

VGP 101

Part 4: Fox Work and Retrieving

By Ken Dinn and Gary Hodson

We were so eager to get this series on the VGP started that we neglected to give our usual caveat at the beginning. There are many different ways to accomplish successful dog training. Our suggestions are only one way and we have no intention of encouraging you to reject other ideas. In fact, we hope these articles will stimulate some discussion of a variety of training methods.

Hunters in Germany who lease hunting land from a farmer—known as a *Revier*—are responsible for all damage done to the land, crops and farm animals. This includes any loss to predators, most particularly fox. Therefore, it is very important that their dogs be willing and able to handle such predators. To ensure this, JGHV includes fox work in the testing of utility dogs.

Fox may be taken in a number of ways. Often the hunter will shoot the fox from his/her stand and then send the dog to retrieve it. Alternatively, the dogs can be used to drive the fox out of woods to the hunters. And of course there are some occasions when the dog may dispatch the fox itself. In all cases the dog is expected to retrieve the fox to the hunter.

An interesting aside... The importance of having a dog that is *spurlaut*—loud on scent—is evident when driving game with the dogs. For example, in some areas there are fishing ponds that are drained in the fall and fox love to live in the banks. In this case the hunters will send the dogs in to roust the fox out. It will be difficult for the hunters to get a safe shot unless the dog is loud and indicates its location in relation to the fox coming over the bank of the pond. In general, the Germans do not put bells on their dogs when hunting as we often do in North America.

ORIENTATION TO THE FOX

In the VGP a dog must be able to retrieve a fox of at least 3.5 kg (almost 8 lbs), in one case carrying the fox over a substantial barrier and in the other case carrying it a distance of at least 300 m. Two things make these retrieves challenging: the weight and length of the animal, and the reluctance of some dogs to carry a dead animal of their own species. Clearly some preliminary work needs to be done before you can begin serious training for the subjects.

PRELIMINARY TRAINING: Once your dog is approaching a mature size you can introduce it to a fox training program with a commercial or homemade fox dummy. The dog needs to learn how to pick up such a long animal and carry it without tripping over the tail. And it needs to develop the neck muscles to manage the weight of the fox over the obstacle or the long distance. The fox dummy mimics the size and shape of a fox and can be gradually made heavier as the dog develops its strength.

There are some nice commercial fox dummies available. Gary got the one in the photo below years ago from Lynda Krull's on-line company Hunters House. [Lynda is owner of DD Zwinger vom tapferen Herzen.] It is the perfect design. We contacted Lynda to see if they are still available. She says that she plans to re-launch Hunters House this coming spring and will carry the fox training dummy, case skinned foxes for training, leather blood tracking collars and leads, and "lots more stuff". She will post a link on her kennel website www.tapferenherzen.com when the company is up and running again, or you can contact her at lynda@krullodge.com

FOX DUMMY: Our fox dummy from Hunters House (see photo) came with a ruff of fox fur in the middle where the dog is to pick it up, but after loaning it out many times this went missing. Note the pocket on either side where additional weight can be added. We made up one pound bags of bird shot for ballast, adding another bag as necessary.

A German website that offers similar training devices is www.romneys.de. Click on the British flag and you will get the English version of the site. Then click on [Dogtraining > Dummies > Page 3](#) to see the fox dummy. Personally we like Lynda's design a bit better.

Meanwhile you can also make up a fox dummy of your own. We did this using a pant leg from a pair of jeans. We wrapped a carrying area in the middle of the leg with duct tape, and then filled either end with one-inch rock and tied them off. The amount of rock can be increased as the dog develops strength. This is not anywhere near as nice as the commercial dummies, but it does get the job done.

We have seen a different sort of homemade dummy that is used just for strengthening the neck muscles of the dog. This consists of a wooden dumbbell with a shaft long enough to add weights on either end.

We are assuming that you will have your dog fully force-fetch trained before beginning the fox work. If not, go back and do that first. Then proceed. Once you have a fox dummy of some sort, you can begin your weight training program. The first step is teaching the dog to pick up the dummy in the middle with the weight falling to either side. The dog will need to learn to balance the weight and keep its head up so the "head and tail" don't drag along the ground. Take the dog for a short walk and let it carry the dummy. Very gradually increase the weight in the dummy and the distance the dog must carry it. As with many aspects of training, you will want to over-train by having the dog carry an extra pound or two and go another 50 m.

Always make sure that the dog never puts the dummy down until you tell it to deliver to you. And be sure to take the opportunity to reinforce a correct delivery. These previous skills need to be maintained throughout the new training exercises.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE FOX: Ideally you will have had the opportunity to introduce your DD to fox early in its life; however, that is not the case for many of us. The most important thing – and one that is often overlooked – is to be sure to use a nice clean fresh fox, especially for the initial introduction.

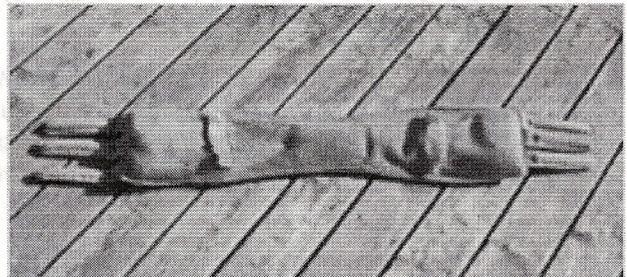
There are some dogs that love the fox right from the very first introduction; but as mentioned before, many dogs are not keen to pick up and carry a fox. To determine if your dog is one that likes the fox simply put a clean, fresh fox out on the grass, bring the dog up and say nothing. Just stand back and observe. The ones that really like the fox will sniff at it, root at it with their nose and will not want to leave it. Most times these dogs will continue and pick up the fox and you can then encourage the proper retrieve.

Dogs that would rather not pick up the fox will usually sniff it, look a little puzzled and then walk away. Don't worry; you will just need to introduce the fox with the more gradual process mentioned below using lots of positive reinforcement.

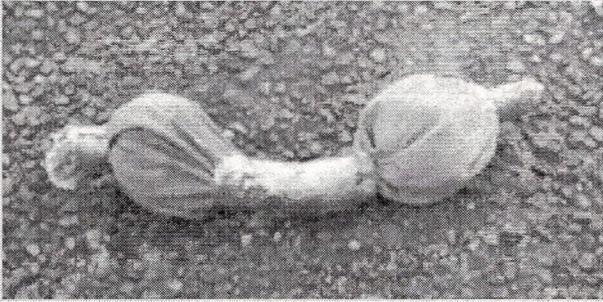
You can begin the introduction by putting commercial synthetic fox scent or fox urine on a regular canvas dummy and working the dog with the dummy as you normally would. Once that is going smoothly, introduce a fox skin, if you can get one, wrapped around a dummy. Again, work your dog on retrieving exercises as you normally would.

And finally, once the dog is accustomed to picking up and carrying the fox training dummy at full weight and distance, you can introduce the fox itself. Proceed carefully at this point. Let the dog nose and sniff the fox for a while. Give lots of praise for this. Hold up the fox horizontally and command the dog to Fetch and Hold the fox. Give lots more praise. You may need to hold the fox in the dog's mouth at first, just getting the dog to hold and then release the fox. During this process keep reprimands at a minimum. You want the dog to have a positive experience with the fox. This is a time to keep the training sessions short and to end on a positive note.

As the dog becomes willing to hold the fox you can proceed to having it carry the fox at your side for a short distance. Then you can move to sending the dog to fetch the fox from a short distance and bring it to you. Gradually increase the distance. As we mentioned with the fox dummy, always make sure that the dog never puts the fox down until you tell it to



deliver to you and that it makes a correct delivery.



Fox dummy made from jeans pant leg.

ALTERNATIVE GAME: In 2006 JGHV issued a Matrix of Accommodation that in part gave handlers in North America the option of using a raccoon or coyote of equivalent weight in cases where fox were not available. The expectation is that you will use a fox if you possibly can.

One thing to keep in mind when choosing which game to train with and use is that a raccoon is more compact and presents a different kind of challenge for a dog to carry. So if you train with a raccoon you want to be sure that you can test with the raccoon. That will be up to you in a VGP, but might present a problem in a Btr.

When there is more than one entry in a Btr the judges put out all of the game at one time. They are spaced according to the regulations, but that does not mean that your dog might not go off and find the game provided for one of the other dogs. If that game is a fox, your dog will be expected to retrieve that fox even though you may not have trained with it.

Also, it is important that the game meets the minimum weight requirement specified in the test regulations. Judges will inspect and weigh the game before accepting it in the test. Be sure that your game, whatever species it is, meets the required 3.5 kg. If it does not, you will have to find an alternative piece of game or not run the test. Because rabies is carried in the brain, the head of the fox or raccoon may be removed. If the head is removed, the fur should be carefully sewn together. The headless game must still weigh the full 3.5 kg.

TEST SUBJECTS FOR FOX WORK

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

GENERAL NOTES: The dog must receive a predicate of at least "sufficient" in either the fox drag or the retrieve of the fox over an obstacle in order to pass the test.

Foxes must weigh at least 3.5 kg (almost 8 lbs) and must be in a natural state with complete tail. Removal of the head is permissible.

The manner of retrieve performance of the dog during these subjects—how the dog picks up, carries and delivers the game—is assigned a separate score from the obstacle or drag work.

RETRIEVING OF FOX OVER OBSTACLE [*Bringen von Fuchs über Hindernis*]: The retrieve of a fox over an obstacle is tested in the forest and, if possible, the obstacle should be natural, or at least blend into the surrounding. The obstacle can be a ditch or some kind of a hurdle. The ditch must be at least 80 cm deep and 1m wide and must have steep walls. The hurdle must be 70-80 cm high and built in such a way that the dog cannot become entangled in it with its legs. The dog should not be able to wade through or go around the obstacle.

The handler must leave his dog at least 5 m away from the obstacle. After placing the fox behind the obstacle, the handler returns to the dog and releases it from this position. After starting the dog the handler must not move closer to the obstacle.



The dog should clear the obstacle after one command, pick up the fox in a tight grip without any delay and retrieve it over the obstacle to its handler. If the dog drops the fox while jumping over the obstacle but immediately picks it up again, it is not considered to be a fault as long as the handler did not interfere. The handler can start his dog a maximum of three times in this subject.

CONSTRUCTING THE OBSTACLE: We have never seen a ditch used as the obstacle at a North American VGP; it has always been a hurdle, better known as the "fox box". As you see in the photo the fox box is typically a four-sided enclosure with the back three sides constructed higher than the front. The interior needs to be big enough that the dog can jump in, turn around, pick up the game and have room to run a couple of steps to jump back out, which suggests that it might be longer than it is wide. The requirements say only that it must be 70-80 cm high (32 inches) and such that the dog cannot go around it. It could be a square, a rectangle or a triangle as long as there is room for the dog to work.



During training we place boughs around the fox box to make it appear more natural. The height at the front can be made higher or lower by the number of boards placed in the slot.

The front of the fox box should be constructed such that you can add height as the training progresses. In the beginning you will send the dog over a low hurdle, maybe a foot high. Gradually increase the height until it is 36-40 inches – over-training, again. You will want to be able to easily make the front lower or higher as you will change the height a number of times in training.

TRAINING WITH THE OBSTACLE: You should have your dog easily carrying the fully weighted fox dummy before proceeding with the obstacle training. As mentioned above you will want to start this work with a low hurdle of about 12-18 inches. You can begin with putting a regular canvas dummy in the box and then sending the dog from 5 m away to retrieve it. Make sure that the dog watches you put the dummy in the box. It may take a bit of encouraging direction to have the dog enter the box the first few times, but after that you will probably quickly work up to the maximum height with the dummy.

Now lower the hurdle again and begin training with the fox dummy at less than full weight. This will get the dog used to handling the length of the fox over the hurdle. Gradually increase the hurdle to full height; then gradually increase the dummy to full weight.

When the dog can retrieve the full-weight fox dummy over the full-height hurdle reliably, you are ready to begin work with the fox itself, starting with the low hurdle and gradually moving up.

Remember to keep this work as positive as possible while ensuring that the dog follows your command to Fetch the fox and makes a correct delivery. Don't move to the next step until the dog has reliably performed at least three times at the previous step. And remember to keep the sessions short so the dog does not burn out on the exercise. Once the dog is fully trained, practice the finished exercise about once a week. If the dog performs it correctly the first time, leave it at that.

On the day of the test you will be allowed to introduce your dog to the obstacle there before testing your dog. Be sure to take advantage of this, giving your dog a few practice retrieves in the new situation.

FURRED GAME DRAGS [Haarwildschleppen]: *The work on the furred game drag is tested with fox and hare/rabbit. It is at the discretion of the club to allow the handler to bring suitable furred game. [Group Canada requires that the handler bring his own fox.]. The furred game used for drags should be freshly shot [if possible]. Above all, the game should be clean and must not be unsightly.*

Furred game drags belong to the forest work and must be laid in the forest. However, it is permissible to locate the starting point and the segment up to the first angle in open terrain (meadows, fields, young tree plantations without brush – but not over freshly plowed fields).

A Judge and/or Apprentice Judge lay the drag. The drag is laid immediately before each dog is tested. The dog must not see the laying of the drag. While the drags should be as similar as possible for each dog, the drags must not be laid repeatedly in the same area during one day. The distance between the individual drags must be at least 80 m throughout.

The starting point is marked with white belly hair and a dragger (a Judge or Apprentice Judge) then drags the game on a line for at least 300 m, including two obtuse angles.

The dragger will carry a second piece of game, unless the handler has requested that only one piece of game be used. The dragger will lay the fresh piece of game that was carried at the end of the drag. (Note: The handler may ask for the dragged piece of game to be laid there instead.)

The game should not be laid in a depression or behind a tree. After the game has been placed at the end of the drag, the dragger must continue walking in the direction of the dragging (without dragging an animal) and hide such that the dog cannot see him from where the game was placed. If two pieces of game were requested the dragger must place the second piece of game in front of him at the hiding spot. In either case the drag line must be removed from the dragged animal before the dog is allowed to work. The judge at the end of the drag must not prevent the dog from retrieving the dragged game if the dog comes to him and picks it up. He must not leave the cover until the judges remaining at the starting point of the drag have given a signal or he can see that the test is completed.

The judges will show the handler the marked starting point. The dog can work the first 20 m of the drag on leash, then the handler must release the dog and must not follow any further. Every influence after the first start is considered to be a restart and lowers the predicate. Because the VGP is evaluating a finished gun dog, distractions do not warrant a replacement drag. On the fox drag the dog can be started for a total of three times even if he does not retrieve the fox he has found. The finding of one piece of game and the retrieving of the other piece of game on drags is not considered to be a fault.

The scoring of the work on the drags is based on whether and how the dog keeps connection with the scent, if he wants to find and retrieve, and if he carries the game to his handler. The manner of retrieve—how the dog picks up, carries and delivers the game—is scored separately. If the dog fails on the drag, regardless of whether he arrived at the game or not, he shall receive the predicate “insufficient” for the fox drag or the rabbit drag.

TRAINING FOR THE DRAGS: There are two fur drags in the VGP: one hare/rabbit and one fox. The only difference between them is the type of game, and they are both conducted exactly the way the hare/rabbit drag was conducted in the HZP. So you obviously have a head-start on this subject. You simply need to work with your dog to be willing to find and retrieve the fox to you from a distance of 300 m.

Once you have accustomed your dog to retrieving the fox you can begin laying drags for it, beginning with short distances and proceeding to the full 300 m plus a bit more for good measure. However, don't rush to this before you are confident with your dog retrieving the fox. You want to be sure that the dog is reliable before letting it out of your sight on a long drag.

Once the dog is working out of your sight, particularly with the fox drag, you will want to have someone at the end of the drag who can recognize if the dog is reluctant to pick up the fox and will reinforce the fetch command if it seems to be refusing to pick it up. That is unlikely to happen but if it does, and if it happens more than once, you need to be consulting with your breeder or another experienced trainer for advice on how to proceed.

Remember that it is always a good idea to do the drags in different locations and with different people at the end of the drag so the dog becomes accustomed to those variations. Eventually you will also want several strangers at your end of the drag, which will be the case at the test.

RETRIEVING [Bringen]: *A dog must independently retrieve [that is, without any handler influence if it fails to comply with the required task] any small game animal that was captured live, freshly shot, placed or found at the end of the drag, or a duck during water work. If the dog fails to make the retrieve independently it will be excluded from the test.*

Retrieving is the manner of picking up, carrying and delivering any kind of game at the test on the drags, during free searching or retrieving and during actual hunting at the test.

The correct picking up and carrying is revealed in the dog's ability to adjust its grip to the type and weight of the game. It is considered to be incorrect if the grasp, hold, and carrying is either too strong or too weak.

The correct delivery is demonstrated if the dog comes with the game straight to the handler, sits down next to him either without a command or with just one quiet command, and keeps the game calmly in his mouth until the handler has grasped it without haste and takes it from the dog with the appropriate command.

Dogs that bury game [Totengräber] or eat game [Anschneider] must be excluded from continuation of the test. Hard mouth [Knautschen] is considered a fault. Dogs that are hard mouthed or pluck heavily will be excluded from further testing.

TRAINING FOR THE RETRIEVE: Notice the MUST in the regulations for Retrieving. If the dog comes into contact with any dead or wounded game during the test it MUST retrieve it to its handler. If the dog fails any one of the retrieves it will fail the test. At a minimum the dog will be expected to retrieve the fox over the obstacle, the fox on the drag track, the rabbit on the drag track, at least three duck retrieves (gunshot soundness, blind retrieve and search behind the duck) and the retrieve of any feathered game. If the dog happens to come into contact with any other dead or wounded game it must also retrieve that game.

The VGP regulations specify an INDEPENDENT retrieve, the same as the HZP regulations. The handler in the VGP is allowed to help the dog find the game through hand or voice signals, but once the dog has come into contact with the game the handler can do or say nothing more to influence the dog to complete the task if the dog is misbehaving. The dog must independently bring the game in and deliver it. The handler can, however, praise the dog when it is performing correctly and make movements to insure that the dog knows where handler is at.

As mentioned earlier, the retrieves are scored separately from the subjects that led to the retrieve. For example, there is one score for the rabbit drag and another score for the rabbit retrieve. The same applies for each of the fox subjects. In the case of the water work, all of the retrieves are scored separately and then averaged in to one Retrieving of Duck score. Likewise, if there happens to be more than one retrieve of feathered game, these retrieves are scored separately and then averaged into one Retrieve of Feathered Game score.

You've already prepared your dog for the HZP retrieves. The VGP is no different. So if your dog performed well at the HZP you simply need to reinforce that good performance during your VGP training. If your dog did not get a good Manner of Retrieve score in the HZP, you need to determine why and work to correct the problem. The issues usually have to do with immediately picking up the game, coming directly in to the handler, sitting, holding the game and willingly giving up the game on command. You may need to backtrack and refresh your force-fetch training.

Steve Kohlmann on the Group Canada website – Members > Resources > Training > Thoughts, Tips and Theories on Training and Hunting the Versatile Gun Dog. *The Trained Retrieve – a.k.a. Force Fetch* by Forrest Moore can be found there under HZP Training. Also take a look at the Dobbs Training Videos and the NAVHDA book *The Training and Care of the Versatile Hunting Dog* – Members > Resources > Books and Videos.

Ideally you will have laid the groundwork for a good manner of retrieve early in your work with the young dog. "Ideally..." Let's stop here for a minute. We want those of you with your first young DD pup to take notice every time we say "ideally you will have..." This is a clue to work you can do with your pup now to save yourself problems during later training for hunting or the tests. Your VGP training may be a couple of years off, but the foundation for it is laid now. You want your young dog growing up with the belief that it should come when called, sit in front of you, give up an object when told to, etc. Don't let bad habits develop through such things as tug of war or keep away games that will come back to haunt you later.

Gary noticed when he was at the fall tests in Germany a few years ago that every handler had a delivery routine that they followed religiously. As the dog was coming in with the game the handler took two steps back. When the dog was almost to the handler, the handler would take a step forward and raise one finger in front of the dog. At that point the dog sat and the handler put his/her hand down to take the game. [Gary was told that when training Sit the trainer always paired the raised finger with the command Sit. Later when learning to retrieve the dog knows that the raised finger means Sit.] All of the dogs came directly in to the handler and sat in front to deliver. There was none of this fancy going around behind the handler and sitting in a particular position to his/her side. Keep it simple! The critical factor here is that the game is delivered, not that it is done "with style". That attempt at style leaves too many opportunities for the dog to get off-track and misbehave.

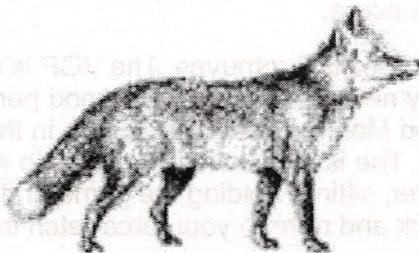
The dog should hold the game until you tell it to release it. That is how you should train. But if you have any doubt whatsoever whether your dog will hold the game at the test, get your hand down there and give the release command. Don't take any chances by giving the dog time to drop the game.

As you proceed with your training remember to fade out extra commands and encouragements before test day. The dog needs to be able to carrying out the task with the few commands that are allowed by the regulations.

It is our understanding that dead game burying, dead game eating and hard mouth are considered genetically-related problems. If any of these behaviors happen with your dog, immediately contact your breeder to consult about the problem.

BTR AS A STEP TOWARD VGP FOX WORK

The Btr—*Bringtreueprüfung*—is a test of retrieving reliability where the dog is sent to find and retrieve a fox that has been placed at least 100 m into the forest at least two hours earlier. We have been told that it is common in Germany for handlers to run their dog in a Btr after its HZP but before its VGP – a kind of preparatory step for the VGP fox work. This has not been a common practice in North America, but certainly is possible. You simply need to let the Director of Testing know that you are interested in having a Btr offered during the next testing cycle.



MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

There will be a late fee of \$25 after January 1, 2011.