

## **Perfect Puppy Prep: Coaching your pup through its first test (VJP)**

*Now wait a second! Isn't the [VJP \(Verbands-Jugend-Prüfung](#), i.e. Assoc. Puppy Test) an evaluation of the pups natural abilities? And isn't young Rover supposed to be born with these traits? And what's the point of testing natural ability if you can train for it?*

### **Why prepare for the VJP?**

Well, the matter isn't quite that simple. Yes, natural ability is the dogs inherited capability to serve as a versatile gun dog. But, imagine you want to evaluate the musical talent of your child - shouldn't the kid have a chance to learn an instrument **before** you can claim a young Mozart in your family? The same applies to your young hunting buddy. His instruments are his body and mind, both of which are growing and changing during his puppy life, and both of which can be influenced by human care. Nutrition and physical exercise make a strong body, and early and persistent exposure to the world of a hunting dogs makes a good and cooperative hunter.

Especially for the novice handler of a versatile hunting dog, the VJP has a cornerstone function. A poor performance at the puppy test can be quite a "turn-off" and may create frustrations in the handler that affect the young dogs further training and testing career. The following tips are intended to take some of the frustration out of participation in tests, and to help first time handlers and owners of a young versatile hunting dog to excel in this test.

First of all, a VJP test is not a competition. There are no winners or losers. You can only pass or fail. There are no prizes, and the scores reflect relative performance of a dog measured against a common standard, not against other dogs. At most tests, the atmosphere is friendly and relaxed, and there is no reason to be nervous or tense. The judges are not out to score you down, but rather will try to see the good in each youngster. And, they will help you and give you tips, just as any other handler will do in the test. They're all in the versatile hunting dog family, and there should be no secrets or obscure activities.

### **But the rules say.....**

#### **The day of the test**

Before entering the test, make sure you have read the test regulations completely, at least several times! If you still can't recite them by heart, read again. Ask old pros about the meaning of concepts and paragraphs. In other words, know what's expected! Ignorance is perhaps bliss, but more often it leads to failure! Get to the test site early, and be well rested on the day of the test. Do not feed your dog 12 hours before the test, so he's not weighted down with a full stomach. And then just do everything exactly the way you did it during training, except of course for any serious reprimands or application of force. Of course, Rover cannot wear a spike collar etc. at a test!

#### **Nose**

The five subjects of the test are nose, pointing, search, tracking and cooperation. Lets deal with them one at a time: Nose, by far the most important instrument for the hunting dog, is also the most difficult to evaluate. In general, all well bred gun dogs have sufficient nose to pass the VJP without problems. But, to get that very good score, you'll have to work on juniors scenting organ a bit. First and foremost, you'll have to give him ample opportunity to exercise it. The pup that goes only for walks in the city park will be flustered by all the wild smells of the testing ground. The young hunting dogs belongs in the field! Here he will learn to distinguish among scents, use the wind to locate game and follow ground based scent trails. This is no trivial feat! It takes months of shaping and molding before the dog has learned to use his nose and hence utilize his scenting ability. It is important that the young dog is allowed to sniff out and chase any game species - regardless of fur or feather! However, we discourage him from playing with non-game birds, like larks, sparrows etc. by hollering a short "no" and moving on, should he pursue one of these species.

## Pointing

Of course, the youngster should have exposure to all game birds he may encounter at the test and is required to point. Which brings us to the second subject: pointing. I firmly believe that pointing can be taught, and I will enter any bet that anyone can teach a poodle to point within 4 weeks! So, there are no excuses for a low pointing score! In order to prepare your youngster for the pointing subject we get some bobwhite quail, pheasants or possibly chukar (or even pigeons, if nothing else is available). All these birds can be obtained from game bird breeders and can be used to make Rover "birdy" and pointing. But care must be taken that he can't catch any of the often "stupid" pen-raised birds. Thus, when working with planted birds, we must keep Rover on a long (100ft) checkcord, preferably with a spike collar. The long line will help us with all the other subjects of the test, so we will use it extensively to keep Rover under control and hence regulate his forays into the wild.

When we plant a bird, we must dizzy the bird by shaking it rapidly for a minute or so and, -if it is a pheasant or chukar- by placing its head under a wing and laying the bird on its back with the feet stretched back. Put the bird under a tuft of grass, a small bush etc, so it's hidden from view. Allow the scent to disperse for a couple of minutes and then take Rover at heel. Walk him on the downwind side of the planted bird and watch him. The moment he indicates that he smells the bird, he probably wants to approach it, but you hold him back, praising him and repeatedly telling him "whoa". After a few seconds, you whistle "come" and take him off the bird, walk a 50 yard circle and start anew, this time allowing Rover to walk about a foot in front of you. After a few repetitions, Rover will stop pulling on the leash and will start pointing when he smells the bird. Then you gradually increase the distance between the pointing dog and you, always keeping the leash good and tight, so Rover cannot move forward, no even an inch! It is very important that during this whole time Rover (a) never sees a bird fly or run, (b) never moves forward after the initial indication that he has smelled the bird, and (c) that he is **always** called off the point. This helps to focus him "backwards" to the handler, and prevents any flushing of the bird. If done properly, your pup will point with style and intensity, and he will eagerly return on command. When calling Rover off point, however, be sure to vary the time interval between the

start of the pointing and the command "come", so he doesn't break the point by himself in anticipation of your call! Praise him when he's doing well and use a tug on the spike collar if he threatens to move too close to the bird. Sooner or later, you'll be so confident in his steadiness that you can give him some "slack". Then we start walking up to the dog and away again, before calling him off the point, and bingo: Rover will point until you get there. He will do this because (a) he never learned to associate pointing with flying birds (and a chase!) and (b) he knows that moving forwards hurts, listening to "daddy" however brings praise. Simple, isn't it? (On especially hard driving candidates, you may want to use a wing-clipped bird walking in front of him and a good spike collar, that will teach him that "standing" a bird is fun, chasing or flushing it is painful!). As with all force, you have to be careful not to make the dog bird shy or lessen his interest in the whole exercise. He must have lots of fun dealing with birds!

## **Search**

The next subject is the search. Here it is imperative that you have a bit of obedience in Rover, so he will at least come reliably when called. I like to introduce my pups to a systematic search by leading them on a 30ft-long leash in a systematic zigzag pattern across a meadow. At every turn, I whistle, and give an obvious hand signal pointing in the new direction, and then turn. Rover may not get it right away, but sooner or later he'll learn to change direction when daddy turns. From then on, there is only one way to walk your dog: in a zigzag path across open fields, or leashed at heel on roads. No free styling anymore, no romping around the fields! I gradually increase the length of rope and soon the pup will quarter perfectly in front of me, watching for a direction signal and willingly turning when I turn. If I'm sure Rover will search well, I let the rope drag behind him, but ready to reel him in if he ignores my directions. I start cutting about a yard off the line every day until he's dragging only a short piece of rope. At the test, of course, I can't use any rope, but I am allowed to signal Rover and I can walk in a zigzag pattern, which helps tremendously to keep the dog focussed on the handler. However, there is more to a search than just a systematic way of running. The dog must display the "will to find game". We can easily stoke this will by praising him for investigating scent, or by seeding the search field with a few planted birds (always at the end of the search, never in the first quarter of the field) to keep his motor running.

## **The rabbit track**

Now we get to one of the stumbling blocks of the test: the live rabbit track. Purpose of this subject is to evaluate the pups desire to track diligently the ground based scent of a mammal. If available, jackrabbits are the best training subjects. We walk (or drive) along the fields where jacks are common, with Rover leashed at our side. Suddenly a rabbit jumps up and we carefully observe the rabbits exact route, while young Rover goes bananas on the leash. Don't be harsh now - let him be wild! Let the rabbit get out of sight, then encourage him to follow the rabbit. If he's smart, he'll follow the scent right away, get to the rabbit and gets rewarded for his tracking work by that wonderful chase. Three such experiences, and you have a tracker. But, not everyone has ample supply of jackrabbits, and not every dog is a born tracker. Under no circumstance let Rover work on cottontails, except when you have a better than average chance to shoot it right in front of Rover! Cottontails have the bad habit of disappearing fast, thus never giving the dog the reward of a sight chase. Therefore, we get a tame rabbit (some of which are so tame you'll have

to chase around your garage for a while before they will run away from you!) and take it out in an open meadow etc. Drop the rabbit far from any cover in the open and "shoo" it away. Now get Rover and put him on the spot where you released the rabbit. In most cases he will eagerly follow the short track and then be rewarded by chasing and most likely catching the rabbit. Two or three of these exercises, and Rover is hot and ready when you point that finger to the ground and tell him "where's the rabbit?". At the test, he'll most likely get a cottontail track, but thinking he can catch that one too, he'll put all he's got into that track work (and the judges put that 10 or 11 score on their score sheets!).

## **Cooperation**

Lastly, the VJP evaluates the youngsters cooperation with the handler. Cooperation is the willingness of the dog to work with the handler, i.e. it comes from the dog, in contrast to obedience which is forced by the handler. This subject is investigated throughout the test, and you can't really train for it. However, the better his obedience is, the better his cooperation score will be, so it pays to have a good handle on Rover at all times, especially when he's a hard driving, independent little bugger. The more you have his attention, the better he will cooperate. By teaching Rover to watch you during the search, you will have the tool to show his cooperation in the best light, especially when he follows you without much whistling and hollering.

In the end, you and Rover will have passed this test with flying colors, even when his performance was less than his usual homework.

Don't be disappointed if not everything works 100 %, luck is an important ingredient in a successful test! By working diligently with your pup, you have served the breeder the invaluable service of proving what quality he produced. You also laid the foundation for a successful testing and hunting career of your pup, and you have won the greatest recognition of all - the respect, trust and love of the best hunting buddy that can be found:

## **YOUR VERSATILE HUNTING DOG.**

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