

# **VGP 101**

## **Part 3: Obedience**

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*Gehorsam* – obedience – is defined in the VGPO as the expression of proper and thorough training and is a prerequisite for using the dog in the hunting field. It is considered the highest priority of all the accomplishments expected of the utility dog.

In the VGP there is a set of specific subjects that are categorized as Obedience on which the dog is scored. In addition, the dog is evaluated on its general obedience throughout the two-day test. Any lapses of obedience during other work or while waiting its turn will be noted and scored at the end of the test.

While obedience training is not as intriguing as many of the other subjects and could easily be taken for granted, it is important to remember that according to some long time judges there are more failures on Obedience subjects than any of the other subjects in the VGP.

Moreover, if a dog evades the influence of its handler for a long period of time during the test and thus delays the testing, it is not to be tested any further. Such a dog is not considered fit to be allowed in the hunting field.

Why is so much stress placed on obedience?

First, obedience forms the foundation for ethical hunting. The dog must work within the constraints of the hunting situation, producing and recovering game for its handler. If it cannot reliably do that for you it is of no use to you as a hunter.

Second, a disobedient dog presents a safety risk to itself and others, at home and during the hunt. The most common examples are the dog that runs into the road and is hit by a vehicle, or the dog that runs off on its own. In the hunting situation a misbehaving dog can interrupt the hunt or even interfere with safe shooting.

And finally, obedience training makes these high energy dogs easier to live with. It gives you methods for dealing with the dog that gets into things around the house, is rowdy and destructive, or is annoyingly noisy.

It is helpful to make a distinction between *obedience* and *cooperation*. It is often said that cooperation is what the dog gives to the handler; obedience is what the handler requires of the dog. Cooperation is the natural willingness of your dog to work with and for you. Obedience on the other hand is the trained behavior of your dog to comply with your commands. While these are two different factors, it is certainly easier to train obedience with a cooperative dog.

## **Training Principles**

Obedience is taught like any other skill by shaping the behavior you want the dog to perform. In any complex behavior there will be a series of steps leading to the finished behavior. Once the dog has reliably mastered the first step you move on to the next one. Reinforcement of some kind should be used to motivate the dog. When required, correction should be brief and to the point. Try to make the learning experience as positive as possible for your dog.

Remember that a dog has to learn in many different locations and with different distractions. Start training in a controlled, quiet environment. When the dog is 100% reliable there, start over in another location, and then another. Once the dog has mastered the particular element in different locations, go back to the beginning and introduce distractions. Move the distractions to different locations just as you did when teaching the original command. Many new handlers think that just because the dog is 100% reliable in the back yard the training is finished. This is not the case. Training must be repeated in different locations with different distractions to be fully established.

Clarity will be important in your training. If you are uncertain about what you are doing, the dog will be as well. Under these circumstances many dogs will shut down for fear of making a mistake and incurring your wrath. So be sure to take the time to think through what you are trying to accomplish in any given training session before you start. If the training is going sour during a session, finish up with something the dog knows very well, give it a pat on the head and put it up. Then take time to sit back and think about what happened. Determine what went wrong and how you can do it better next session. Likewise, if your mind is not clear or your mood is not positive going into training, don't train right then. You might only set your training back.

Consistency is equally important in your work with the dog. As you surely know by now, dogs love routine. Use this to your advantage by setting up routines within your training. This can cue your dog as to what you expect of it in a given training or testing situation.

To the extent possible, when you begin training a new subject you want to create a situation where the dog cannot escape doing what you want it to do. This often means having a leash or long line of some kind on it. As the dog becomes compliant with your command you can lessen or eliminate this control. You do not want the dog developing the belief that it can escape doing what you want it to do.

Once a behavior has been trained it is important to maintain that behavior. This is particularly true with obedience. Expect your dog to be obedient. Reinforce it when it is obedient and impose consequences when it is not. If you become lax with your expectations your dog will become lax with its behavior and your hard work will unravel.

It is typical of dogs to distinguish between who they must obey and who will let them off the hook. We have all seen that differential behavior with our dogs and other family members. This means you can train good hunting obedience even though there are contrary influences in the dog's life. However, it is still a good idea to get the family on-side as much as possible.

### **Halt: an all-around useful Management Tool**

One of the most useful tools for controlling your DD is the Halt. Once trained, when given the command HALT! the dog immediately drops into a down position with its chin on the ground between its outstretched paws and remains in that position until it is released. Whatever behavior the dog was engaged in has been interrupted and it is in a submissive position waiting for your next command.



This command can be used to interrupt any inappropriate chasing; to improve pointing and steadiness to wing or shot; when the dog strays too far from a blood track or drag track; and for teaching the down/stay. You can use it any time the dog misbehaves. Gary used it successfully to break a dog of running the bank when

sent for water work. As soon as she began to move down the bank instead of into the water he would immediately command Halt and leave her in the down position for a couple of minutes. Then he would set her up and send her again. It took very few trials with Halt before she reliably entered the water and proceeded with the task.

There are two excellent articles on training Halt—written by Steve Kohlmann—on the Group Canada website. Look for them in *Members > Resources > Training*. Ideally you will have trained this command earlier in the dog's life at the same time you taught other commands like Sit, Down and Stay, but it is never too late to begin the training.

### **Clarifying Terms**

There are a couple of somewhat confusing terms you need to understand as you read the VGPO:

The first is the difference between the terms “predicate” and “score”. The predicate is the verbal descriptor of how the judges believe the dog worked on a subject: excellent, very good, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory. The score is the numerical value they assign for the performance.

In the VJP and HZP where a 12-point scoring system is used a range of scores are assigned to each predicate: excellent = 12; very good = 9, 10 or 11; good = 6, 7 or 8; sufficient = 3, 4 or 5; and insufficient = 1 or 2. The judges determine whether the dog's performance merits a higher or lower score within the predicate.

In the VGP where a 4-point scoring system is used the predicate indicates a particular score: excellent = 4; very good = 4; good = 3; sufficient = 2; and insufficient = 1. In all three of the tests a 0 is entered when the dog fails to do a required element. A score of excellent is truly exceptional and the judges must write a justification for awarding it to the dog.

Another important distinction is made in the VGPO between the meanings of the words “should” versus “must”. When the regulations say SHOULD they mean that ideally the dog will perform at that level and if it does not its score will be reduced to whatever degree it has failed to meet the standard. When the regulations say MUST they mean that if the dog fails to perform to the standard in any way it will fail that subject. It is absolutely required.

Note: All exercises in the VGP are judged according to the behavior desired in the hunting situation so the criteria may be somewhat different than you have observed in obedience tests in other types of clubs.

## **The VGP Obedience Subjects**

The descriptions of the subjects that follow are paraphrased from the VGPO.

**General behavior – Obedience:** *This subject covers all instances of obedience not included in the other obedience subjects, which primarily means the behavior of the non-working dog. This includes the willingness of the dog to be leashed after forest, field and water work; remaining calm during the work of other dogs; not pulling continuously at the leash; and not whining, barking or howling, etc. This level of behavior ensures that the dog will not disturb the handler and other hunters during the hunt.*

Two things stand out with regard to preparing your DD to meet the general obedience requirements. The first is expecting your dog to be calm, quiet and cooperative during day to day activities. Hopefully you have been working on this from the time you got your pup and those behaviors are well established by now. If not, begin with training Halt and use that as a way to shape the desired behaviors.

The second thing you will want to do—if this has not already been your practice—is expose your dog to situations with other people and dogs around. Some of the inappropriate test day behavior may be due to the novel situation. The more familiar your dog is with being in this kind of group situation the better. This is where training with a number of other people can be an advantage. While other dogs and handlers are working, reinforce your dog for being calm and quiet. Be careful as it is so easy to watch the working dog and handler and forget to keep an eye on your own dog. Be sure to keep your attention on your dog; this is an important part of its training.

**Obedience during drive hunt** [*Verhalten auf dem Stand*]: *All handlers and dogs entered in the test are stationed around a thicket or dense stand of forest as shooters, while a group of people in the woods simulate beaters driving game out of the woods. In addition to making verbal and beating noises, the beaters will fire several shots. Each handler must also fire at least two shots when directed by a judge. The dog is to remain silent and calm during this activity. It SHOULD not whine, and MUST not bark, pull on the leash or leave the handler without*

*command. The dogs may be either on or off leash; a leashed dog may not receive a score greater than “good” (3).*

During a drive hunt a shooter and dog need to remain in the exact position they have been assigned for safety reasons, and the dog should not make any noise that will distract the hunters or arouse the other dogs. This test subject simulates that situation.

This is one exercise where you will need helpers during training, but it can be anyone able to walk through the woods and whack at trees with a stick. If you have already done Halt training, this should be relatively easy as the dog already knows Down/Stay.

Next you introduce the beaters going by. At first keep some distance between your location and the beaters. Then gradually move them in closer until they pass approximately 5 m from you and are visible to the dog. Both you and the beaters need to periodically fire shots. The noise during the drive hunt exercise can vary. At some tests it is as described above; at others it may include banging on pots and raucous whooping. You should be prepared for either.

It will be good if you can ultimately do this exercise with one or two other hunter/dog pairs positioned along the woods, since that is how it will be done during the test. If possible include a dog that is not trained and barks and/or tugs at the leash. This can be a useful distraction for training your dog to remain quiet and unmoving under any circumstances.

You can get no more than a score of 3 (good) if your dog is leashed during this exercise. Remember, however: this is a MUST subject. If the dog breaks and leaves your assigned area it fails the entire test so it may be well worth the sacrifice of one point. We should never forget that dogs do strange things on test day.

A low level of whining during the exercise will not fail the dog, but will reduce the score a predicate or more depending on its intensity and loudness. Barking, tugging at the leash, leaving the area—or any similar behavior that could interfere with shooting safety or with other hunters—will result in test failure.

**Heeling on leash** [*Leinenführigkeit*]: *The leashed dog should follow the handler through a stand of dense forest or young saplings without tangling the leash or hindering the rapid progress of the handler. The handler must pass closely by several trees on both the right and left at least twice, and must stop at least once.*

*Every tangling of the leash or pulling at the leash lowers the predicate for the dog's performance. Observation of the dog's behavior on leash throughout the entire test will also be factored in to this score.*

**Heeling off leash** [*Folgen frei bei Fuss*]: *Heeling off leash is tested on a forest road or trail. The unleashed dog should follow its handler closely at or behind the handler's heel for at least a distance of 50 m without requiring any loud commands. The handler must vary the walking speed and stop several times, at which time the dog should immediately stop, too.*

In the context of hunting, the goal of heeling is for your dog to stay with you in such a way that it does not interfere with your walking stability or the safety of the gun you are carrying.

During the leashed heeling the handler will be asked at some points to walk so close to trees that his hip brushes against them. When this happens the dog is expected to drop back behind the handler, but to pass the tree on the same side as the handler rather than go around it. At no time should the dog be forging ahead, walking on the other side of the tree or in any way causing the leash to become tangled.

During the unleashed heeling the dog is expected to stay by the handler's side as he changes pace, changes direction or stops.

Contrary to popular belief, heeling is not the easiest skill to teach your dog. By nature the dog wants to forge ahead and lead you. Ideally you will have taught the dog at a young age that this is not appropriate behavior.

The prong, or pinch, collar is a good way to teach Heel. Have the dog walk on your left side (or right depending on the handler) and begin walking with the command Heel. When the dog goes ahead of you "POP" the dog with the collar. You do not want to use continuous pressure because the dog will learn to lean into the pinch and accept it. Every time the dog forges ahead: pop, pop, pop until it is back in position. When the dog is in the proper position give it some praise. Continue this until the dog is walking calmly in the correct position.

Once things are good in a straight line, introduce turns. Make the turns abrupt so that the dog is taken by surprise. You turn and the leash is slack so the dog continues on only to be pinched by the collar. Not too many corrections



or pops by the collar are needed for the dog to start paying close attention to the proper position. Once started the dog always has to be in correct position when walking on leash and told to Heel.

**Down/Stay (Ablegen):** *The handler walks alone with the unleashed dog beside or behind him to a point assigned by the judges. This point must be at least 100 m away from the gallery and the other handlers with their dogs. The handler then commands the dog to lie down either free or close to an object such as a backpack, hunting pouch, folding seat, etc. The handler uses a signal or quiet command for the dog to remain there. [The leash may be attached to the collar of the dog during the Down/Stay, in which case the dog can receive no higher than a predicate of “good” (3).] The handler slowly walks away as if stalking game and goes to a point assigned by the judges where the dog cannot see or hear him anymore (at least 30 m). The handler should not turn around or give his dog a voice signal. From there the handler fires two shots with a shotgun, separated by at least 10 seconds. The dog must remain in its place until the handler returns and picks it up. If it leaves the place, whines or barks, the performance must be assessed as “insufficient” (1). The dog may raise its head and may temporarily sit up. Moving not more than 5 m is not considered as leaving the place, but lowers the score. Hunt-like behavior and calmness of the dog determine the score for this test subject.*

Ideally you will have trained Halt before tackling this subject. Then introduce a series of approximations to the required behavior.

First, you and an assistant walk the dog to a particular place. Put the dog on Down using a hand signal and a single quiet command such as Down or Halt. You can put a personal item next to your dog if you like. Some handlers believe this article will cue the dog that you are leaving only temporarily and will be back. Stand next to the dog, holding the leash. The assistant goes out of sight as required and fires the shotgun. You reprimand the dog for movement or whining; praise/reward it for remaining quietly in place. The Assistant should return to your side. Next, proceed the same way, this time leaving the leash on the dog, while you move a short distance away. Then repeat the exercise with you moving 10-15 m away.

Now repeat the above procedures with the dog off leash, with you standing close, moving a short distance away and finally the greater distance away. Praise the dog for perfect behavior; reprimand it for movement and noise. Take care not to move to the next step until the dog is performing properly at the current step.

Once the dog is behaving perfectly on this exercise with the assistant doing the shooting, change your roles and repeat the on-leash and off-leash steps. This time assistant stays with the dog, while you move away and do the shooting for each step. For the final step you should do the exercise alone with the dog—placing the dog on Down, stealthily walking out of sight, shooting as required, then returning to the dog—while your assistant hides nearby to observe the dog’s behavior.

As with any training, the location where you do the various stages of this exercise should vary so the dog does not become dependent on doing it in just one place. Another important step in this exercise is never to call the dog to you. Always go back to the dog, pick up any item you left and take the dog away from the position/place you left him or her. You do not want the dog to anticipate that it can come to you.

Like with the drive hunt, you can leave the leash attached to the dog during this exercise, in which case it can receive no better than a score of 3 (good).

**Steadiness to wing** [*Benehmen vor eräugtem Federwild*]: *The dog should not chase flying game birds. The handler should not have to give a command to stop the dog.*

**Steadiness to fur** [*Benehmen vor eräugtem Haarnutzwild*]: *The handler should be able to stop the dog from chasing furred game by voice, whistle signals or even repetitive and sharp commands. A dog that is disobedient more than twice by chasing furred game cannot receive a Prize I. Compulsive chasers of fur that cannot be called back by voice or whistle, or that only come back after a long period of time and thus interrupt the testing, must be excluded from the testing. They are not fit for practical hunting.*

Halt is the command of choice when dealing with a chasing dog. When properly trained you should be able to whistle your dog down at a distance and expect it to remain in that position until you release it.

Note regarding Steadiness to Wing and Steadiness to Fur in the VGP: It is sufficient for the dog to be tested for steadiness on either birds or fur. It does not need to be tested on both.

**Steadiness to shot** [*Schussruhe*]: *The evaluation of steadiness to shot can only be tested on flushing or fleeing game that the dog has seen. Game should be shot in front of the dog, if necessary by the judges. Steadiness to shot is considered “very*

*good” (4) when the dog does not chase flushing game after a shot. On birds, the handler should not influence the dog.*

For the HZP the dog needed only to be steady on point until the handler had walked in. Now it must be steady through the shot and fall of the bird. Ideally this should be accomplished without commands from the handler. Notice the “should”. If you need to give a command you can, but the score will be lowered accordingly. Again, the handler has to do what is necessary to get a score for the dog. Something is better than nothing!

Kit Critchlow has written an excellent series of articles on training steadiness to flush, wing, shot and fall—Sure Steps to Steadiness—that can be found on the Group Canada website. Look for them under *Members > Resources > Training*. Kit’s method is based on the work of Steve Kohlmann and uses the Halt command mentioned earlier.

## **Practice!**

You can begin many aspects of obedience training right now and work on it steadily through the winter.

Obedience can be practiced every day in small ways as a part of your normal routine. For example... Put the dog on Down/Stay while getting the gear out to train or hunt. Heel the dog on leash when going out to the training or hunting area. Heel the dog off leash back to the vehicle when it is tired. Halt the dog occasionally when it is running in the field or forest on its daily runs. The opportunities for obedience practice are endless.

Remember that consistency is important. From now on you want your dog to be obedient and you must take the time to enforce it regardless of the situation. Don’t cut corners, even when hunting. If the dog busts the bird, don’t shoot. As long as you allow the dog a retrieve when misbehaving you will have difficulty changing its breaking behavior.