

The basics of Basic Obedience

by Jeff Martin



These notes are an extension of a previous article titled Training for Success.

There are **only 5 simple commands** that need to be taught to your versatile dog to communicate as a team and fully harness its abilities in the typical hunting situation. The obedience that applies to versatile dogs is also more focused and totally unique to their versatile abilities than say obedience you commonly see at either retriever or pointing dog field trials.

Its important to remember that each of the German tests are an extension of the tasks from the previous tests. That is the training for a higher-level test is built on the foundations established, training for the previous test.

In the **Derby** or natural ability test, where dogs can be as young as 6 months old the only obedience is to turn if called and to come to the handler to be placed on lead.

The **SOLMS** is a level where the young dog's training has advanced and it can be used for actual hunting. It is a higher standard than a derby, where the dog now searches correctly with purpose, will hold point reliably until the handler could get within shooting range and ideally if the dog breaks it can be stopped from chasing for hundreds of yards, gassing out and wasting precious time and energy. The retrieving training has also advanced to include both fur and feather tracks and retrieves, as well as blind or unseen retrieves at shotgun range across water, plus live duck searches. These retrieving subjects must all be completed with the dog sitting within the reach of the handler to take the game. Dogs in the SOLMS are typically 12-22 months old and it is a great test of ability and trainability at this young age.

The **VGP** is more typically for dogs beyond their second birthday with more experience, often 3-4 years old. It is many of the same tests as the SOLMS but with a higher standard of polish expected but with addition's such as total reliability on point, steadiness to flush and shot without the need for a single command, blood tracking on a long lead , obedience during drive hunts as well as retrieving a 7lb fox or racoon from a drag or over a natural barrier to name but a few. This should be on every one's testing agenda and is a great test of both you as a trainer and the finished dog.

I mention these tests only to show that broken down to the individual tasks they are not as daunting as they may appear and also that you should train to the highest level

possible from the very get go. It's a mistake to allow a derby dog to run delinquent and ingrain bad habits with the idea that you will fix it later. This also ties in with the truism that **you must train to the age of the dog** rather than the test you plan to run next.

As I've written many times, in the first 6 months its all informal fun training. There is plenty to do exposing the pup to exploring the big wide world and allowing him to physically grow to a strength that you can start training and at the same time making sure that no bad habits are created (refer to Training for Success). An 8-week-old puppy has the brain capacity to learn similar to that of an adult and I have done it successfully with such a young pup. I wouldn't recommend it for a first timer and much prefer nowadays to develop desire, initiative, build a bond and develop or shape its temperament in the first 6 months before I start with any formal training. You really do have plenty of time to complete basic obedience as most of it is done daily in your backyard.

Some **golden rules** that must be ingrained in the trainer and become an automatic reaction if you want to be successful at training and hunting these dogs.

1. Never give a command you can't or won't enforce. This requires you to decide will he obey or not before you give it?? This rule has to be 100% perfect and he will stop testing you as he knows you demand obedience every single time. If you allow him to ignore your command it will continue to get worse and you will become just background music. More details later.
2. Once a command is learnt, use one command and expect a prompt response immediately. Taking a pee or sniffing a bush before complying isn't correct.
3. Train formal obedience on a 6ft lead or longer, the soft round ones are far easier on your hands than thin flat models. Just like humans the first lesson or two is stressful to the new student and a common reaction is for them to bolt or avoid the whole process. Without the pup on a lead how can you avoid this or not have your lesson deteriorate into an uncontrolled mess??
4. Always have a common release command which signals the exercise is now over. Once a command is given, obedience to it is expected until the pup is released. I use "lets go" and some use "OK".
5. Keep lessons short and sweet with a good attitude, training is supposed to be fun for all involved. Its good to put the pup through the lessons he has already mastered followed by lots of positive praise to build his confidence and pride, before moving on to the new lesson he is in the process of learning. I always breakdown every exercise to its simplest components. When the dog has clearly shown he got the lesson (even if its just a

component) stop with lots a praise, put the dog away for 30 minutes without any further commands or distractions for him to absorb the clarity of what he just learnt. Putting him in his crate somewhere quiet without distractions is handy for this rule. You may read this in other books as finish an exercise with success. It's a common mistake to continue with the dog making further mistakes and then put him away confused and unsure.

Don't be a robot, dogs will read your body language like a book. Dogs are one of the few animals that will follow hand signals, so make sure you use them in conjunction with each other as a voice command is strongly reinforced by the hand signal. There are many instances in hunting (such as jump shooting ducks on a river) where you may want to handle the dog with just a hand signal.

Make sure when training an obedience exercise onlead, you keep a calm voice and talk to the dog constantly. Typically, it's a soothing "good boy" for correct behaviour or a soft "agh-agh" for not quite right then back into "good boy" for the correct behaviour. How can a puppy learn if you're a deaf mute and don't communicate with him. Animated, happy and communicating is your job as a trainer.

The initial lessons of a new task may have you repeating the command many times as you show what's expected so the pup associates the command with what he should be doing.

Also train in a quiet place free of distractions such as your other dogs or kids. I find if you feed your pup regularly morning and night the 10 minutes prior to being fed has him awake and alert primed for a lesson. The meal is then his reward for the training lesson.

A choke chain versus a leather collar?? I strongly recommend a free-flowing choke chain that has a sliding ring at each end for clear communication. Cheap choke chains have clunky links and don't work as well. The lead is placed so it looks like the letter P when viewed from the front of the dog if he heels on your left and should then have 6-8" of free slack after being placed on the dog. It is mostly used loosely and only tightens momentarily if your using it as a correction, so if its too small its always tight and ineffective. It is always used loosely for a quick correction NEVER tightly for guiding the dog into position, this because the end goal is to have the dog obedient when off lead, so use it loosely as if it doesn't exist as the goal is to have an obedient dog when the lead comes off.

Heavy leather collars are what you put on a draught horse to pull a cart and that's how most dogs use them to pull you!! Train with just a lead and choke chain on the dog with no other collars, they don't work very well if marred by other collars.

These are the 5 obedience commands I use and for ease are taught in this order. **SIT** with a hand signal like a traffic cop, **COME** with both hands slapping your thighs on the front, **HEEL** with a slap on the outside your left thigh or if the dog is sitting in front of you , use a wave to your left, **DROP** with an accompanying signal of pointing to the ground, **HALT** with a hand in front of the dogs head as if trying to stop him. Each of these have their own distinctive sound so less confusing and all exercises are used in German tests.

SIT: this is the first lesson because it's the easiest and all the others are easier to teach from this basis. With the dog wearing its choke and lead correctly quietly in a spoken voice command "sit" as you push the pups rear gently to the ground. He may resist but persist. He is on lead so he can't leave. Praise and pat him immediately when he stops resisting as you repeat sit. You aren't standing up at this early stage, but likely kneeling next to him. Praise him for 5 seconds or so before giving "lets go" as his release command. You only give the release after he has successfully stopped resisting, in pups mind he learns to comply correctly, and I get praised then released quickly. Give him a moment with lots of praise then repeat the exact lesson. After two correct responses put him away to think about it or feed him as a reward in his kennel to think about it. A couple of similar lessons morning and night over the next two days will see you advance to standing with a your hand raised as you give the command and have him comply or you immediately make him by pushing down his rump just as you did when kneeling. Don't allow the pup to rest on its haunches, it is sitting on its hocks, so don't allow it and correct it if it occurs.

Some people like to train this initially with treats which is OK with a young puppy, but this typically falls apart once you stop giving titbits.

What I'm explaining is very different, it's the dog complying because YOU told it too, its placing you in a position to be respected as alpha dog.

To extend the difficulty and proof the sit lesson after the first step is mastered, while holding the lead loosely move to the left and right of the sitting dog while maintaining the hand signal, your dog may try to get up from the sit position so correct it immediately to ensure it remains sitting. A couple lessons like this and you should be able to walk completely around the dog and have it remain sitting. Pat yourself on the back you are making progress.

The next extension is to sit the dog as per usual with you in front, apply a slight pull on the lead (not a snap) , correct the dog if it moves, release and praise if it responds correctly by not moving. This exercise is to strengthen the dog always waiting for the release command. The absolute reliability to remain sitting no matter what, is used with steadiness at the water, delivery of game to hand by SOLMS level but particularly remaining in place in the drive hunt at the VGP level.

COME: once sitting and its proofings are done move onto come. Tell the dog to sit and move to the end of the lead but facing the dog. Command COME as you bend over slightly pat your thighs and encourage him to come to you and command sit as he gets to you. This is a big step so praise accordingly. As you repeat this over the next few days if your dog anticipates the come command by getting up, correct him by going back and repeating the sit command, as always, its wait until your given another command or release.

I always expect my dogs to come in and sit in front not just vaguely somewhere nearby. This is usually so as adults they get leashed up, but it becomes an ingrained habit for delivering game to hand.

Once your dog is mastering sit, come and sit in front at 6ft onlead extend it by dropping the lead and call it from 20 ft and longer. If your dog is coming so fast and running past you call him with you backed up against a fence etc. the goal is for pup to always come to sit directly in front. At close quarters on lead you can always stick your leg out to correct a dog trying to go by you or sit to your side, it must be established the only safe place is sitting directly in front facing you.

Another drill extension is called “inching” which you will use a lot in retrieving training, sit your dog move just a foot further away and command come again with the hand signal to sit in front. This becomes a series of sits with your dog super close looking up at you, so hold his head up making eye contact while stroking his nose in praise, make a game of it. If your dog ever returns with game and sits too far away (even in a test) give him the quiet hand signal for come closer and he will know to inch right in close to you for perfection.

Now its very hard to force a dog to come to you especially at a distance and most people have great difficulty. If you’ve taught your dog to come on command correctly back to you in the yard under controlled conditions, he has learnt what the command actually means and what you expect. Never, ever, ever call the dog to you and punish it for something it did 10 minutes ago. In the yard come has always meant praise and patting for coming to you, now your teaching come means a beating, a big mistake!!

Here is the **magic of long distance control**, if your dog ever disobeys at a distance, run immediately screaming like a madman until you catch up with it, he knows your coming and also associates the disobeyed command that caused it because you came screaming the moment he committed it. As you get near the dog, he will likely fold knowing he’s in trouble because you are now in his field of influence. You may even throw the lead to connect with him to show you can always get at him. Show your displeasure verbally in no uncertain manner BUT stop immediately and command COME again and this time he will comply. Go back a longer distance as you did when you initially gave the

command and repeat the command that he ignored, to demand he do it correctly. Do this religiously every single time it occurs, and he will learn quickly you will always enforce obedience at any distance. This rationale applies to any command given at distance keeping in mind Golden Rule #1 at all times. I would avoid extending come commands to a long distance until most of the obedience is completed and you then firmly have his respect.

HEEL: heeling like all training is easiest if broken down into its components. With the dog onlead and sitting move to the end of the lead and facing away from the dog. Give the new command heel as you move away and slap your thigh. You may have to encourage the pup with the lead to move to the correct position on your left. The choke lead is gently used to pull him back if too far forward or pull forward if he's lolly gagging behind. This initial step is very gentle for the pup to learn to walk in a straight line close to the trainers left leg. Once this is learnt over a few lessons start to extend it with stops and starts that the pup has to learn to comply with independently, this is all done traveling in a single direction. The next extension is to introduce left and right hand turns while still gently correcting the pup into position using the lead. Up to this point it has been to show pup that heel means stay close to the trainers left leg no matter what. Your dog now understands where he should be when commanded to heel so you can now have him sitting front but wave your hand to the left as you give the command heel. You may have to position him at your side with the lead but it's a pretty quick transition to coming to your side. Once you believe heeling is well understood start doing heeling with a faster speed, turning left and right plus stopping and starting. You should make a correction by now snapping the choke chain then release it for a less than speedy response. Don't use excessive force, apply it according to the nature of your dog. You don't want to panic a mild dog, and have it shut down, but it should be unpleasant enough that he should learn to want to avoid it by responding quickly. You can take this to extreme speed with an experienced older dog and still make a fun game out of it that he will love to do, it is not about punishment. This is the exact test you will use in a VGP heeling on or off lead through the saplings.

DROP: This is considered the big anchor of versatile dog training as you never ever call a dog at a distance from the down stay, you always return to collect it. The dog then has the mindset to wait as you will always come back to him. This is used repeatedly in the VGP test.

With dog in the sitting position command drop or down (your choice) as you point to the ground. You may have to move both front legs out in front as you lower the dog to the ground. Praise and pat him in this position repeating the drop command. It may take two lessons a day for a couple of days for the dog to realise what position you want him. Drop always extends from the sit command. The moment he shows any inclination to go down on his stomach praise profusely he is getting it. If he doesn't pull his head

down until his body is lying on its stomach. This is unpleasant for the dog so use as a last resort. Once mastered you extend it by walking frontwards over the dogs back or even stepping across the dogs back the whole time expecting it to remain lying down, make corrections as they occur. This command really is to lie down, its time out for likely quite a while, so I practise this if I'm working in my garage, so I put the dog on his matt in the down position and expect him to stay there or correct him immediately if he doesn't (BTW dogs cant stand stationary for long times). This is the exact exercise you use in the 10-minute weisen test at a SOLM or firing out of sight at a VGP.

I actually use a variation of this but as some VGP rules have gotten far easier its now really overkill. I use the command "down there" meaning its lie down and wait but use the added command of pointing to the ground to tell the dog to keep its head on the ground between its paws, when and if I need that.

HALT: this is to stand motionless; it comes in very handy if your dog is on point but moving slightly to maintain contact with a moving covey. You can stop it with a quiet halt and then release it to keep moving as you catch up.

Have the dog on lead and command halt with the accompanying hand signal, he will wonder what you want and be a little confused. You can stop him by gently holding the lead to stop him. As he stands stationary praise him with good boy, so he knows he's doing it correctly. He may move a leg or even try to sit because of his confusion, so you pick him up to stand or place the foot that moved back to where it was as you repeat the command. After a few days and he is understanding what is required proof it just as you did with sitting by walking around the dog and later by applying pressure ion the lead.

In both extensions correct him with an agh-agh as you move him back into position. You can extend it even further by running him at speed beside you on lead and then spring the halt command and expect him to stop immediately as you did. This exercise is absolutely priceless for communicating with a dog on point and I use it extensively when training a dog to stop to flush and totally steadiness to wing and shot (see a previous article titled Total Steadiness, start at the Finish for details) without the need for a single command as is expected at VGP standard. No electrical punishment needed, just a step by step approach that the dog understands.

I hope I've relayed in this article that you remain calm and patient with each exercise being achieved with lots of showing, so you avoid lots of corrections. You as the trainer has to decide when your dog has mastered a step before moving onto the next. Too slow you risk having the dog bored but moving too fast with lessons half learnt creates a lot of doubt and confusion in the dog. Keep in mind when training "that nothing succeeds like success" with your dog feeling pretty successful and confident.

If you have time to feed the dog, you really have time to train it!! So, every mealtime you should put the dog through the whole obedience routine or at least what its learnt to date. Release the dog as you prepare its food and give it to him with pats and praise for the work. You can practise some of the extensions such as sitting the dog out of site or sitting at a distance while you prepare his food but be prepared to make corrections immediately as they occur but this time make him wait longer for his mistake. You can practise sitting him while you prep his food then move to a position to release him to go with a wave of your left or right arm as you would in the field. The classic is to sit him out of sight but on lead, prepare his food then call him but spring the HALT command on him as he comes into sight and expect him to obey immediately, you must be between him and the food to enforce this !! . Take him back to where you used the command and repeat it if he took a few steps too many, before releasing him to go eat. At mealtimes he is ramped up and attentive so primed to take to training so he can get fed. The things you can devise, really shows “ if you have time to feed the dog , you have the time to train it.”

Good training and Waidmansheil Jeff Martin