

A German Blood Tracking Test

By Gary and Sandy Hodson

We've run three dogs in the VGP and each time the most challenging part of the test for us was the blood track. So it was with great interest that we attended the Holstein Verbandsschweissprüfung (Association Blood Tracking Test) while we were in Germany this fall. As mentioned in our last article, we were very fortunate to have a first-hand view of the event, first participating in the laying of the tracks and then having a front row seat during the running of the test. We are very grateful to the Test Coordinators Wolf Schmidt-Körby and Dirk Hinz for this opportunity.

The Holstein Verbandsschweissprüfung is an annual event that includes both the traditional Blood Tracking Test (VSwP) and the more recently devised Trackshoe Test (Verbandsfährten Schuhprüfung – VFSP). Each of these tests can be run in both the 20-hour and the 40-hour version; that is, the track has been down for either 20 hours or 40 hours before the dog and handler attempt to follow it.

The VSwP is similar to the VGP blood track except that it is done over a longer distance (1,000 m as opposed to 400 m), the track has been aged longer (20 hours or 40 hours as opposed to 2-5 hours), and the same amount of blood (250 ml) is used despite the difference in distance. The distinguishing feature of the VFSP is that only 100 ml of blood is used over 1,000 m, with much of the track being laid by fresh deer hooves that have been attached to the feet of the person laying the track—hence the name “Trackshoe Test”.

The test was to be conducted on Sunday, so the 40-hour tracks were laid on Friday and the 20-hour tracks were laid on Saturday. The tracks were laid by the two Test Coordinators, who were also Judges, and the *Revierführer*, that is, a person who is responsible for the hunting in the area and is thus quite familiar with the lay of the land. These men all had a great deal of local knowledge, but nonetheless they used detailed maps from the forester responsible for the area to make an annotated map of the actual track as it was laid.

According to the test regulations, the VSwP and VFSP are to be conducted in a large forest with good populations of big game to ensure that the difficulties of diversion tracks are available for every dog. The beginning of the track may lead up to 100 m across an open field, meadow, etc., before entering the forest. Once in the forest it may lead through forest openings, clear cuts and thickets, all with varying vegetation cover. The direction should be slightly variable with three almost right angles inserted.

As we mentioned last time, the German forests are much tidier and more open than what we are accustomed to here in Canada. They have full-time foresters assigned to the various areas who see that the forest is properly managed. In Staatsforst Hasselbusch we saw evidence of selective cutting and replanting with an alternative species, with most of the slash having been cleared away. In one particular area every tree was numbered, we assumed as a part of a study being done.

Once the start of the track and the general direction it will follow was worked out, the next step was to attach a piece of paper to a tree indicating the date and time of day the track was laid. Some red and white streamers were also attached so that the exact location could be easily found again.

Next to the tree with the information about the laying of the track fresh branches were positioned to indicate where the shooter stood, the direction the shot was fired, and where the animal was hit. At that point some blood and hair were placed. This was the actual starting point for the track.

The blood track for the VSwP can be laid using either the dabbing method or the drip method; however, all tracks in a particular test must be made by the same method. In this case a dabbing method was used, which involved a wooden pole with a small piece of sponge attached being dipped in a bucket of blood. The sponge was wiped on the edge of the bucket and then touched on the ground every second step,

lightly at first and then more firmly as there was less blood on the sponge. As necessary the sponge was dipped again in the bucket. The amount of blood in the bucket had been carefully measured and had to extend to the end of the track, so care was taken to be sure it was not used too liberally.

The Revierführer led the way, navigating through the woods and marking the map with notable landmarks so that the judging team would later be able to identify whether the dog was on or off the track.

Landmarks might have been tree stumps, shooting stands, markings made on trees by the forester, a bird house attached to a tree, etc. Periodically the Revierführer would place additional markers that would be detected only by the judges—a scuff mark, a broken branch hung from a tree or leaned against a tree, a rock placed on a stump, a piece of log turned over or laid parallel to the track. Believe me, these markers were subtle and it was difficult for us to notice them during the test even though we had been there when they were made. A handler concentrating on his dog would never have noticed them.

The people involved in laying the track walked in a line and the person dabbing the blood was always the last in the line. Over the 1,000 m of the track there must be two wound beds; that is, a spot where the soil is compacted, extra blood is dabbed and bits of hair and lung or heart are placed. There must also be four to six Verweiserpunkte, or reference points, where small bits of lung or heart are placed and covered with a leaf, fern or moss so that birds will not find and remove them. When the dog finds these organ bits the handler will let it eat them as a reward, but they also confirm to the handler that the dog is indeed on the track.

At the end of the track the track-layers posted a sign on the back of a tree similar to the notice put at the beginning of track, indicating the day and finish time that the track was laid. Red and white streamers were attached to that tree so that it could easily be located on the day of the test for placing the deer. We then walked out of the woods on a path away from the track, with the dabber taking great care not to lose any blood after the end of the track.

The method for laying the VFSP track is quite different. The person laying the track wears a specially designed pair of boots to which fresh deer hooves are attached. Only 100 ml of blood is used in this test and a significant portion of that is dripped in the first 100 m of the track. The person wearing the boots walks in the dripped blood at the beginning of the track and then proceeds down the track. Two wound beds are made over the 1,000 m of the track, with the hooves attached to the trackshoe again being stepped into the blood before continuing down the track. No other blood is dropped in-between these wound beds with the exception of a few drops at each Verweiserpunkt of lung or heart. There were five or six of these reference points just like for the VSWP.

The deer hooves and the blood used for both tests were fresh. The deer had been shot on Thursday night, the day before the 40-hour tracks were laid. After three 1 km tracks were laid, the deer hooves on the track shoes were changed to fresh ones for the remaining tracks.

Seven 1,000 m tracks (six entries and one extra) had to be laid on same day for the 20-hour VFSP. You better believe that Dirk Hinz, Renata Bösang, and Gary were a tired crew at the end of the afternoon and really appreciated the *Kaffee* and *Kuchen* Dirk's wife Sylvia had waiting for us.

The day of the test was crisp as we gathered just after dawn at the Community Hall in Mönkloh. The procedure was much the same as it had been for the HZP and VGP we reported on last issue. After reporting in with the Test Coordinator the handlers had a coffee while the judges had a conference as required by the test regulations “to ensure an orderly execution of the test and uniform judging criteria.” The running order and judging group to which each dog was assigned was determined by a draw.

The test began as usual with the blowing of the horns and introductory comments by Test Coordinators Dirk Hinz and Wolf Schmidt-Körby. It was 8:30 on a Sunday morning on a residential street in this small village, but no one seemed to object to the commotion—perhaps the local people are as moved as we are when we hear the hunting horns sound. Then we broke into our groups—Gary with one and Sandy with the other—and headed for the forest.

The first task at the forest was for the judges to place the deer at the end of the first track. Meanwhile the handlers got to know each other as they began a day of camaraderie. There is a lot of standing around waiting at a blood tracking test because there is nothing to see of the work being done and a 1,000 m track can take quite a while. These folks seemed quite familiar with the situation and had come prepared with hot drinks and snacks to see them through.

As with all JGHV tests this one was open to dogs from any of the JGHV-affiliated breeds that met the entry requirements. In this case there was a Labrador Retriever, a Large Münsterländer, a Rh-Teckel (wirehaired Dachshund), two German Wachtelhund, two Small Münsterländers, an English Springer Spaniel, and a Deutsch Bracke. The variety of breeds involved in these two tests certainly challenged our preconceived ideas about what it takes to do the job. Amazingly—to our minds—the English Springer Spaniel did exceptionally well. We have not seen dogs from this breed in our area that are calm enough to do a task requiring such concentration as blood tracking does.

The forests we were in were being well used by the local population. Both on the day we laid the tracks and on test day we saw quite a few people either exercising or searching for mushrooms. In every case when they were informed that a dog test was being conducted in the area, these people immediately volunteered to move away in the opposite direction. We were interested to learn that by law dogs are not allowed off lead or off the main paths in the state forests.

Once the deer had been placed the judges returned and called for the first dog/handler team. The judges showed the handler the position of the shooter and where the game had stood when it received the bullet. The handler placed the dog down, attached the tracking collar and 6 m lead, and began the track. From this point on the dog and handler were entirely on their own to reach the carcass of the deer.

The three judges and the local guide are to follow the dog and handler regardless of whether they are on or off the track. If any of them were to lag behind, it might alert the handler to the fact that they were off the track. Likewise care had to be taken so that any gestures or conversation would not give the handler feedback. The judges inform the handler if the dog leaves the track for more than 80-100 m without the handler recognizing it, but the handler must find his/her own way back to the track. If this happens more than twice they have failed the test.

It was fascinating to watch Annemarie B.-Kolwe work with her almost four-year-old Rauhaarteckel Xeno vom Roggenhof on one of the 40-hour VSwP tracks. Annemarie seemed to read her dog quite well and knew when it was off the track. She alternated calm encouragement with firm, but never harsh, instruction to track. Periodically when she seemed to think the dog was off track she would stop him, talk calmly to him, and sometimes give him some water. I could tell that she was also calming herself down. The value of the Verweiserpunkt—occasional bits of lung and heart—was evident when the dog found them and confirmed that they were on the track. I saw Annemarie throw a marker down a couple of other times when she saw blood as well. These reference points were important as there was no feedback from the judges as to whether they were on or off the track. On two occasions the dog was off the track and Annemarie let him search in circles until he located the track again. Finally they reached the end of the track and the carcass of the deer. There were big smiles of relief all around. 1,000 meters is a long way when you are concentrating so hard!

But that was not the end of it. The judges stepped off to the side to discuss what they had seen and determine their evaluation of the dog and handler's performance. They came back with an announcement of a Prize II [passed/good] performance. Oak leaves were placed on Annemarie's hat and the collar of the dog, and the horn blower sounded the signal as Annemarie hugged her little Rauhaarteckel. At that point the senior judge stepped forward and gave rather detailed feedback on the performance of the dog and handler. Unfortunately for me it was in German and I did not get the details.

What the judges were looking for in the performance of this dog and handler were the teamwork between them and the dog's manner of work. They evaluate willingness to track; calmness, surety and independence; the manner the dog uses to relocate the track by sideways, forward or backward casting; whether the dog indicates the Verweiserpunkt; and whether the dog self-corrects after following a diversion, or whether he needs to be taken back. A fast working dog will actually be penalized in the evaluation because it is believed that such a dog will ultimately fail in a difficult situation.

I also had the opportunity to watch a Labrador Retriever and a Large Münsterländer on their 20-hour VSWP tracks. Both struggled a great deal. The Lab finally did reach the deer carcass, but only received a Prize III [passed/sufficient]. The handler had clearly been quite anxious and neither he nor the dog showed the surety and problem solving required for the task. The judges ultimately terminated the test of the Large Münsterländer—as is their right—because they believed that it was not going to be successful given what they were seeing. This dog was handled by a young woman who looked to be in her early twenties, and I was so impressed with her composure. She stayed calm to all outward appearances despite the difficulties encountered, and continued to work as effectively as she could with her dog. She graciously accepted the feedback the judges gave her and assured them that she would keep training and attempt the test again. Bravo!

In another area of the forest Gary was watching the work on the VFSP tracks made with the trackshoe method. The six dogs entered in the 20-hour VFSP had been assigned to two judging groups. Gary observed the work of two Small Münsterländers and an English Springer Spaniel. After the test Gary learned that the ESS had been placed with its handler just five or six weeks before the test, but he was a very experienced handler. On two different occasions the dog had gone off the track far enough that the judges were about to recall them, when the handler stopped, said he thought they were off the track and took the dog back to the last Verweiserpunkt. Both times the handler let the dog circle around that point until it picked up the track and they continued on to eventually find the deer carcass.

The first Small Münsterländer also got off the track on two occasions, but the handler did not recognize that fact. The judges had to recall the handler and take them back to the last reference point. Fortunately, the dog circled the area and was able to find the track both times. This team reached the deer carcass successfully, but had a lower prize because of the two restarts. The second Small Münsterländer was not able to complete the track. Like all of the unsuccessful handlers we saw, this one expressed appreciation for the work of the judges and their feedback, apologized for the poor performance and promised he and the dog would do better next time.

The judges for this group all observed the work of the dogs very carefully and relied heavily on the Revierführer to let them know when a dog was more than 80 m off the track. The senior judge Kuno Freiherr von Kaehne was particularly experienced with this work and had no trouble keeping up despite his eighty-some years and need for a cane. Along with fellow judges Dirk Hinz and Jörg Meineke, he was very supportive of the handlers. It was easy to see why the handlers were so appreciative of the judges.

At the end of the test we returned to the Mönkloh Community Centre for the banquet and award ceremony. All of the paperwork was handled with the computer program we had encountered at the previous tests and was done in good time. Following a lovely meal Test Coordinators Dirk Hinz and Wolf Schmidt-Körby announced the test results and presented the awards. There were handsome traveling trophies presented for the top performances in VSWP-20, VSWP-40, VFSP-20 and VFSP-40. Successful handlers and honored guests received a pen set. The remaining handlers and judges received a mug. A toast of schnapps was enjoyed by all, followed by speeches from the top handlers. It had been a grueling day for some of the handlers, but it was clear that they all felt a sense of achievement for even having attempted this difficult test.

A week later Gary judged in the VGP that we mentioned in the last article. Here the blood tracks were laid with 250 ml of blood over 400 m and aged only a few hours. You could see the

difference in how the dogs worked the track. Some worked very quickly and were penalized accordingly, as mentioned above. Others were quite young dogs and you could see that they barely had the maturity to tackle a task requiring this much control. In each case the final score assigned by the judges was determined by much more than the fact that the dog had reached the deer carcass. The teamwork with the handler, the manner of working, and pace were all taken into consideration before a score of 2, 3, or 4 was assigned.

Two of the dogs—the DDs handled by Uta Jochims of Liether-Moor Kennel—did *Totverweisen* work (Dead Game Guiding) at the final stage of the track, which was very impressive to see. The regular 400 m VGP blood track has only one wound bed in it. For Dead Game Guides a second wound bed is made at the end of the 400 m where the deer carcass would normally be placed. Then an additional 200 m of blood is laid and the deer carcass is placed at the end of that. The Dead Game Guide is released from the leash at the second wound bed and allowed to search freely from there for the deer. The dog has been trained to flip a *Bringsel* (in this case a piece of antler dangling from its collar) up into its mouth when it finds the game and immediately return to the handler. The handler removes the Bringsel from the dog's mouth, sends the dog back to the deer and follows it as far as he/she can. When the dog reaches the deer the second time it again flips the Bringsel into its mouth and heads back to the handler. This routine is repeated until the handler and judges have been guided all the way to the deer. Additional points are awarded to dogs that successfully complete the Dead Game Guiding. Both Liether-Moor dogs did an impeccable job on this portion of the track.

We were interested to see that Verweiserpunkt were also used when laying the track at the VGP. We had never heard of this before, but were told that it is in the test regulations and perfectly alright. We don't see it in our English version of the VGPO, but think the practice is one certainly worth incorporating into our future VGPs.

Now that blood tracking wounded deer with a dog is legal in Nova Scotia we have been called a couple of times to help locate a deer that a hunter cannot find. This has given us a much greater appreciation for what is required in a real life situation. In the first case twenty hours had passed before they called us in. The hunters had been tramping all over the area for hours. And the blood trail ended suddenly, we think indicating that the wound had sealed. We were called in sooner on the second case, but again the blood trail ended abruptly. This made us realize the value of training for the Track Shoe Test where there is little if any blood for the dog to follow. We will also do a good deal of distraction training to teach the dog to stay focused on the blood/hoof track and ignore other human or game tracks.

Tracking—both of game scent and blood—is a critical element in the philosophy of ethical hunting followed by JGHV and its affiliated clubs. We share their belief that no game should suffer or be lost unnecessarily, and we will certainly train each of our dogs to do their part in the recovery of game. Our experiences at the German Blood Tracking Tests have given us a much better idea of how to do this.



Top Left – Deer Scent Shoes
Top Right – Judges with Carcass
Bottom Left – Wound Bed
Bottom Right – Starting Marker