

VGP 101

Part 1: An Overview

By Ken Dinn and Gary Hodson

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The fall tests are over and your young DD passed the HZP. Wonderful! Time to go hunting – a reward for you both for the time and effort you put into preparing for the test. It is also time to begin thinking about the VGP.

In our last article we stressed that training for and running the VGP is not all that difficult. Unfortunately the part that is hard is an area where many of us are weak as trainers – making a training plan and upholding our commitment to follow it. There are more elements to the VGP. Some of the elements depend on earlier training and must be trained in a specific sequence. Some of them can be trained simultaneously. Some subjects require conditioning the dog first. Many require the participation of a helper or some specialized training gear. There’s a lot to think about and organize if you are going to run in a VGP!

Unfortunately we can’t give you an exact plan to follow. There are too many variables unique to you and your DD. What we hope to do here is outline the factors you need to take into consideration when making your VGP training plan.

USING A CHECKLIST

The training plan starts with a checklist. You need to be clear about what needs to be done by test day. To help you with this a list of all the subjects evaluated in the VGP is included at the end of this article along with how much value is assigned to each subject. For details about each of these subjects and exactly how they will be tested, look at the VGPO – the VGP Test Regulations.

Important Note: The VGPO booklet is available from Business Manager Dan McMillan and is **MUST** reading for all trainers/handlers. Too many members come to the VGP without a clear idea of exactly what is required and run into problems as a result. Read the regulations for each subject several times, and then put questions to experienced handlers and your breeder until you are clear on exactly what will happen and what is expected of you and the dog.

Some items on the checklist—particularly many of the field and water work subjects—your dog already knows from your preparation for the VJP and HZP. You won’t need to train them again, but you will need to routinely practice them. Just because your dog did them well a year ago does not mean it will do them well a year later without some refresher sessions. This practice needs to be part of your training plan. Neglecting this step could lead to the surprise of your life!

Some of the previously learned subjects will be evaluated at a higher level and thus require further training. For example: the dog must not only point but be steady to flush, shot and fall. With water work there is not only a search behind a live duck, but also a search without a duck being present, a more challenging task.

Much of the training will be on the subjects that are entirely new to you and your dog: the forest and obedience work. Many of these subjects are unique to the style of hunting practiced in Germany. As we address them in later articles we will try to give some context of where and how they are used so that you will understand why they are included in the test.

The sequence in which you proceed with your training will depend on such things as:

- Which prior skills are inadequate and need to be refined before proceeding.
- Training activities that depend on the completion of other activities.
- The resources you have available at a particular point in time.
- Limiting environmental factors such as excessive heat, extreme cold, deep snow, inadequate cover, etc.

Training for each subject will involve a series of steps leading to the end goal. The number and difficulty of the steps involved will determine how much time the training for that subject might take. Subsequent articles will suggest the steps necessary for training each subject.

No one training plan will work for everyone. We each have a different work style. Some of us plan in great detail and benefit from writing things down, while others have an idea of what is required in their head and are able to work from that. And of course there are plans everywhere in between those two extremes. At a minimum—in order to ensure that everything is moving forward in good time—we suggest that you lay out a calendar of the months before the test and set target dates for the various training tasks to be completed.

Other Considerations

As owners we need to admit up front that many of the training problems we run into have little to do with the dog and more to do with our own limitations as trainers. Timing, pacing, sequence, consistency, reinforcement and correction... All play an important role in how well your training goes. You might benefit from a review of some basic training principles like the ones you will find in Joan Bailey's books, the Drahthaar Puppy Manual and the Armbruster Training Manual. [There are reviews of these books on the Group Canada website, with information about where to find them. Look for them in Members > Resources > Books and Videos.] If you don't already have these books, put them on your Christmas wish list and then spend those blustery mid-winter days reading them—with your dog on Down/Stay beside you, of course.

There are also some unique training aids that you will want to have. They will be mentioned in later articles in association with the subjects that require them. Some you can make yourself if you prefer; e.g., a fox training bag. Others are easier purchased; e.g., a blood tracking collar and leash. More Christmas gift ideas!

Time will be a key element in your preparation for the VGP. You need to understand right from the beginning that this training requires a significant time commitment over a long period of time. The training for this test cannot be done all at the last minute. However, we believe what gets the best result is not necessarily long training sessions, but shorter more frequent sessions.

We have heard it said that a good dog and trainer can prepare for the VGP in 30 days. We think 90 days of training 20 minutes a day is a more reasonable time line.

Concentration will be another important element in the training. Some of the behaviors you are training are complex; some, like blood tracking, require cooperation between you and the dog to get the task done. You will need to learn to “read” your dog at a higher level than ever before.

Oops! It sounds like we are trying to scare you again. Actually these things are not difficult. You just have to be conscious of them. Plan your time, carry out the training and pay attention to what happens. Some people find it helpful to actually keep a training log so that they can better track what is happening in each subject.

Above all remember, if you and your dog are not enjoying preparing for the VGP, something is wrong.

PRE-TRAINING ASSESSMENT

The first step will be to conduct an assessment of where things stand with you and your DD before you begin training. For example:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this particular dog? Consider not only the natural ability of the dog with regard to use of nose, search, pointing, and tracking, but also the level of desire and cooperation the dog has. This will help you to decide where more time and effort might be needed during training.
- Are there aspects of your previous training that need to be reinforced or refined before moving on to new training subjects? Of particular concern here is the dog’s retrieving reliability. Do you need to review and reinforce your force fetch training before going on?
- How obedient is your dog overall? Whose fault is that? While some dogs may naturally be more cooperative and thus more obedient than others, the problem with disobedient dogs more often lies in our own inconsistency. Sometimes we punish misbehavior; other times we let it go. After the HZP is over we often forget to praise the dog because it is no longer in training. It is important from now on to expect the dog to be obedient in all cases and to follow through with appropriate consequences of praise or reprimand.
- How well conditioned is the dog? We expect the dog will be in quite good condition during hunting season. You will want to maintain that condition at a reasonable level so that the dog will be ready to work first thing in the spring when the weather clears.
- What are your strengths and weaknesses as a trainer? What kind of reading and/or consultation do you need to undertake to make you more able to do the training? If reading is not your best way to learn, look for some of the good training DVDs that are out there.

RESOURCE PLANNING

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of resources that need to be in place for various phases of VGP training. Certain useful **Training Aids** will be described in upcoming articles in this series in relation to the subjects that require them.

Training Game: Whether you buy them, raise them yourself or use them at a training facility, you will need access to a reliable source of game. Quail that can be recalled and homing pigeons will be particularly useful for steadiness training and help keep the costs down.

Since you have already worked your dog on live ducks for the HPZ and may also have hunted your dog on waterfowl, you will probably not need more than a couple of live ducks to refresh the dog's work in this subject.

With regards to dead game for the drags and for water search training, you will want to put some of your fall harvest in the freezer for spring/summer training. And you want to be sure to save some pristine game to take to the test. It really is an advantage for your dog to work on game to which it has already been introduced.

The hardest thing for us to find has always been a suitable dead fox. It is somewhat easier now that we can also use raccoon or coyote, but they must meet the minimum size requirements. It is all right to begin your training with smaller specimens, but you want to work up to game larger than the minimum in order to ensure success.

A deer carcass will be left at the end of the blood track and the dog will be expected to stay alone by it without leaving or damaging the carcass. The dog needs to be familiar with that happening. It may not be appropriate or practical for you to keep an actual carcass for training. A tanned deer hide can easily serve this purpose.

Training Areas: The field and water training areas you used for the HZP may also be suitable for the VGP training. In addition you will need to find appropriate areas for the forest work. The VGPO will give you an idea of what is required.

You will need to find a variety of places to train. This is always true with training, but particularly so with the VGP. The dog must be able to generalize working from one area to another. Initial training may be done in your old training grounds, but eventually you will want to train in other areas to give the dog that challenge and experience. The test area may be strange to your dog and it will need to be able to cope with the variation from its accustomed area.

Training Assistants: You can do much of the training on your own, but in many instances you will need some assistance. Who you choose to work with is entirely up to you. Each of us has our own style and comfort level. Just be sure that it is someone you are comfortable with and that benefits the training rather than distracting from it.

If you are lucky enough to have other handlers reasonably nearby it can be a great benefit to do some training as a group. This gives you the extra hands you need and another perspective on how your dog is doing and how to solve particular problems. Meeting others for training also helps to keep you motivated to go for training on those days when you might prefer to let it go.

Always remember that most of us who have trained dogs for the VGP are more than happy to give you a hand either through discussion or actual help with training. If there is someone near you who has this experience be sure to contact them. We remember what it was like and are eager to share what we learned in the process.

In addition to exposing your DD to a variety of training areas, it is also important to expose it to a variety of people when training. As you know from the previous tests, a lot of people are involved and that may intimidate a dog that is not used to having other people around when it is working. If you are not training with others on a regular basis be sure to plan to incorporate other people into some of your latter training days so the dog will be accustomed to having other people around.

Trouble-Shooting

It will be important to monitor your progress toward the goals you have set in your training plan. You need to review the checklist periodically (monthly?) to be sure steady progress is being made and that no subject is being overlooked.

Earlier we said that VGP training takes a lot of time, but does not necessarily require long training sessions. There is some danger of boring a dog with too much repetition or overtraining. You want to keep the dog fresh and enjoying the work.

Many steps in training the various subjects can be done for a short time in the back yard – five, ten or fifteen minutes and you are done. This can happen daily, in the morning before work or in the evening after supper. Likewise, obedience can be incorporated into the daily activities with your dog around the house. For example on your daily run you can practice such things as heeling, retrieving, halt, come, come around, etc.

Variety in your training can also be important. Many of the VGP training activities are independent of each other and can be worked on alternately. While you want to have continuity of training sessions within a subject until the goal is reached, it is also good to be able to shift to an entirely different activity to provide variety for both you and the dog.

Lack of progress with a subject usually means you need to stop and evaluate what has been happening. Pushing on with the same strategy without doing this may burn out both you and the dog. You need to consider: Is the step you are taking too big for your dog and you need to insert an intermediate step? Have you inadvertently given mixed messages to the dog and it is confused about what is expected? Has the tone of the sessions been too harsh? Does the dog need more reinforcement; e.g., treats, praise, a fun release activity at the end? If you cannot figure it out on your own, you will need to consult with another (more experienced?) trainer.

It is very easy to be too heavy on the reprimands and overlook the praise when training. As our frustration mounts, the level of negative interaction and energy grows and can cause the dog to shut down. It is important to recognize when this is happening and to back off before things get worse. Always try to end a session on a successful note, even if this means dropping back to an earlier step. Then go back to the drawing board and try to figure out what needs to change in your approach to this element of the training.

Keeping all of this in mind will help you to make a realistic plan in the beginning and then make appropriate alterations to the plan when problems arise. If you have started your training early and set a steady pace, you and the dog can enjoy the training with minimal stress. That is the way it is supposed to be!

Continue to Next Page for List of VGP Subjects:

VGP Subjects and their Weighted Value

FOREST WORK

- Leash Work
- Overnight Track - 8x
 - or Day Track – 5x
- Additional Dead Game Baying – 4x
 - or Additional Dead Game Guiding – 3x
- Retrieve of fox over obstacle – 3x
- Fox Drag – 5x
- Retrieve of fox on drag – 2x
- Hare or rabbit drag – 4x
- Retrieve of hare or rabbit on drag – 2x
- Independent search (Stöbern) – 4x
- Dense cover search (Buschieren) – 3x

WATER WORK

- Independent search of water with dense cover, without duck – 3x
- Gunfire soundness – required but not scored
- Blind retrieve in water with dense cover – 3x
- Independent search in water with dense cover, with duck – 3x
- Retrieve of duck – 2x

FIELD WORK

- Use of nose – 6x
- Search – 4x
- Pointing – 4x
- Manners behind game and relocating – 3x
- Blind search for feathered game
 - 1. work on winged partridge or pheasant – 4x
 - 2. or Feathered game drag – 3x
 - 1. Free search for freshly shot game bird – 3x
 - 2. or Free search for planted feathered game – 3x
- Retrieve of feathered game – 2x

OBEDIENCE

- General behavior – Obedience – 3x
- Obedience during drive hunt – 2x
- Heeling on lead – 1x
- Heeling off lead – 2x
- Down/Stay – 2x
- Steadiness to wing – 2x
- Steadiness to fur 3x
- Steadiness to shot – 2x