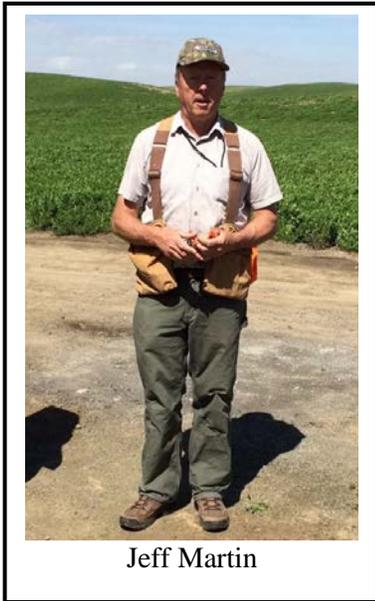


# The Importance of Cueing

*by Jeff Martin*



Wild dogs typically hunt in packs and because of this adaption, look to you as their hunting partner for visual and verbal cues. Very few domestic animals have this ability to look in the direction of where your arm is pointing. When judging I often see a complete lack of cueing with dogs being sent on a task with very little understanding of what's expected of them and subsequently mixed performances.

From the very beginning of training a versatile dog you are building on the dogs experience and expanding on the tasks you ask of the dog , therefore it becomes even more important to be clear and consistent in how you set the dog up to do something . The VGP test is 36 or so separate tasks , some with conflicting instincts and good cueing is essential.

If you aspire to testing to Solms and VGP level (and as any self-respecting versatile dog owner you should) it's an absolute necessity that you understand "the importance of cueing" .

I am going to outline my system of physical and verbal cues that I use consistently and are not in any way conflicting with each other. You can use any cue you like just be sure they achieve the same.

Basic obedience is as follows

1. "Sit" verbal command accompanied with a raised hand as per a traffic cop.
2. "Come" verbal as you bend forward slightly and slap both arms on your thighs.
3. "Heel" verbal as you wave across your front if the dog is sitting in front or a slap on your left thigh if the dog is already heeling on your left.
4. "Halt" is accompanied with a flat palm in front of the dogs head and held at head height. If your dog mistakes this for sit, lift him up into the standing position along with a repeat of halt.
5. "Drop" is accompanied with bending slightly and pointing at the very ground in front of the dog where you expect him to lie down.

These are the basic commands that allow the dog to be a good citizen and to get the dog to do as you want weather in the home, the restaurant in Germany or on a hunting trip.

The following are cues that I start using in the field from the very beginning:

**Field search vs drags in the field.** When sending a dog on a field search ALWAYS send the dog across the face of the wind and in the direction you intend to travel. I typically sit the dog, remove the lead then release the dog as I wave in the direction you intend it to search.

A good field search is with the dog using a high head and checking every snippet of scent.

As it reaches a good hunting range from you and it turns, you walk slightly in the opposite direction, then as your dog is passing you it will probably look at you and you wave in the new direction you are traveling and want it to travel. Repeat this and the dog will search left and right of the handler. If the dog turns too often and too short without a thorough search, reprimand with a verbal “agh agh “ and continue walking in the direction you want searched as you point your arm in that direction. This is best achieved when starting from a puppy and will have your dog orientating its search to your walking direction and cueing off of the handler. It is a common mistake with new owners to follow the dog wherever IT searches, make sure you encourage the dog to be searching off your direction. A habit to encourage this is never ever give a whistle to turn when your dog is running in the wrong direction hardly listening to you , simply give a single command and start running in the new direction until your dog catches up to you. Do this every single time this occurs starting with a young dog that doesn't want to get left behind will create the essential good habit of it following you.

Field drags , firstly have your helper drag the fur or feathered game in a DOWNWIND direction . If you drag it yourself always return via the edge of the field without any chance of compromising the track. The cue I use for this is sit the dog say 5 feet from the start and remove its lead , I wrap one end around my hand and just hold the end I intend letting go as I send the dog. I place the lead around the dog's neck as I move to the start with my other arm pointing to the ground that has fur or feather to signify the start , I also use a verbal command “ where is it “ which is the general command I use for something to go find and retrieve . With a few repeats of this, just placing the lead around your dog's neck will have it putting nose to ground knowing it's a track and following the track it will be rewarded with game. Note some people use a collar and a slip cord to slide through and release the dog as the cue for tracking, both work. I just try to keep it as simple as possible. A training tip is, even though the dog will be doing 300 meter drags in tests, every drag in training doesn't have to have the dog released at the very beginning. It's a good habit when training for you to just point at the ground at the start and have your dog and you using the track then slip the dog to complete only the last 50 meters on its own. This promotes a controlled pace and nose down use of the track which maintains good habits when blood-tracking at later tests.

By using these cues , your dog is far less likely to fail the drags ( which statistically is the most failed at Solms or HZP level) by running off uselessly on a field search and vice versa.

**Blind search versus a wounded duck search at the water**, it is a waste of valuable hunting time when a dog goes off on a wild free search for 30 minutes when the dead duck is on the edge of the reeds in plain sight, 30 yards across the pond. Please see a western region training article titled “Mastering the water blind “for details on recommended verbal and physical cueing. This training and cueing sequence will instill in the dog the habit to go straight across to a known pickup point as its quickest way to its reward i.e. the duck. Never forget to cue the dog with “ good boy “ as it reaches the pickup point as a means to anchor it to the spot , it works very well if the dog hits the reeds a few metres upwind of the duck and has to hunt around a little.

The live duck search can be started in training from the very same spot as outlined in the blind article, however the key difference is not to use your hand or arm as any direction, with your dog at the water’s edge looking across the pond cue with repeats of “where is it“. The universal cue for something to go find and retrieve as you send the dog. A training tip is you don’t need crazy frantic live duck searches every time, a dead or even shackled duck can be used, it’s even good to place multiple ducks so your dog will ALWAYS be successful and will love the game. The only time your dog will ever fail to not find a duck is at a test where there is no duck to find, in the Search without the duck , in training it should always be successful. Note game regulations in Germany stipulate that the dog only be trained on two live ducks in its life and in some states live duck searches are not allowed at all.

**Blood-tracking**, the cueing sequence for this is when you return to the start maybe hours later, down-stay the dog with a DROP command maybe 10 feet from the start. Take your time, calmly untangling and laying out the 20ft tracking lead with the wide tracking collar attached , go to the dog and remove its lead and collar placing those in your training vest then install the tracking collar . You then bring the dog to the start pointing at the blood on the ground with maybe a single “where is it“. Your dog will progress down the track and you let the lead slip through your hands so that you are calmly walking 10-15ft behind the dog holding the lead. The rules ask that the handler is at the end of the 20 feet lead and its actually easier to read the dogs body language this way rather than be 5ft from it influencing its every step. Most people mark the exact track with clothes pegs and fluorescent tape up in trees , so when you know the dogs right on it encourage it with gentle calm “ good boys“. If you know the dog is distracted on a squirrel or fresh deer crossing you can reprimand with “agh agh“ then take it back to the track. Let the dog make its mistake by going off rack and seeing if it corrects itself before interfering, this is particularly important when your dog over shots

a sharp turn, give it the opportunity to learn and correct itself. Blood-tracking tracking is a team effort BUT the dog's ability should be the bigger part of it.

**Stobern or independent forest search.** initially you have selected a defined half to full acre woodlot. You walk out with game from the very starting position you intend sending the dog from. That is you are intentionally leaving some sort of trail. You place the game in one corner of the wood lot and return via the outside. Go get your dog and go to the start, cue with "where is it , where is it" then release the dog , it will lunge forward and onto your trail then go find the game you placed . A couple of repeats over the following days and you can stop intentionally leaving a trail. You can also intentionally leave a trail to a second pickup point on another corner of the woodlot and later walk around to these pickup points to place the game. You will develop a dog that every time you face him towards a woodlot and cue him accordingly he will go blasting on a search and failing to find will continue to search because he has never failed in training and in his mind , there has to be something here somewhere.

**Buschieren or close spaniel type search in heavier cover** this simulates when you are hunting rabbits or grouse in heavy cover and you can only be successful if your dog hunts within shotgun range with minimum commands if any and very quietly. The cue for this is always train in heavy cover and send your dog as per a field search but you absolutely whisper your commands. Give directions with your arm but move slowly and purposefully. It helps to occasionally when your dog is searching away from you to throw a dead pigeon and fire a starter pistol, your dog will turn immediately ( and stop if its training is advanced to being steady to wing and shot ) and probably see the fall of the dead pigeon. It can be commanded to retrieve as per usual as its reward. This is a great training technique as your dog has in its mind you are the candy man and the game can come from near you. Don't overdo this so your dog is following you around the forest waiting!!!

That covers the major cueing problems that I regularly see, cueing is grossly underused. Training is surprisingly easy with a well-bred versatile of proven breeding, get out there and enjoy the training, we look forward to seeing you strutting your stuff at a future test.