

# VGP 101

## PART 1: AN OVERVIEW

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Verbandsgebrauchsprüfung – now that's a mouthful! In English it would be the Association Utility Test, but in both Germany and North America we commonly refer to it as the VGP. This is the JGHV test that follows the two Breed Tests (VJP and HZP).

Over the next few issues of *Drahthaar News* we plan to present you with a series of articles about the VGP in an effort to demystify this test and generate more interest in people training for it. This first article will give an overview of the test. Later articles will address making a training plan and the actual training of the more unique aspects of the test.

### WHAT IS THE VGP?

As a utility test, the goal of the VGP is to produce a fully trained versatile hunting dog ready to work in the field, forest or water on all types of wild game. The test reflects the style of hunting in Germany where they use their dogs for hunting upland game, ducks and geese, hare, wild boar, and deer, and for eliminating predators. Stand shooting and drive hunting are often employed. Hunting is frequently done in groups, so the dogs get a strong dose of obedience training so that hunting will be a safe, controlled experience.

A dog that passes the VGP with a Prize I, II or III is entered in the German Versatile Hunting Dog Registry (Deutsches-Gebrauchshundestammbuch – DGStB) and assigned a DGStB number. The prizes indicate that the dog achieved at least the minimal level of performance assigned to that prize designation for each subject of the test. Earning any of the VGP prizes is a prestigious result.

Unlike the scoring system for the breed tests (0-12 points), VGP dogs are rated on a 0 to 4 point scale: 0 = insufficient; 1 = poor; 2 = sufficient; 3 = good; and 4 = very good. For exceptional work a 4h can be awarded. This would require that the dog performed in an extraordinary manner under very demanding conditions. The reason for using a different, more restricted scale is that at the utility level the dogs are expected to perform to perfection. The breed tests involve immature dogs and the broader rating scale gives the judges more room to rate their evolving level of performance. A utility dog is judged to either have done the task or not.



The VGP is a two-day test, in part due to the number of subjects included. However, even if there are only a couple of entries and the subjects could be completed in one day, the test must be run over a two-day period. The maximum number of dogs that one judging team can evaluate in a VGP is four.

## VGP SUBJECTS

You are already familiar with many aspects of the VGP from running the HZP; the dog is simply expected to perform them at a higher level. Other subjects, particularly in the forest and obedience work, will be entirely new to you.

VGP field work includes the familiar Use of Nose, Search and Pointing. What is new is Manners behind Game (steadiness and relocating) and Retrieve of a Freshly Shot Bird.

VGP water work includes the familiar Gun Sensitivity, Blind Retrieve and Search behind the Duck. What is new is a Search without the Duck.

VGP forest work – here is where things get quite different from anything you've trained for before. First is the bleeding tracking – *Schweißarbeit*. The dog is expected to follow a 400 m blood track (laid with 0.25 liters of blood) to the carcass of a deer. The handler has the option for a day-track (2-5 hours old) or an overnight track (at least 14 hours old). The work can be done with the dog on leash, or it can be done by Dead Game Baying (*Totverbellen*) or Dead Game Guiding (*Totverweisen*). The weight assigned to the track score depends on the level of difficulty the handler has chosen.

Fox work is another event unique to forest work. The dog must retrieve a minimum 7 lb fox (or equivalent-size raccoon or coyote) over an obstacle, as well as retrieve the fox from a 300 m drag. The challenge in these subjects lies in conditioning the dog to handle the size of the game and overcoming the natural dog's reluctance to carry a fox.

The Independent Search—*Stöbern*—requires the dog to thoroughly search a 2.5 acre wooded area without knowing that it will find game. The reason for this subject is that in some German hunts they send dogs into a densely wooded area to drive game out into the open where shooters are positioned along the edge. A Dense Cover Search—*Buschieren*—shows how the dog works in heavy cover while hunting with its handler, including when shots are fired.

Obedience training is the foundation for a successful VGP overall. The judges evaluate the behavior of the dog every minute from the beginning of the two-day test to the end and note any lack of obedience or cooperation. In addition to this there are specific obedience subjects that are scored on their own.

The dog must heel with you on and off leash, in open cover and in forest. The dog must remain in the down position by your side while a group of drivers passes by, simulating a drive hunt. And the dog must remain in the down position while you go out of sight and fire several shots.



## HANDLER PREPARATION

Over the years there have been various articles and columns in the newsletter with reference to training for the VGP. We used to stress how challenging a test it was to train for. Somehow that managed to intimidate more than a few people into not bothering with it. The truth is the test itself is not "difficult". There is just a lot to it and there are parts that are not familiar to us because up to now we have not hunted in the same way as they do in Europe. Once you know what is involved, each element is no more difficult than any other training you have done. In fact a VGP is not that much more work if you have a properly prepared HZP dog. The system is designed to build one test on the other.

While it is good to have seen a VGP before training for and entering one, it is not absolutely necessary. Many of us did it without that experience and succeeded. However, if it is possible to observe a VGP first, by all means do. It will help you to know what is expected and that will give you confidence.

What is particularly important is to have a training buddy at various stages of the training. Ideally it will be a hunting friend who can handle a gun for you. But it can also be your partner or your kids or an interested neighbor. It just needs to be someone who will do what you tell them to do. Over the next few months we hope to set up a VGP Mentorship Program where inexperienced VGP trainers can be paired with a member who has successfully completed the VGP at least once. Depending on your proximity to each other, this could involve discussions, sharing resources and equipment, and training together.

The most important thing is to not psych yourself out or let anyone else intimidate you. Do solid, timely training and then trust your dog. The result is unlikely to be "perfect", but it doesn't need to be. Yes, you want to do well, but this is one case where the value is in the overall experience. If you turn it into a competition with others you are likely to make judgment mistakes that could lead to poor test results. Relax and just do it for yourself and your DD.

## WHY ENTER A VGP?

Many members say, "I don't plan to breed or become a judge so there is no point to entering the VGP." That is a somewhat limited view. There are other equally important reasons to do the VGP.

It is true that although there is no requirement for a dog to pass the VGP before being bred, it does give the dog more credibility as a breeding choice. And successfully completing a VGP with a self-trained dog is a prerequisite to becoming an apprentice judge. Both of those are worthy goals.

But an equally important personal goal might be having a trustworthy truly versatile hunting dog that you would feel comfortable hunting with anyone in any hunting situation. It is a marvelous thing to see a fully trained DD work. The truth is, while most of us would say we will train our dog to that level on our own, it is unlikely that we would do that as thoroughly without having the test to work toward. The test gives us the motivation to follow through.

And finally you need to remember: training for the VGP is just plain fun, for you and the dog. These are interesting subjects and there is a great deal of satisfaction in mastering them. As long as you make a sensible training plan that allows for steady progress... (More on that next issue.) As long as you seek support when you need it... As long as you create a positive working relationship with your dog... Training for the VGP will be fun. Give it a try!