

# Hunting Aptitude Evaluation (HAE) Protocol

## VHDF-Canada

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### **1. Field Subjects**

Field work is used to evaluate the dog's search and pointing, and it also contributes to evaluating the dog's use of nose, desire to work, and cooperation. The dog is brought up to the field (or forest) containing wild or planted game birds and released to begin searching.

Near the beginning of the search component, typically before the dog encounters any game birds and while the dog is at a suitable distance, a gunner will fire a 12 Ga blank when signaled by the judges. The shot is taken at a moment when the dog is expanding its search and outside of the comfort zone provided by the proximity of the handler. A second shot will be fired following the same procedure when the dog has continued searching after the first shot. Young dogs often mark the shot with an alert posture interrupting the search briefly, but then move on. Not gun-shy, gun sensitive, or gun-shy will be recorded on the score card, with added detail when warranted.

For evaluating Search, a dog is urged to hunt independently over upland habitat. without repeated commands or direction from the handler. A versatile dog displays desire to find game by expanding its range and speed according to the cover. It displays cooperation by periodically re-establishing visual contact with its handler and adjusting its search accordingly, with minimal direction from the handler. A dog that is confident in its use of nose will mark old or unproductive scent, but spend little time beyond a quick confirmation. A versatile dog should cover ground within gun range and beyond, when the type of cover allows.

When a game bird is encountered, the capable dog will mark the scent several metres distant, creep only as much as necessary to unmistakably locate the bird by scent (if at all), and independently point and hold point for at least several seconds with body language clearly recognizable as pointing. Steadiness is not expected at this early stage and can be ranked as exceptional. Handling moving game is another sign of exceptional performance in HAE.

A handler can prepare a young dog for the search component by taking it to fields where the dog is rewarded by finding game. Wild birds are best, but planted birds can be used if they can

be released judiciously. A handler can encourage a mature performance by offering praise for special achievements but otherwise remain calm, confident and quiet. Needless chatter to a dog only breaks its concentration. A handler might use a command when encouraging a field search that is different from the dog's typical release for a non-hunting situation.

## **2. Water Aptitude**

For evaluating tolerance for water and confidence to swim, a dog is taken to the water's edge and encouraged to search the water, as it would search land. This independent entry on the part of the dog is a unique feature of VHDF testing. It was introduced to correspond to the successes breeders had in performance-based breeding for water aptitude. A dog may search briefly along the shore before entering water. Once the dog has unmistakably entered the water and swam, the expectation is satisfied. The dog is then rewarded with a tossed bumper and, after a moment of praise, re-sent. A dog needs to swim twice to confirm its love of water. Further expansion by the dog especially in cold and wavy water indicates added maturity.

If a dog does not enter swimming-depth water independently but it does so when a bumper is thrown as in a marked retrieve, twice, it can receive a maximum score of 8. If the dog refuses to enter for a bumper it can receive a maximum score of 5 if it swims for a bird. These are possible scores and ultimately at the discretion of the judges. A dog does not have to retrieve from water but refusing a retrieve can influence the desire and cooperation.

A handler can build confidence in water by first allowing a pup to explore the water's edge without pressure, on its own terms as long as needed. Then an item is thrown. Before a young dog becomes dependent on a marked retrieve with a thrown object, an item is thrown out of sight of the young dog. The dog is then put in a position where it can see the item and so the level of difficulty is increased. Success at each send is the key. Using a frozen bird mixed with bumpers will enhance the dogs' feeling of success in training.

## **3. Tracking**

A key feature of versatile dogs is their shift from one work aspect to another at an instant. That valuable trait shows in tracking. A temporarily flight-impaired pheasant, or other game bird, is released out of sight of the dog, and hazed out of sight from the starting point, which is marked by pulling some feathers. The dog is then brought up, shown the feathers and as calmly as possible encouraged to follow the track. The handler can use the smooth end of lead or check cord to let it slip while going with the dog a metre or two. Then the handler will stop and let the dog do its work without further command or direction.

The test evaluates the dog's ability to stay calm in the face of hot scent, and methodically work out the track. Dogs can use a low nose as though glued to the track, or a medium-high nose casting in a saw-tooth fashion across the track making good use of the wind. If a dog loses the track, it may circle back and re-establish the track on its own. However, dogs that range too widely without checking their direction, tend to shift into searching, instead of tracking.

The test requires that the dog proceed toward the pheasant by tracking, not by shifting to a field search and hunting for the bird. Successful tracking illustrates a good use of nose and desire to work. Although a successful retrieve is not necessary to score well in tracking (indeed, a long and careful track need not require that the dog even find the bird at the end), but it can demonstrate cooperation.

A handler can help the dog by ensuring that the dog does not see the pheasant nor scent it before being put on the track. Handlers should watch the wind such that a dog cannot scent a bird being carried into or out of the tracking area. A handler, once called, should proceed to the feathers quickly, stand at a distance out of the wind to obtain directions from the judges. Then, calmly, entice the dog to put its nose down, sniff the feathers and in a smooth motion continue from feathers to pheasant track.

The above subjects include what a versatile dog does when confronted with hunting-related stimuli, such as a bird-promising field or woods, a pond, or feathers with scent leading away. Those studying animal behaviour call these traits secondary motivators – things a dog does because it learned there are birds to be found. Our next subjects are closer to primary motivators or drives, or subjects that cross over all of the secondary subjects. These subjects are Use of Nose, Desire and Cooperation.

#### **4. Use of Nose**

Dogs are enormously useful partners in the hunt because they have far more scent receptors lining the inner surfaces of the nose than humans. However, use of nose by a dog is not automatic. It requires concentration. Concentration is influenced by a dog's comfort and hence a handler and the test environment should facilitate comfort (e.g. a calm handler, a warm and dry kennel, drinking water, etc.). Judges are trained to look for extenuating circumstances and do what they can to minimize these.

Judges look for the many subtle signals that indicate how well a dog is using its nose, including: how many birds found, how frequently scent is acknowledged (where a game- or even songbird was), how quickly and accurately a dog locates a hidden bird, how quickly it moves on from unproductive scent, at what distance a dog has unmistakably located/pointed a bird.

Judges also consider the conditions, whether ground is dry, or wet, with or without vegetation, whether a light breeze or no breeze, or scent-whipping wind.

#### **5. Desire to Work**

A common misconception is that animated behaviour, speed or range reflects desire. Desire in versatile dogs is best distinguished by the phrase desire to work. Desire to work is evident when a dog applies itself effectively toward a task; when a dog shifts from one task (energetic search) to another especially a conflicting one (methodically and cautiously working difficult scent).

Desire to work is also evident when a dog encounters difficult conditions, as in carefully untangling a pheasant's trail when it went back on its own track.

Desire shows in the manner in which the dog applies itself to complete a task – in its body language.

## **6. Cooperation**

While the subjects above resemble the so-called primary and secondary motivations that are also present in wild canids, cooperation is a feature of domestication. Cooperation is a beautiful thing when we observe it in the field.

While desire to hunt satisfies a dog's own primal instinct at some level, cooperation in contrast, is displayed when a dog satisfies the hunter's interest against the dog's own.

Cooperation is evident in a dog that exhibits a purposeful search and yet still stays in visual contact with the handler and follows without command in due course the search direction taken by the handler. When judges are in doubt, they may ask a handler to veer away giving the dog a chance to clearly display cooperation.

Cooperation is evident in a dog picking up a bird without delay, and returning it directly to the handler. A cooperative dog also makes eye contact. This sometimes happens in contexts where the dog encounters difficulty and is asking the handler for help.