Training for the Drags

by Gary and Sandy Hodson

The HZP and the VGP both include two drags: a shorter one with feathered game (pheasant or duck) and a longer one with furred game (rabbit). These drags are not really a test of the dog's ability to track. The scent trail laid during the drag is like a highway and almost any dog could follow it without difficulty. The purpose of the drag is to evaluate whether the dog is a reliable retriever when it finds dead game. Will it retrieve the game to you every time you send it regardless of conditions?

THE TASK

The feather drag is at least 150 m with two obtuse angles (e.g., 30-45 degrees), and the fur drag is at least 300 m with two obtuse angles. The judge laying the drag attaches a dragline to the game and starts by leaving a few feathers or bits of fur at the beginning of the drag. He then drags the game out the specified distance, making the two obtuse angles at suitable places. The first angle for the fur drag must be approximately 100 m from the start of the drag.

The judge usually begins the drag with two pieces of game—one he drags at the end of a line and the other he carries. At the end of the drag, he lays the fresh piece of game that was carried. It is placed in the open—not in a hole or in brush. The judge then finds a nearby place to hide so that he can observe what the dog does at the end of the drag. He takes off the drag line and lays the game that he dragged at his feet. Using two pieces of game ensures that if the dog runs past the first piece because it has been tracking the judge it will still have game to retrieve. It does not matter which piece of game the dog brings back. Alternatively, the handler can request that the drag be laid with just one

piece of game. In this case the judge will leave the game at the end of the drag and there will be no game close to the judge. The decision of whether to use one or two pieces of game will depend on how you train and how your dog typically performs. It is entirely up to you.

Once the judge signals that he has finished the drag and is in hiding, the handler and dog are called up. Another judge points out the start of the drag and its direction to the handler. The handler then brings the dog up to the start and releases it with a command such as FIND, TRACK or whatever else is preferred. The handler may work the dog on leash for the first 20m before releasing the dog to continue on the scent trail. The dog is expected to follow the track out, locate the game and retrieve it directly back to the handler, making a mannerly delivery at the end.

If for some reason the dog does not make it to the game, there are two opportunities to restart. The judges will advise you on how to proceed at this point. However, if the dog makes it to the game and leaves without it, the judge at the end of the drag will immediately pick up the game and return to the start. There is no second chance once the dog has located the game either at the end of the drag or at the feet of the judge. A dog that makes contact with game but does not retrieve it automatically fails the test.

When the dog is on its way back to you with the game it is acceptable to put your hands in the air or to walk back and forth to draw the dog's attention to where you are. However, you cannot give a command like COME or FETCH. The dog must independently retrieve the game without any

correction by the handler. No commands— verbal or non-verbal—are allowed at this point; only the movement to let the dog know where you are.

According to the test regulations the correct delivery is when the dog comes happily and willingly to the handler, sits down next to him/her without a command [if necessary, one quiet command is allowed at this point] and keeps the game calmly in its mouth until the handler grasps it and gives the release command.

In addition to the score given for the FEATHER DRAG or FUR DRAG itself, the work on the drags is considered when making final scores for USE OF NOSE and MANNER OF RETRIEVE.

TRAINING FOR DRAGS

We like to use the method outlined in the Armbruster Training Manual to train our dogs for the drags. We will give just a brief overview of the training method here; you should read about it in greater detail in the manual, which is available from Dan McMillan.

- The dog should be fully Force Fetch trained before beginning this procedure.

- Familiarize the dog with the game to be retrieved by having it take the game from the ground before beginning the training.

- With the dog out of sight, have an assistant mark the start of the drag, drop a few feathers or belly fur and drag the game out 30 m. The assistant should remove the dragline and leave the game positioned for easy retrieving in a clear, high spot. He should find a hiding spot at least 10 m beyond the drag or make a wide circle downwind back around to the start.

- The first couple of drags may be done with a crosswind, but after that they should be with a tailwind so that the dog is more apt to work with its nose down on the scent trail.

- You, as handler, should bring the dog up to the start on lead, stopping about 2 m short and switching from the lead to a check cord. Holding the check cord rather close to the collar, you should bring the dog on up to the feathers/fur and point to it while giving a command such as FIND or TRACK. As the dog follows the track, you can let out more line; however, you should ensure that the dog is keeping to the track and keeping its nose down on the scent. If the dog lifts its head, you should again point down to the track and give the chosen command.

- When the dog reaches the game at the end of the drag you should command FETCH (or some similar command) and ensure that the dog immediately picks up the game. You should then turn and run back to the starting point where the dog should sit and deliver to hand on command. The purpose of running back is to reinforce the idea that the dog should immediately return directly to the handler at the starting point.

- As the training continues, gradually increase the distance of the drag on a straight line, introduce a gentle bend midway, increase the distance further, and finally introduce the two obtuse angles, one to the right and the other to the left.

- Gradually fade the use of the FETCH command at the end of the drag, using it only for times when the dog does not immediately pick up the game.

- Finally you should run the check cord through the ring of the collar or the collar itself instead of snapping it on so that it can easily be slipped free of the collar. When the dog gets to within 20 m of the game, stop and let the cord slip free. Wait at that spot for the dog to deliver the game to you. The distance from the release of the dog to the end of the drag should gradually be increased until you are releasing the dog at the prescribed maximum distance of 20 m from the start.

- Remember at all times that while you want the dog to return quickly and directly to you with the game, the track out should be run systematically with the dog's nose down. A slower pace may be appropriate.

- Do not release the dog from the check cord until you are confident that the dog will both continue the track to the game and retrieve the game to you. Return to the check cord if you run into problems with the dog going off track or failing to pick up the game in a timely manner.

Avoiding Problems

In my experience, one of the most common reasons a dog will fail the HZP is some kind of problem with the drag, particularly the rabbit drag. Three hundred meters is a long way. When you are starting your dog, it looks like they have taken that rabbit to the next county. And that's the point—you will not be able to influence your dog when it gets to the rabbit. This is a test of what your dog will do with game when out of sight and control of the handler. If your dog is uncooperative or has a tendency to hunt for itself, it will show up here.

As mentioned earlier, dogs almost always make it to the game. The game itself and the footsteps of the judge leave a scent trail like a highway. But then the fun begins. If you have not used Force Fetch training with your dog, this is where it will show up because the dog is so far from you that you have no influence.

As a judge, I've seen it all! Some dogs look at the game, look back toward their handler, and then take off back toward the handler without it. Other dogs notice the judge when they reach the game, become unsure, and take off back to the handler for that reason. The judge will be hiding, but it is likely that the dog will scent him/her and could become intimidated. We have seen dogs that pick up the game and toss it around, roll on it or even piss on it. Sometimes they then bring the game on in, but other times they are having just too much fun and can't be bothered. Worst of all, the dog may pick up the rabbit but later drop it, eat it or even bury it.

In one test I judged there were three dogs who were game buriers. They picked up the rabbit and started back to the handler, but then veered off into a ditch and buried the rabbit before they came on in. You would be absolutely amazed at how quickly that can happen. These three dogs were all from the same litter. I think this is pretty strong evidence for a genetic component to this behavior and supports the rule that says a dog that eats, buries, or heavily crushes or plucks the game will fail the test and will not be certified for breeding.

To avoid some of these problems I would suggest the following:

- Train your dog to retrieve with the Force Fetch method mentioned in the accompanying article in this issue, paying particular attention to the pitfalls outlined by Forrest Moore.

- Train for the drag with the systematic method outlined in the Armbruster

Training Manual (or a similar method) whereby you are can maintain control of the dog through the use of a check cord until you are confident that it will behave as expected.

- When finalizing your training vary the length of the drag, but always make it longer than prescribed in the test regulations. The rules say *at least* 150 m for the feather drag and 300 meters for the fur drag. A judge may make it longer in order to find the right conditions to place the game. Also vary the number and direction of the angles in the drag. You don't want the dog to expect it to be the same way every time and be thrown off if it is different.

- At the end of the drag, be sure to place the game in a way that is easy for the dog to pick up and carry; e.g., place the rabbit on its belly with the backbone straight up. Most judges will do this as well during the test.

- Have various different friends assist you with laying the drags so that your dog is accustomed to finding strangers at the end of the drag.

- Determine ahead of time how you are going to release the dog on the track. People do it different ways—with a cord slipped through the collar, with a line loosely held around the neck, just holding the collar, etc. You want to do it in a way familiar to the dog and a way that will not interfere with the dog's concentration. Once the dog is on the scent you want it to be able to move readily ahead.

- Once the initial training is complete, fade the use of the training commands. The dog should be accustomed to performing without command after the initial start on the drag. Remember that on test day you cannot give your dog a command after it has been sent to retrieve or you will cause it to fail.

- The smart handler will take the game from the dog quickly rather than give it the opportunity to drop it. Remember, test day is different. The dog may be a bit uncertain and do things it does not normally do. Don't give it the opportunity to mess up. As soon as the dog sits, give your release command and take the game from it.

- Game for the drag will be provided for you at the test; however, you are allowed to bring your own—as long as it is fresh and unaltered. Bringing your own is a good idea because your dog will already be familiar with it. Just be sure that it is completely thawed if it has been frozen and that it is not spoiled. The judges will inspect the game and may refuse to let you use it if it is not suitable.

Good luck! Once you have a dog that will reliably complete the rabbit drag, you have a dog that will not fail you when the retrieve is tough during the hunt.