

Preparing for the VJP Test

This article was originally published in the Annual Meeting Catalog of the Verein Deutsch-Drahthaar/Group North America. It is republished here with the permission of the author.

The testing program administered by the VDD is designed to assess the quality of a breeding. The tests are not competitions. There are not any prizes or money to be won. Through your participation in the breed tests the quality of the Drahthaar breed can be improved.

The remainder of this paper is structured toward the VJP judging elements and the normal schedule of events on test day. I have included things I do, or have observed other handlers do, that may help bring out the best in your dog. If you haven't already, you should order a copy of the Judges Manual from the club. It is very informative for the handler.

I do want to stress three things. First, take the approach that you are preparing for the VGP or utility test. I firmly believe that the key to training a prize I utility dog is based on the rapport you establish early with your dog. Preparation for the VJP is an opportunity to firmly establish this rapport and prepare yourself and your dog for more demanding training and preparation later on.

Second, as you are reading this, or if you talk to other dog handlers, **THINK. OBSERVE AND CONSIDER DOG TRAINING AS AN ONGOING PROCESS.** A problem I see, especially in first time handlers, is taking everything they read or hear from other sources as verbatim. Often the result is the handler decides that he must immediately change the way he is doing things or believes his pup is not conforming to some standard. The handler then confuses the pup, sets back the training achievements up to that point in time and ends up confusing and frustrating himself and the pup.

My advice, think about the information you get from me and other sources, think about how you have worked with your dog to this point, and think about strengths and weaknesses your pup has shown. Consider the variables such as intelligence, desire, situations, environment, etc. Also think from your pup's perspective. Are you consistent in your approach, do you recognize the pup for a job well done, is your stance or facial expression affecting the pup's performance, what would make him act a certain way or not do something, etc.?

Third, the points contained in this paper start from day one, when you buy your pup. Make your training fun and easy when your pup is little. Increase the difficulty as your pup gets stronger, mentally and physically.

After you have thought about all of the variables and information involved in this dog training process then implement the training. This may require you to ignore the information that has been given to you, modify your approach, start some aspects of training over, or perform additional training. In preparation for the VJP, where you are trying to bring your pup's abilities to a peak, consider adapting to your pup's abilities, rather than asking the pup to adapt to yours. As I said, this is a process. So think, observe, implement,,,,,,,,, and then think, observe, and implement again.

The VJP is considered a test of a pup's natural abilities as a hunting companion. It is nearly impossible to fail this test, so there is not any reason to feel any undue pressure or nervousness. The three judges you will be working with will be observing the pup's innate abilities and instincts as a hunting companion. Feel free to ask the judges questions for clarification. They are willing to help you understand what is going on.

There are five judging elements; rabbit track, nose, search pointing, and cooperation. The rabbit track and nose scores are weighted with a multiplier of two. A twelve point scale is used. A score of twelve is excellent and is very rarely given. A score of eleven, ten or nine are in the very good category; eight, seven and six are in the good category; five, four and three are considered satisfactory. The judges may be assessing two or three of these categories simultaneously.

The test day will start with a short judges meeting. Following this, everyone will be gathered together. The judges will be introduced and the head judge will tell the handlers which order the pups will run in. Males usually go first. If you have a female and she is in heat make sure you tell the judges. This allows the judges to arrange the running order so the dog in heat will offer the least distraction possible, especially to male dogs.

Following the judges meeting the pups will be tested for gun sensitivity. You will be asked to release your pup. When the pup is 20-30 meters from the gun a shot will be fired and the pup's reaction will be observed. This will be done one more time. You will then put your pup back on a lead.

Make sure you have shot around your dog when there is not any game present and he is hunting. Shooting in the presence of game and without game can elicit different responses from a pup. Your pup probably won't have any problems, but take nothing for granted while dog training.

Following the gun sensitivity the field searches will begin. Remember your running order number, this is how the judges will call for you and refer to you the rest of the day. Dog Number One will begin the search. Dog Number Two, will follow. If a rabbit is found Dog Number One will most likely be put on a lead. The judges will call for Dog Number Two to come up and track the rabbit.

This continues the rest of the day, through the entire running order. The order may become mixed up as the day progresses so be aware of what the judges are doing and saying. Sometime during the day, it could be before the gun sensitivity, at the lunch break or the end of the day, the judges will check your pup's tattoo number, teeth, and testicles if a male.

Prepare your pup for this handling. The judges will have to open your pup's mouth and move his lips around to assess the bite and correct number of teeth. From a judge's standpoint, it is annoying to fight with a pup that has not been prepared for this handling. From your standpoint, if the judge has to get a little "rough" with your pup because he was not prepared for this examination, it could affect the pup's mental attitude for the rest of the day. If you have a male dog, handle his testicles. The judges will only touch them momentarily to check that he has two. Some males object and will growl when this is done, so make sure you have a firm grip on his collar.

Although training and obedience are not assessed at this test, the day will be much more enjoyable for everyone if you have a handle on your pup. Your pup should come when you whistle or call. The biggest obedience factor on this day will be heeling on a lead. Your pup will spend a good part of this day on a lead, waiting to do rabbit tracks. It is going to wear you and the pup out if he uses all his energy dragging you around all day. Practice heeling when in open fields. As your pup progresses practice walking around and through brush and small trees where rabbits will most likely be found. Make sure your pup will go around saplings and obstacles on the same side you do, without hanging up on the lead.

Have your dog prepared to sit in his box for long periods of time and sleep overnight in the box. During the rabbit tracks the judges may have you and your pup remain at the meeting place until they need you. You may also be traveling to the test site and need to stay somewhere overnight. By preparing your pup for these long periods of confinement he will conserve energy and be much more composed.

Rabbit Track

During the rabbit track the judges will be looking at the pup's ability to track. Ideally, your pup will be given at least three opportunities to track a rabbit during the day. When a rabbit is jumped you will bring your dog up on lead. The judge will show you where the rabbit started and the direction it ran in. You are allowed to walk your pup down the track on lead for a maximum of twenty meters. However, keep in mind that the judges may only have seen the rabbit for twenty or thirty meters. It is difficult for them to assess the pup's ability to track if you use it all up on lead.

If the pup loses the track don't panic. The judges will be looking for the pup's desire to find it and pick it up again. If he comes back to the starting point or "hot spot" to pick up the track let him-it shows the dog is working to track and using his nose. If the dog loses the track and appears to be searching aimlessly some distance from the track, then consider calling him back to the hot spot to start him on the track again. When the judges have seen enough they will ask you to put your dog back on lead.

Teach your pup that when you point at the ground there is something there for him to find. You can do this by hiding dog cookies under furniture or in the grass. He will quickly learn that when you point at the ground there is something there he needs to check out. If you jump a rabbit do the same thing, and then encourage him to work the track.

The best preparation for your pup is to put him on rabbits. In the beginning, let him play with some dead rabbits in the yard. Toss them and let him retrieve them or carry them around. Place the rabbits where he will have an opportunity to smell them and find them. Once he knows what a dead rabbit is then give him the opportunity to sight chase a couple to get his increase his desire.

When your pup's desire for rabbits is evident, begin working on scent tracking. When you jump a rabbit, hide his head so he cannot see where the rabbit runs. Mark the spot the rabbit got up and take your pup to the spot. Encourage him to put his head down and get a good smell. Work the

pup down the track. If your pup pulls then let him go. Do not keep him on lead if he wants to work the track, you will only lessen his desire to put his head down and track.

Watch your pup closely. It is important that you learn the pup's mannerisms when he is on and off the track. Being able to read your pup will help you when you are training for the VGP. If your pup loses the track, but continues to look for it in the general area, then call him over to the track and help him start again. Walk up the track and continue to encourage him to put his nose down and track.

If your pup starts searching aimlessly then call him back to the hot spot and encourage him to track. If he again starts searching put him back on lead and look for another rabbit. I think it is better to look for another tracking opportunity than to let the pup learn to search without purpose when you want him to track.

If you do not have many rabbits in your area pickup a road-kill or a domestic rabbit and drag it for your pup. I prefer wild rabbits for this, I think domestic rabbits smell different and stronger. Drag the rabbit 50 - 70 yards in a zigzag, through brush over obstacles, etc. As the pup progresses I will also pick the rabbit up for 2 or 3 steps to cause the pup to lose the track momentarily and learn to work to find it again.

Using a rabbit drag will enhance your pup's desire to track because it will find the game at the end of the track. It also allows you to control the situation. If you use dead rabbits make sure your pup will bring the rabbit back to you. If you don't have confidence in his ability to retrieve right now then do not give him the opportunity to do wrong and develop bad habits.

Do not have your dog on a snap lead when you bring him to the rabbit track. What happens is your pup starts to track and then you yank him off of it to unsnap the lead. Instead have a slip lead or a piece of rope five to six feet long. Run this rope under his collar, from the back toward the head, and then hold both ends in your left hand. When your pup starts the track you simply let go of the end of the rope that is on the head side of the collar and the rope slips free as the dog tracks away from you. This way you have control of your pup going to the track and the pup has complete freedom from you when it starts the track.

I normally let the pup do its own thing on the rabbit track. After he hits the hot spot, and acknowledges it, I let him go on his own free will and use his nose and tracking abilities. The pup knows where the rabbit went better than you do. Just because the judges said it went on a certain path doesn't mean a breeze isn't blowing the track a few feet to the side, or you and the judge are looking at different landmarks. Believe me, the pup can decipher the track better than you can. The key is being able to read your pup, knowing he is indeed on the track, and giving him the opportunity to gain experience tracking rabbits.

Nose

There is little you can do to help your pup's nose. Either it works or it does not. What you can do is make sure he has had plenty of opportunity to gain experience using his nose. Give your pup the opportunity to experience the smells that may be encountered in the field. Through

experience and opportunity your pup will learn to use his nose as a tool to find furred and feathered game.

Search

The judges are looking at how thoroughly the dog searches the area, cooperates with the handler and uses the nose. This is where first time handlers can handicap their pups during the test. Remember two things when your pup is asked to search. Number one, this is a hunting situation. Work with your pup the same way you would during a hunt. Some first timers are nervous. A mistake I see is this nervous energy results in the handler increasing his normal hunting pace. Your pup either does not perform a thorough search of the area or becomes confused over your behavior, affecting his performance.

Another mistake is trying to over direct your dog. You are allowed to direct your dog by talking, whistling or using hand signals. However, many nervous handlers overdo the direction and attempt to control the pup's search. This may also hurt your cooperation score. Be calm and handle your pup the way you have in your training sessions. Concentrate on working with your pup.

Number two, you are in charge of this hunting situation. The judges will tell you where they want you to go, however try not to let them set the pace of the search or get ahead of you. Don't be afraid to speak up or ask judges and gallery to stay behind you. Also avoid getting mixed up in a crowd where your pup loses visual contact with you and then searches for you in a crowd of strange people and dogs.

The search is where obedience may be important. Once again, your pup's obedience is not being assessed. However, if the judges jump a rabbit they will want you to get your dog in so they can put another pup on the rabbit track. The sooner your dog is on lead the sooner the other handler can put his pup down.

I believe a pup keys its search off of your face and the square of your shoulders. Think about it. Your pup is looking for eye contact with you. In addition, at a distance your bright face is what it can best see. Use this to your advantage.

In open fields walk in a lazy zig-zag or serpentine. When your pup is searching and you want him to change direction simply turn your head or begin walking off at an angle from him. Your dog will realize that he no longer can see your face and will begin searching in front of you. After he starts searching in front of you again angle off in the other direction. You might give him a small signal such as a short whistle beep, but don't over do it.

The result of this will be a nice quartering pattern and the thorough search of the field. It will also demonstrate good cooperation, the pup is working with you. Do not wait to start the search training until the pup is big enough to get out on his own. It should begin day one, when you get your pup.

Don't forget to observe and read your pup. Your pup may be using his nose and concentrating on something while you are trying to get him to search or improve his pattern. Just as if you were hunting, if your pup appears to be working something at a test then let him work or move toward him in preparation of game being produced.

To improve your pup's desire to search and use his nose, randomly place dummies or your drag rabbits in the field. He will quickly learn that a quartering pattern results in finding things. Place these items in thickets or brush piles to encourage your dog to hunt all cover. You can also use planted birds. However, your pup is learning right now, so don't confuse him by having a combination of things in the field for him to pick up and point. Do not take the chance that the pup will pick up birds, thinking that is what you want him to do. Use either retrieving items or birds, not both.

Point

Pointing is self explanatory. Some of the things the judges will look at are intensity, does the pup lock up, creep in, wag its tail, run in on the bird, flush the bird, etc. Your pup will be required to point two times. This phase is normally done on planted quail, however, if wild birds are encountered your pup's pointing ability will be evaluated also. The pointing instinct is stronger in some pups than others. The vast majority have the instinct to point, it is up to the handler to develop this instinct. There are many references on developing a dog's point.

Be aware that if planted birds are used, there will be some human scent around, no matter how careful the judges are in placing the birds. The problem I have had in the past is that the pup has learned to associate hand scent with retrieving. Instead of pointing the bird, your pup may jump in and pick it up. Depending on the confidence you have in your pup's pointing ability, it may be a good idea to work him on planted birds while on a check cord. Teach the pup that you want him to be staunch and not to jump in. Also prevent him from creeping in on the planted bird. Instead teach him to stop upon hitting bird scent.

Do not pull your pup off a point. Gently pick him up and carry him away during training and during the test. Pulling him may only excite him and cause him to break later. It may also hurt the pup, giving a negative experience he associates with bird scent. When you set him down take a minute to calm him. Don't get in a hurry and rush your pup to the next bird.

Prior to releasing your pup check the wind. Make sure that you are working into the wind so the pup has the best opportunity to pick up scent. If you do not start your pup into the wind or quartering wind the pup may run over the bird and bump it. The judges will tell you where the birds are planted. You can use whistle and commands to get your dog into the bird scent.

Cooperation

The judges will be looking at how the dog works with you and for you. A pup that checks in regularly and searches in front of the handler will score better than a pup that spends a lot of time

out of sight hunting for himself. This is a rapport you and your pup have built up since the day you got him.

There are going to be a lot of strange people, pups and surroundings at this test for your pup to encounter. It may make it easier on your pup and improve his cooperation and search if you wear a familiar piece of clothing that he has learned to key in on when you are in the field. This way it may make it easier for him to spot you in the crowd. I wear a faded Carhartt jacket and a John Deere cap every time I take my pup out. I wear this during the test.

The searching exercises help develop cooperation. During the first few months of a pup's life the development of the pup's cooperation is my primary focus. I emphasize the first few months, when the pup is dependent on me. If you wait until the pup is big and bold enough to do things on his own then your pup's cooperation will be lessened, especially if it was questionable to begin with.

I develop the cooperation instinct in two ways. First is praise. Whenever I change direction or the pup comes to me on his own I praise and talk the pup up. The pup quickly learns that working with me is a pleasant experience.

As the pup becomes bolder I begin hiding from the pup, forcing him to find me and teaching him to keep an eye on me. The pup may not even notice you are gone for a few minutes the first time he goes off on his own and you hide. His concern will be evident when he realizes you are gone. Let him work to find you for a few minutes. When he does, praise him and start searching again. If after a few minutes he has not found you, give him a whistle to get him started in your direction. During the search continue your direction changing and praising the pup when he comes in to you. If he starts to search on his own again and gets out of sight then hiding again may be called for.

Do not make finding you difficult. Stand behind a tree, kneel behind a bush, or lay down in the field. The key is you are not readily visible but can be found.

Do not overdo the hiding, especially with a young or soft dog. It may make the dog hesitant to get away from you at all. Once again, it is important that you know your dog well enough to be able to read his actions.

Some people use night walks or searches to develop the cooperation instinct. They have been successful with this. I do not use it because it does not allow me to control the situation as easily as I can during the day. From what I understand, the pup is able to see me in the dark better than I can see him. I always feel that the pup is teaching me to look and listen for him rather than the other way around.

Summary

Hopefully this will give you some insight into the VJP. Your VJP may or may not be as I described. It may depend on the conditions and judge preferences. Have your pup prepared and yourself prepared and the day will be enjoyable.

All contents Copyright (c)1995 Thomas O. Moore

No reproduction in any form is allowed without specific written permission from the author. All rights reserved.