

The Early Training...

The First 6-7 Months of Your Deutsch Langhaar's Training

Here is an article that Eike Behrens put in September 2012 Issue of the Deutsch Langhaar Mitteilungen. Eike Behrens has well trained over 100 Deutsch Langhaars to pass a VGP and he also offers training classes for hunting dog handlers in Germany. I translated his report to the best of my ability. It may not be 100% word for word, but I believe I captured the high points and important parts. Hermann Rohling

In the last Mitteilungen, we talked about how important it is that the breeder works with the puppies in their first few weeks of life. They must be exposed to all kinds of different game and be able to explore fields, forest, and water with their mother. When selecting a puppy, we want to see that he/she is not only from a very good hunting background, but also that he/she is raised in the traditional form...meaning that the breeder his his/her part correctly. These types of breeders should be preferred when picking a puppy. It is especially important when someone selects an older pup to ask questions about how the pup was raised and what type of training the breeder has been doing.

After the 8-week old puppy has arrived in his/her new home, it is important that we continue the training that the breeder has already established at that very young age. First, the puppy has to overcome the shock of separation from his mother and the rest of the litter, and adjust to the new surroundings. A puppy that was properly raised should have no problems overcoming the changes in short order.

Now we need to introduce the puppy to the kennel, car, house, and the rest of his/her new environment. We start with locking the pup in a kennel for only a few seconds and then we extend the time more and more every day. We take trips to the field and forest so the pup learns early on how to behave in nature. It is helpful to have an older dog along for these first trips as well. We can build on these fundamental experiences later on to get the behavior we are expecting. It is helpful to introduce other dogs the same age as your pup and bring them along to socialize. When we think that a dog's close relatives, the wolf and coyote, are fully on their own at the age of six months and have to fend for themselves, then we can understand that it is only natural that a pup of this age exhibits the most trainability. Experts believe that the brain development of a six month old pup is equivalent to that of a 17-year old person.

In past years, many folks believed that the pups should have the first year with no restrictions and great freedom. In classic training books, we can read that the first year of the pup's life should have very little restrictions except for some basic obedience training. The second year would be the start of the consequent training with harsh methods. Those methods have to be continued and the dog is always under pressure to perform correctly. All the training was not ingrained and the dog is always trying to escape the pressure. In order to have success with these training techniques with the high standards that we expect from our dogs, trainers use methods that were all but pleasant to the eye. We can see parallels to some of the treatment to mankind by mankind.

Today, we have a better relationship with our dogs. Many years ago, the hunting dogs also had better nerves and could bounce back from some of these harsh training methods. Many dogs today would not be able to handle these training techniques to be successful at the end.

We break the training of our dogs into three categories: obedience, retrieving, and tracking. The obedience is also part of retrieving and the tracking. We begin with obedience followed by tracking, and finish up with retrieving.

Obedience is important for any dog but specifically for a versatile hunting dog. In the VGP, the obedience is weighted very heavily in the overall score. In 2010, only 22.3% of 1,322 VGP tested dogs had the maximum score of 68 points in the obedience category. With the many obedience classes available, we should take advantage of them and never settle for less than the top scores in obedience with our hunting dogs.

Once our new hunting buddy feels at home and knows who his master is, it is time to introduce a collar. At first, the puppy will scratch and try to get rid of the thing, but after a while, he/she will get used to it and accept the collar. Every time the pup comes out of the kennel, and especially when we go for hikes and walks, we put on the collar first. Pup will get used to the collar very quickly in no time.

The next step is to introduce the puppy to the leash. At first, the puppy will fight the fact that he/she must walk with his/her master. But keep correcting the puppy if he/she does not heel correctly and the puppy will get used to the leash in time.

In Rudolf Fries' book, "Bayerischen Gebirgsschweisshund" (a blood-tracking specialty breed), Rudolf writes that if a dog does not learn correctly how to walk on a leash in his/her first year of life, he/she will never learn how to do that task correctly. He is right. When we see how some of the handler/dog teams at tests or hunting walk through the fields and woods, we can tell right away how obedient the hunting dog is. The correct walking at heel is the first step and key to total obedience in your young dog.

The dog has to follow the handler with his/her head knee-high and the leash hanging loose. As with all training, you must practice this in familiar surroundings to start, and later go to different areas and terrain to change things up. The handler has to change directions many times for the dog to understand to pay attention to him/her. If the dog does not follow the handler correctly, a hard pull on the leash and the command "heel" is used to correct the dog. As soon as the pup is heeling correctly, we praise the behavior. In the old days, the dogs had to learn everything with a negative experience and strong consequences. The behavior studies have shown us a better way that is called positive reinforcement. That means that we praise the dog when he/she does the task correctly and can even give small treats. The praising has to be done immediately in a time of three seconds or less or the dog will not understand why he/she was praised. The dog will pay more attention to the handler and keep an eye on him. As the pup advances in the training and gets older, we should also practice having him/her at heel without a leash.

When the dog is an expert at heel, we teach him/her how to sit on command. We use a short lead, pull up on the pups' head and gently push down the rear of the dog while saying the

command “sit”. During the exercise, we also praise the pup and give a treat within the three seconds. After a few days, he/she will understand the command and we do not have to push the rear down any more. At the next training session, we will drop the lead after the dog sits and start to circle the dog...first close and then stretching the distance. If the dog follows the handler and moves from the spot, we put him/her back on the exact same place with the sit command, praise and give a treat. Later on, the goal will be that the dog sits as soon as the handler stops walking. The dog should also remain sitting unless called or heeled away.

To start the retrieving training, we should start practicing with checking the dog’s bite and eventually even putting your whole hand in the dog’s mouth. It is always an ugly scene at tests and the veterinary office when the judges or veterinarian look at your dog’s bit and end up wrestling with the dog because no one has ever checked his/her teeth before.

When we are happy with our sitting command, we start on the “down” command. Now we pull the front legs forward on a sitting dog while saying the command “down” and pushing the dog to the ground. It is the same scenario as before where we praise the dog and give him/her a treat while we are pressuring them to keep down. Later, we can put the treat on the floor and gently push the dog to the ground. Soon, the push to the ground is no longer necessary and we give the treat after the “down” command. After the dog will lay down on command, we start to circle the dog and move further away from him/her until we can hide for a short time. We extend the time duration where the dog cannot see us. We can even take the leash off the dog after we feel that he/she will obey the command. At the return from hiding from the dog, we have to stand by him/her for a period of time before giving the release command. We should practice that in the car or his kennel with the door open. We do not want the dog to break until released.

The “Reizangel” is a six-foot long stick with a 6-foot long string on the end. It should have been used by the breeder already. It is very similar to the “wing on a string” (pheasant wing tied to the end of a fishing rod) used by American breeders on young puppies. It is a great tool to help your pup with pointing and prey drive. It can also be used to exercise your dog.

It is also important to teach the pup how to swim and get used to the water at a young age. Again, it is important to change the situation and place to increase exposure for your pup.

Parallel to all of the training, we should start the 8-10 week old puppy out on food drags that later develop to blood tracking. At first, we start with a short drag of 8-10 feet and then extend the drags and the time delay longer as the puppy ages. Later, we replace the piece of meat or treat used for the drag with fresh game liver and use some cow blood to mark the track. It is important to not use piece of meat in the summer as insects love to invade them. Soon, we replace the drag entirely by dripping blood instead (while still leaving food or a treat at the end of the track). Here again, we start using less blood and extend the distance and increase the time delay as the pup ages. If we practice all of this right, our young pup will be able to master a VGP overnight blood track at the age of 4 months and he/she will have those skills ingrained for the rest of their life. The versatile hunting dog must learn very early in life to use his/her nose on a track. This does not restrict or interfere with his/her use of nose in the field.

A handler will have no problem later on to complete an overnight blood track at a hunting test or in real game recovery. This method will teach the pup to stay more obedience and calm when distractions like game are introduced. It is fascinating to watch these young pups with passion and concentration work these blood track out. They work with their nose to the ground and at an even pace with one goal in mind...which is to find the game at the end of the track.

In most states of Germany, it is now required to have a trained hunting dog that will be able to accomplish an overnight blood track to be considered for hunting use. This ability will be tested in a hunting test like the VGP. Every year, there are over one thousand hunting dogs in Germany that will pass a VGP. It is not magic. We have to start the training of our dogs now in the puppy stages to prepare them for the future. They must be prepared for the tests and for their usefulness as a versatile hunting dog.

What we cannot teach our pups in the early ages is retrieving. Here, we have to wait until all of the permanent adult teeth are in (usually at about 5 months of age). The retrieve is too serious of a task to be learned at play. We need to watch that the dog does not carry any objects around with him/her and that there is nothing lying around the house or kennel that he/she will pick up and carry.

Since we conditioned the pup to having his teeth/bite look at early on, we should have no problems introducing a dummy to a dog's mouth at the age of six months. Here, it can be an advantage to again use treats. As soon as we take the dummy out of his/her mouth, the dog gets the treat. With some pressure, the dog will pick up the dummy from the handler's hand, and later on, off of the floor. It takes a lot of practice and patience until the dog is ready to pick up any game or dummy on command. But this is a life-long skill that we teach our dogs. We practice the retrieves in field, water, and forest. When making retrieves at the water, it is important that the dog does not see the handler throw the object into the water (pup needs to learn to swim out to retrieve without looking at handler for help).

The retrieve of the drag game training should be delayed until a later stage in the dog's life (after he/she is fully force-fetched).

If everything is done correctly, your 6-7 month old puppy can now go on hunting outings with the basic training completed. The handler's ability to reinforce obedience and retrieving skills on hunting outings are the key to success.

In the summer after the VJP (spring puppy test), we prepare our pup for the HZP and VGP tests. A pup that was raised and trained in the right time and brings a good hunting background with him/her should have no problems with the hunting tasks at hand. With a solid foundation, the pup should make a good companion on many hunts to come for his handler. And this is the goal for the breeders, handlers, judges, and breed clubs of the JGHV.

Eike Behrens