symbol with the six-figure price tag.

"This is not an attack dog," says Leedor Borlant, who has nearly finished training Kevin and describes him as a wolf in sheep's clothing. "It's a pet that will protect you, a private bodyguard that's a family member."



From left: Kevin, giant schnauzer, £55,000; Fred, German shepherd, £75,000; Glock, Belgian malinois, £80,000

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Kevin looks up at his handler through his fluffy black fringe and wags his tail. He is two years old and built like a bungalow. Raised and trained outside Hull by Borlant's company, Protection Dogs Worldwide, Kevin has a helpfully hypoallergenic coat and a relatively modest £50,000 price tag. Depending on what they're trained to do, the entry-level price for one of Borlant's dogs is £30,000, rising to £120,000. Bruno, a German shepherd, has been bought by an ultra-high-net-worth individual based in Cape Town, and dogs with Bruno's capabilities sell for between £80,000 and £120,000. Mr X, as we will call him, lives a life of yachts, boats and private jets, and faces constant credible threats to his safety. Borlant doesn't know exactly what he does "but he's definitely not a drug dealer. We check people out. If I think the dog is going to be put in a bad situation, I won't sell it." Mr X has two former SAS soldiers with him at all times, but bodyguards are not without problems. They're invading your personal space and limiting your freedom, and they also attract attention.

"When he's got the dog, the security guards will be at a distance," Borlant says. "He doesn't want to be seen with the guards everywhere he goes. If you're walking down the street with a dog you look like a normal person. A lot of these people want normality. They just want to walk down the street with a dog."

Or consider the plight of another Borlant client, the unnamed king of a foreign land. He lives in a palace with 120 staff and no one he thinks he can trust. This is apparently a common problem for billionaires: they think everyone's out to get them and become unhappy and paranoid. He has bought "multiple dogs" from Borlant, including shepherds, cane corsos and rottweilers.

"The dog keeps them safe in case the staff are infiltrated," says Borlant, a compact 34-year-old with bulging biceps and very white teeth, dressed in black and driving a black Land Rover Defender. "When you've got a lot of money you become a huge target. I used to sit here on FaceTime with the king for hour after hour. He's there in the room, just him and the dogs, for hours on end. You know what the dogs bring? Compassion and love. Dogs don't care what you have. They don't know that he's a king or he's rich. They don't know if you've got a big house or if you travel by Ferrari or bus. All they want is a cuddle, and they're not impressed by anything [like that]. They're impressed by a ball."



Training at Svalinn Protection Dogs
SVALINN PROTECTION DOGS

Human bodyguards can be manipulated or bought off, or just less eager than a dog to die defending their principal. Among Borlant's clients are ambassadors, celebrities and footballers including England defender John Stones ("Really nice fella. Lovely wife, kids, normal household"),

and David Alaba, who plays for Real Madrid.

He raises his protection dogs on two sites in a rural, affluent suburb of Hull. He has a parallel business training regular dogs for their owners and giving them protection skills if they're a suitable breed. This can require expectation management. He's been asked to turn Jack Russells, poodles and cocker spaniels into protection dogs, and on one memorable occasion a bichon frisé.

"I was like, what are you talking about? You can't make a bichon frisé do that. They said, but we've seen your videos. And I told them, you haven't seen a bichon frisé swinging off someone. You just haven't."

Borlant sells about 40 dogs a year, some bred in-house, some bought from trusted breeders abroad. His overheads are £750,000 a year. A team of 20, including a former SAS security consultant who finds the job relaxing, spend every day, all year, tracking every detail of the genes, birth, development, feeding, exercise and training of every dog. They raise it, socialise it, take it into their own homes. The dogs are trained to have the on/off switch that allows them to be loving family pets — or "soppy as anything", as Borlant puts it — as well as snarling balls of solid muscle that will launch themselves at you at 20mph. Unlike guard dogs, they're family pets that will only bite on command. He won't sell to anyone who wants to leave them at home guarding the house "because people are the asset and that is what the dog is trained to protect. Everything in the house can be replaced."

Borlant and three of his team were recently flown by private jet to give a dog demonstration to a world-famous "major, major" person who'd heard about them from the president of a foreign country and wanted to see what they could do. He reckons the day trip probably cost the man £100,000. "You tell these stories and people think you talk shit." He suspects that another client family, who lived in the middle of nowhere in Estonia, were in a witness protection programme. All of them live in jaw-dropping houses of the sort you usually only see in films, he says — \$100 million palaces from Las Vegas to Spain and Fort Lauderdale to Australia.

"Sometimes you want to cry with happiness for the dogs when you hand them over, because you're like, 'Look where you finished up! Look at the life you've got!' Running around, playing with the kids, sitting by the pool — the dog's made it."

Most of the time the dog doesn't have to do anything except play with the kids. For the ultra-high-net-worth, this is something else to worry about. Has the dog forgotten what to do in an emergency? "They ring you up and say, 'Can we stage a robbery?' So you go and stage a robbery and they feel good again."

Others have just been a victim of what he calls "tie-ups" — being tied up by burglars who empty the safe — like the woman from London who called him recently. She'd opened the door to a delivery man who hit her round the head with a gun while the children were upstairs.

"Amazing house, all the security in the world, CCTV, and now what? You've lost everything. You're a prisoner in your own home and the only thing that brings that feeling of freedom back is the dog."

Well, yes, but the burglar could have shot the dog. "Potentially, but the risk is much higher and the [legal] consequences are more severe. And if the dog bites you, you're leaving DNA behind."

English law surrounding dogs is both simple and complex. It is an offence for any dog to attack someone and owners are liable for their dogs' behaviour. Possible penalties range from a fine to



The Protection Dogs Worldwide boss Leedor Borlant with his partner Bethany and their two children
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a prison sentence and owners can also theoretically be sued by the victim. Factors that may be taken into account include the disposition and behaviour of the dog and the circumstances — for example, whether the dog was provoked or attacked unexpectedly.

Over in Montana, cuddly Highlander is a Svalinn dog. In Norse mythology Svalinn is the shield that protects the sun, and today it's also a protection dog business owned and run by Kim Greene. She's spent nearly 20 years devising an in-house programme breeding and raising dogs that are trained to love and protect. Many dogs will do both naturally, to a greater or lesser extent. What Svalinn instils is the ability to do it safely and reliably, on command. For \$120,000, you get a stable, gentle family pet that can take your leg off.

"They are primarily guardian angels who are vigilant on our behalf," says Greene when we talk over Zoom. "They are deterrents. They are trained to manage threats."

And rich people see threats everywhere. Greene cites a client fearful that her children might be snatched from the shopping trolley while she's loading groceries into the car, or a woman who wants one of her dogs because she walks home on her own from the office late at night. Her clients worry about "have-nots in society who will stop at nothing", about kidnapping and human trafficking and pickpockets.

Spending £100,000 on a dog is arguably something of an overreaction to the threat of pickpockets.

"That's just one potential threat," Greene says, painting another scenario of a grandmother in



The Svalinn Protection Dogs CEO, Kim Greene. "I would never say they are trained to kill. They are trained to manage threats. The dogs will meet force with force"

SVALINN PROTECTION DOGS



A Svalinn protection dog and family pet. "It's a two to three-year trajectory to build the dogs, as it were"

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the park with the grandchildren. "Having a dog that's ever watchful while you interact with the children, so you're not looking over your shoulder all the time, gives a sense of ease."

Her dogs are a genetic mix of German, Dutch and Belgian shepherds, to "even out" temperament and ensure the best physical

attributes of the breeds and remove some of the worst, such as the hip dysplasia that can affect larger pure-breed dogs. They're put through a two-year programme that includes fitness training, obedience exercises and attack drills, during which dogs are taught to disarm and maim (their handler wears a bite suit). But, crucially, they are also trained to instantly disengage from an attack by having an in-built "off switch". Greene uses a few specific safe words. By the end they can cope with anything and anyone, anywhere. In spite of the price, there is usually a waiting list.

"We sell peace of mind," Greene says. "We do not sell fear. This dog will be with you for a minimum of ten years and it is already trained, fully finished and refined — a good citizen of the world. Our dogs are pretty damn impressive and there is a skill set built in that you are almost certainly never going to need. I don't want to be fearful; I want to be smart. You can have your best friend and your best protector."

Greene, 49, was living in Nairobi 20 years ago when she got her first protection dog, Jack. Pregnant with twins, she felt vulnerable but didn't want to carry a gun. Once a policy adviser to President Karzai of Afghanistan, she was running a security and intelligence company with her husband at the time that supplied, among other things, dogs. Jack would sit on the front seat of her Land Rover and scare people away.

"Cool as a cucumber," she says, welling up at his memory. "All the skill set in the world and never needed to use it." Eight years later and back living in America, the couple set up Svalinn.

"It's a two to three-year trajectory to build the dogs, as it were," she says. "Of the 50 in our barn at any one time, maybe 18 will be delivered per annum. Ninety-five per cent of the training is exactly the same for all dogs, but the refinement, the polishing, the finishing, will be very bespoke to the family that has bought them. At the end of the day everyone wants stability, obedience, love. They want to be able to take their dog out, perfectly situated on their left side,



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on a leash. Suddenly, you're a harder target than anyone around you. That is our brand."

Greene argues that her dogs are, if anything, undervalued. The operation, based on a 170-acre ranch, is 24/7 and the 13 team members are highly skilled at what they do and could command between \$100 and \$200 an hour. In-house breeding is extraordinarily time-consuming and expensive, and well over 1,000 hours of training goes into every dog. Talking about the dogs' ability to deter, she refers to how they've been "trained in an operating system" and have "built-in safety mechanisms". They're trained first to emit a low growl. Their hackles will rise and, as Greene says wryly, at that point most people will move away. If they don't, then her dog has it covered.

"It does not mean one of these dogs is going to kill someone. These are not bloodthirsty creatures. They are just looking to keep their owner safe. I would never say they are trained to kill; that's a misapprehension. They are trained to manage threats. The dogs will meet force with force."

Unlike guns, dogs can't be used against you and won't accidentally discharge. Unlike bodyguards, you can take them into the bathroom with you and have them sleep at the end of the bed. She cites the peace of mind that comes when you hear a bump in the night but your dog is sleeping peacefully by your side, proof that everything is OK.

Maybe the dog didn't hear the bump.



Puppies at Svalinn
SVALINN PROTECTION DOGS

“If it’s a bump of importance, the dog will be paying attention.”

She won’t sell to just anyone, instead insisting on building a relationship with the dog’s future owner. There are plenty of people who could write her a cheque tomorrow, as she puts it, but she wouldn’t necessarily take it. There has to be mutual respect, because the relationship is going to last for the life of the dog and she wants customers to be good adverts for the brand. “They must certainly not have nefarious intentions with the dog. The dogs’ wellbeing is of paramount importance.”

On the floor by her side, Highlander, who has a head like a breeze block, dozes innocently in a patch of sunlight.

“He’s one of the dogs that makes the team most fearful of putting on the bite suit,” she says, gazing down at him affectionately, “because it hurts so much even through the suit. He is a no-nonsense dog. But he’s the biggest cuddler with babies. He’s such a love.”