

VGP 101

Part 5: The Forest Searches

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The open-field type of search of the VJP and HZP is repeated in the VGP. In addition, the VGP includes a heavy cover search – *Buschieren* – that evaluates how the dog works when hunting in the forest or other heavy cover for gamebirds such as grouse or woodcock. In these conditions the dog is expected to work closer, ideally not going out of sight of the handler.

The second type of forest search – the *Stöbern* – reflects the requirements of the drive hunts common in Germany. Our German/English dictionary translates *stöbern* as “to rummage”, which wrinkled our brows a bit until we learned that in hunting terms it is translated as “independent search”. During this search the dog is sent into a wooded area and expected to cover the area completely, driving out any game in the process. With this in mind, the idea of rummaging makes sense.

Our understanding is that in Germany the *stöbern* is used primarily during drive hunts for wild boar, deer and fox. Hunters will be stationed around the perimeter of a wooded area or along a road within the woods. Then the dog will be sent into the woods. The dog should search, locate game scent, follow the track and push the game to the line where the hunters have been placed. As soon as the game has passed the line of shooters the dog should turn back into the woods to continue its search; the dog should never continue past that line.

In some cases—for example during a boar hunt—there may be up to 30 rifles around the woods, spaced up to 100 meters apart. In this case a number of dogs will be worked at the same time. Some of the dogs are specialists, called “Finders”. When they locate game they start barking so the other dogs come to assist and together they push the game out.

A single hunter may be positioned at a certain place where the boar are known to try to escape and may sit there for up to three hours watching for boar. Some hunters may also be stationed on tree stands.

As mentioned in the article on fox work, the dog can be used in this same way to drive fox out of the reeds around a drained wetland area where they like to make their dens. In either case it is important that the dog be spurlaut (scent loud) so that the hunters will know where the dogs are working. The hunters generally can tell what the dog is driving out by how it is baying; they have a somewhat different pitch and pattern for different game.

A dog learns not to cross the line of hunters through experience. The dogs used in this kind of hunting should be mature, have absolute obedience and be trained with Down. Each hunter will have a whistle so when the dog is passing the line they can stop it by whistling or calling. With experience the dog learns how it should work in this situation. Obviously the dog must respond to commands from someone other than its master. [Note: this particular aspect of a drive hunt is not part of the VGP.]

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

DENSE COVER SEARCH [*Buschieren*] – *The Dense Cover Search must be tested in young stands of forests, in clear cuts or brushy areas. A new area should be available for each dog, and the dog must have the opportunity to thoroughly demonstrate the dense cover search as commonly practiced during hunting.*

The handler must fire at least one shot from a shotgun during the search when ordered by the judges. The dog should search under the gun and should handle the dense cover calmly and methodically, so that the handler can follow him easily.

The judges will particularly assess the contact between the handler and his dog. If there is an opportunity to evaluate pointing, steadiness to wing or shot and retrieving during the dense cover search, they will also be evaluated

BUSCHIEREN TRAINING: Under these conditions the dog is expected to work close and stay in contact with the handler. The judges will ask the handler to fire a shot during the search, at which time the dog is expected to maintain its contact with the handler.

Training for this subject consists primarily of exposing your dog to this kind of close cover and then insisting that the dog work close. It is a good idea to start the exercise with the same routine each and every time. Ken likes to put a specific collar on the dog—say a wide reflective collar—or a bell so that the dog keys off this as a signal to stay close.

Some dogs will automatically shorten their search in the heavy cover, but for others this may require some training. Begin out in the open with the dog on a check cord and practice having the dog come around when you blow the whistle. When the dog is reliably turning to the whistle, move into the woods. Here you will want a command such as Stay Close, Hunt Close—whatever you prefer. Walk the dog in the dense cover and insist that it stay close. If the dog gets out too far, use the command and change direction. If the dog still persists in working out too far, you can use retrieving bumpers in combination with the Hunt Close command. Simply give the command and toss a bumper not too far in front of you so that the dog sees it the first few times. This will get the dog in the habit of looking for you in dense cover and program it to get in close when it hears the command. An alternative to this is to use the command and instead of tossing a bumper, fly a bird from your vest. This will really get the dog focused to stay with you in the cover. These commands will need to be faded out over time as the dog learns to hunt closer to you in these conditions.

Steadiness to shot is required during this subject. The judges will instruct you to a fire shot. The dog does not actually need to stop at the shot, but should not break from its search to locate or chase game. The command Halt can be used to restrain a dog that runs off after the shot. This command should be faded out as the dog learns from experience what is expected of it.

INDEPENDENT SEARCH [Stöbern] – *For the independent search, thickets and woodlots containing sufficient numbers of game must be chosen to give the dog the opportunity to show realistic independent search work behind game. Alternatively, the independent search can be tested in corn fields (> 1 ha; [2.5 acres]) or dried up cattail marshes (> 1 ha; [2.5 acres]). Every dog should have a new area to search if at all possible.*

The judges will distribute themselves throughout the area so that they can evaluate how the dog works. They are looking for a thorough, methodical search, and they will note if the dog is loud on any game it pushes out.

The handler can either start the dog from his assigned position, or command the dog to lie down, walk off towards his assigned position and then command the dog by hand or voice signal from a distance to independently search the cover. Each dog should have no more than 10 minutes to search.

If the dog gives tongue while working game, it will be marked as loud [laut] on the score sheet. If a dog remains silent behind visible game, it must be marked as silent [stumm]. A dog that is silent behind game cannot receive more than the predicate “good” in the subject Independent Search. If neither loud nor silent behavior can be evaluated due to lack of game, the dog will be marked “questionable” [fraglich]. If the dog demonstrates loud hunting on the scent of fox or hare during the search, it is marked as loud on track [spurlaut].

Brief pointing during the independent search does not lower the predicate, unless the dog points for 5 minutes or more. Likewise, the score is not lowered if the dog captures game during the independent search and retrieves it to its handler. In that case the retrieve must be evaluated. The same applies to shot game that the dog retrieves.

The chasing of healthy [unshot] game far out of bounds into other areas and a failure to come back after an appropriate time – even after a whistle or voice signal by the handler – must be scored as faulty. Disobedient chasers that continue hunting and return only after long periods of time do not satisfy the expectations for a utility dog and will be excluded from further testing.

STÖBERN TRAINING: Remember during your independent search training—in both the forest and water—that the dog should find something to retrieve every time you send it out. You want it to believe that if it keeps searching it will find something, since at the test the dog is expected to keep searching until you call it in.

First, decide on the command you want to use for the stöbern. This is a search, not a track or a typical retrieve. We like to use something unique to this exercise. Gary uses Find, but it can be anything you like as long as you use it consistently so the dog associates it with this exercise. It is a good idea to line the dog up at the beginning of the exercise as if sending for a retrieve. This is something that the dog already knows and makes it less confusing.

To begin you might want to practice a few lining drills, especially with different wind directions. Let the dog watch you walk out and drop a line of three dummies. Walk back, set the dog up and send it. This way the dog is clued into the drill.

Now place three dummies just inside the woods about 30 m apart. We like the dog to see this preparation the first few times. Then send the dog with your chosen command. When the dog brings in the first dummy (it doesn't matter which one it finds first) it should deliver the dummy appropriately. Praise the dog and then set up again to send it for another dummy. Repeat this until all three dummies have been brought in and delivered. Make the first few sessions easy. As soon as the dog begins leaving your side without hesitation, place the dummies without the dog watching.

If the dog comes back to you without a dummy, at first ignore the dog and give it a chance to restart itself. If it does not do that, send the dog again. Never let it stop the exercise without having retrieved the dummy, even if you have to take the dog in closer to the dummy in order to find it. If that happens, once the dog finds the dummy return to your starting point to take the dummy from the dog. If the dog is confused and starts to shut down, end on a positive note by walking it right to a dummy and then the next time shorten the distance so that it is easier for the dog.

Once the dog has learned the game and retrieves all three dummies consistently, place the dummies further into the woods, continuing to send the dog from the edge. It is a good idea to vary the distance from the cover that you send the dog. Sometimes it is easier to build distance by sending the dog from further back from the edge of the cover. This way the dog gets used to going out farther and is still successful fairly easily.

Gradually place the dummies further in and spread them out wider. Ultimately you want the dog searching the whole area (about three acres) looking for a dummy. After the first orientation to the exercise you will want to place the dummies earlier in the day so that the dog is not just tracking your scent. Some dogs will do anything for a dummy while others are not too keen on them; to really fire up the search you can try dead game instead of dummies. Do not over-do this training; you want the dog fired up and eager to go.

ALWAYS have something for the dog to find. Test day should be the first time that the dog does not find something to retrieve.

Once the dog knows the drill, vary the location where you conduct it. On a few occasions near the end of training enlist two friends who will position themselves in the far corners of the woods as the judges will do. When the dog comes near them they should give a brief shout to let you know they have seen the dog. This is what will happen on test day and you do not want the dog to be distracted by it.

If your dog should happen to push out game at the test and begin to chase, you can call it back after a short while. You need to be able to control the dog this way because more than a brief chase will cause the dog to be eliminated from the test. If this has been a problem for you, you should consult others with regard to managing this behavior. This is another instance where the Halt command can be very useful. If your dog has the opportunity to retrieve game, it will be expected to deliver it in the manner of any other retrieve and this will be evaluated and factored into the overall retrieving score. Stöbern training is a great opportunity to practice your retrieves.