



The Versatile Hunting Dog Federation

By Jeff Funke

The Versatile Hunting Dog Federation (VHDF) was established December of 2007 with the help of long time versatile hunting dog enthusiasts including Sigbot Winterhelt, Josef Schmutz, Ed Bailey, and myself. VHDF held their first hunting dog evaluations in the spring of 2008 and currently has active affiliates in Alberta, California, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Saskatoon. VHDF's mission is to promote ethical hunting practices and conservation of game animals by enhancing the quality and ability of versatile hunting dogs through breeder and handler education, performance based testing, and by facilitating continuing education and information exchange regarding health and genetics. The primary path taken to accomplish our mission is by conducting field tests designed to evaluate versatile hunting qualities of breeds registered by any recognized registry or studbook. VHDF is an all-breed testing organization that exists to serve breed clubs, breeders, individual owners and the dogs themselves by providing a fair, comprehensive testing system. Breed standards, registration, registry and other such matters are the sole responsibility of individuals or breed clubs and not the responsibility of VHDF.

Summary of VHDF Testing

VHDF tests are noncompetitive. Dogs are evaluated against a set standard specifically designed around the collective values of North American hunters and their dogs. These evaluations are designed as a tool for the hunter and breeder to evaluate natural ability and trainability in a public forum. The test results are public record and are useful to breeders for future breeding decisions. The results also tell owners what areas they should emphasize in future training for an all-around and capable hunting dog. VHDF field judges are now trained internally through our rigorous apprentice program. The initial VHDF field judges came from a combination of North American and European hunt test programs as well as field trial judges.

The VHDF testing and evaluation program is divided into three distinct categories: (1) aptitude evaluation, (2) performance evaluation and (3) conformation evaluation.

Aptitude testing or evaluating the dog's natural hunting aptitudes refers to an evaluation of the natural ability or capacity of the dog in any one of a number of hunting related subjects that are considered to be inherited. Aptitude testing is particularly important for versatile dogs given the nature of such dogs and the large number of different and sometimes conflicting hunting related aptitudes they are expected to possess.

VHDF offers two levels of aptitude testing. The first level, the **Hunting Aptitude Evaluation (HAE)**, is designed to record the level of hunting aptitude in the young dog up to approximately 1.5 years old; however, there are no age requirements. At this age, the dog should have been exposed to game but not seriously trained and thus still exhibit semi-natural aptitude. During the HAE, each dog is evaluated

in the aptitudes of Nose, Search, Pointing, Tracking, Water, as well as having Desire and Cooperation evaluated during each of the specific test subjects.

The second level of aptitude testing is the **Advanced Hunting Aptitude Evaluation (AHAE)** and it is designed for the young dog beyond puppy stage that is fully developed mentally and physically. The abilities of the dog at this level should have been further enhanced through training, therefore giving one a very reliable and detailed evaluation. This level of detailed evaluation is very useful as the primary tool for the hunter and breeder to evaluate natural ability and trainability of individual dogs as well as entire litters. During the AHAE, each dog is evaluated for the aptitudes of Nose, Search, Pointing, and Search behind a duck (which combines tracking and water) as well as having Desire and Cooperation evaluated during each of the specific test subjects. Further, each dog is tested in the trained subjects of Steadiness on Game, Retrieving on Land and in Water, Blind Water Entry, and Retrieve by Drag, as well as having Obedience evaluated during each of the specific trained test subjects. The AHAE test has been long awaited by many top breeders because it is one of the few events that evaluates the dogs' natural talents and trainability at a more rigorous and useful level than just a puppy test; yet allows for a dog that has not been completely finished and thus able to possibly mask inherited faults. This makes the AHAE test useful as both a progeny test and an individual dog test.

VHDF believes that Breeders and Breed Clubs are responsible for selecting the future path of their breeds as opposed to the natural selection that occurs in nature. Selection for a dog breeder is the task of choosing the individual animals that will best carry the future of the breed. This task is both art and science. By using some science based on VHDF estimates of hunting aptitudes, breed clubs and breeders may improve their odds of choosing the best individuals that not only produce the most talented offspring, but those with the least number of defects. VHDF aptitude testing is particularly useful in selective breeding programs that utilize progeny testing to determine the genetic value of a parent or a set of parents. Progeny testing involves inspecting groups of offspring from specific parents. Whereas individual breeders rely mostly on individual selection, breed clubs and groups of breeders are able to pool their resources and utilize progeny testing. In this case, if entire litters of offspring from related parents or groups of offspring from particular sires show above average aptitude in the natural ability subjects, one can reasonably conclude that these parents are genetically valuable because of the quality of their offspring.

Performance testing seeks to identify dogs that are fully capable at all levels of work before and after the shot, on land and water, by themselves or in a brace. Performance testing identifies dogs that not only have the necessary hunting aptitudes, but gives further insight into temperament and tractability. Therefore, dogs must complete significant training in order to accomplish the required tasks.

The VHDF **Performance Evaluation (PE)** is designed to evaluate the fully finished versatile dog. The PE is the highest level of competency for dogs within the VHDF system. The Performance test should serve as the definitive evaluation for hunters and breeders who seek to test their dog's ability as well as their own training skills at the highest level. During the PE, each dog is evaluated in the aptitudes of Nose, Search, Pointing, Search Behind a Duck, Water Search Without a Duck, and Backing or honoring a brace mate's point. Further, each dog is tested in the trained subjects of Blind Water Retrieve,

Steadiness on Game, Retrieving by Land, Water, and Drag, as well as having Desire, Cooperation, and Obedience evaluated throughout the entire test.

While the inherited aptitudes are still evaluated in the PE, the main focus is on the overall performance of the dog handler team to accomplish the task at hand; such as remaining steady through the fall or recovering a duck on the blind retrieve. VHDF considers the PE to be the most valuable test for individual breeders to utilize for *individual* selection since it incorporates all the aptitudes, as well as gives insight into temperament and trainability. In addition, hunters and trainers seeking to measure their training methods and suitability of their dog as a reliable and competent hunter before the shot, after the shot and in the company of a companion's dog will find the PE to be a useful evaluation. .

The final component of the VHDF testing program is the **Confirmation and Structure Evaluation (CSE)**. The CSE is a detailed evaluation of every part of the dog from head to toe with a major emphasis on proper structure and movement in the field. Coat quality is also evaluated in detail. The CSE is not designed to compete with or supersede breed shows offered by breed clubs, as we cannot offer the level of detail that the specific breed specialist judges can. What we do offer is information for the individual breeder that otherwise has no access to such knowledge. VHDF believes in the "Total Dog" concept and encourages their members to pay equal attention to performance, structure, temperament and health. This program was developed by combining the attributes of the AKC conformation programs with the more detailed evaluations conducted by European breed clubs. As such, many VHDF CSE judges are conformation judges certified by AKC or their European counterparts.

VHDF Scoring System

The VHDF scoring system is referred to as a 10 point plus system. Under relatively normal conditions, dogs are scored from 0 to 10 in each subject, with a 10 being roughly equal to a 100 percent performance. A 100 percent performance means that nothing else is expected at that level in that subject and there is little to no room for improvement. Likewise, a 5 is roughly equal to a 50 percent performance, meaning the dog did half of the work expected or showed half of the ability that experience tells us is possible. The scores of 11 and 12 are reserved for performances that exceed the expectations of the judges, and in the case of the 12 overcame difficult conditions as well. The VHDF scoring system is designed to leave plenty of room at the top end to recognize truly exceptional dogs and performances when they occur. In many venues, an average dog can earn the highest possible score. In this respect, the goal of VHDF is to do the best job possible of identify the truly above average dogs as opposed to merely offering a passing score or the opportunity to earn a title if the dog meets the minimums.

In the **Hunting Aptitude Evaluation (HAE)**, all subjects are scored with a numerical weighting factor of one. This is for simplicity so that individuals and breed clubs may easily interpret the numbers for their own purposes. While we as individuals may value certain characteristics more than others, i.e. some say desire is more important than cooperation, we have refrained from placing arbitrary numerical

weighting factors on the individual subjects. After all, if a dog is deficient in any one of the inherited aptitudes considered to be useful for versatile hunting dogs, he is not a good prospect as a truly versatile hunting companion.

In the **Advanced Hunting Aptitude Evaluation (AHAE)** and in the **Performance Evaluation (PE)** where more training is required the scoring is divided into trained subjects and natural ability subjects. The trained subjects have a numerical weighting factor of one while the natural ability subjects have a numerical weighting factor of two. Training tends to have more variables than aptitude and therefore less genetic importance, but it should not be overlooked entirely.

Ultimately, the purpose of the VHDF 10 point plus system is to provide detailed, meaningful and consistent information. The Versatile Hunting Dog Federation does not award first, second and third place; nor prizes; nor trophies and ribbons. The level of detail provided by the 10 point plus system allows breeders to increase the selection pressure for particular traits that they seek, as well as for the overall quality of their breed.

A Few VHDF FAQ's

Since VHDF is a new organization with some new ideas we tend to get a few questions on a regular basis. Here are my answers to some of those questions.

Q: Why is VHDF needed when there are already a number of other similar organizations?

A: While it is true that there are similarities between VHDF and existing clubs we feel that none are as inclusive, detailed, and flexible. VHDF allows all breeds and all registries, whereas some testing groups exclude purebred dogs based on their registry. VHDF also includes conformation and water and tracking work for the truly versatile hunter. Finally, the VHDF scoring system provides a high level of detail which is useful for breeders and breed clubs to select parents with the highest genetic value. VHDF feels their scoring system does the best job of identifying the above average progeny and individuals as opposed to systems that mostly identify the below average performers. This is somewhat similar to the way the competitive field trial system identifies the above average performers in the breed overtime vs. a hunt test that clearly identifies competency, but may or may not identify above average performers. The VHDF scoring system cannot only certify competency at given tasks and as a whole, but by having a 10 point plus system with the 11 and 12 given for exceptional performances they can identify the very uppermost performers.

Q: Why are there no titles or at least a passing score? I am not sure how well my dog performed?

A: VHDF is a highly competitive organization consisting of very dedicated breeders, hunters, and versatile dog fanciers. Except for the PE field evaluation, all the tasks are run with the dog as an individual in a non-competitive environment. VHDF celebrates all dog organizations that are committed to improving their breed, competitive or not. VHDF chooses to eliminate titles and pass fail cutoffs for several reasons. First, not all breeds are at the same level of ability. Some gene pools are currently very

small and have little breeding stock to choose from. Given that fact, we feel we do not have the knowledge to dictate to breed clubs how old a dog needs to be, what total score is needed to pass, or which of the hunting aptitudes are most important for their breed and therefore carries the highest weight and has the greatest impact on the final score. Second, VHDF seeks to merely provide data and avoid the politics of earning titles. The awarding of a title would be an arbitrary cutoff that may be useful as a benchmark, but again tends to take the focus off of the very best performers and put it back on the title benchmark itself. The scoring system is very simple to interpret. In the HAE for example, the dog is tested in 7 hunting aptitudes and the scoring is from 1 to 10 with 10 being a 100 percent performance. A score of 70 means that the dog obtained full performance in all categories. Likewise, it is important to look at the score in individual categories so that such information may be used to improve a breeding program's weakest areas by seeking lines of dogs that consistently perform near full performance in those areas. Participants are provided a detailed certificate of evaluation for their dog and the results are posted online.

Q: I don't see a VHDF affiliate in my area and I would like to participate in a VHDF event. What should I do?

A: VHDF currently has 9 affiliates mostly in the West and Midwestern US. VHDF would like to offer more opportunities for our members throughout the US and Canada. To start a new affiliate group is easy to do and has minimal requirements in terms of cost or infrastructure. Existing dog clubs, groups, or individuals for that matter need not form a separate sub-chapter of VHDF. All one needs to do is pay an annual affiliation fee of \$150 and pay a set fee of \$450 per 3 person judging team for each weekend of testing. The first test is offered at no cost so clubs can try out the VHDF format with minimal investment.

For more information on the Versatile Hunting Dog Federation, please visit our website at www.vhdf.org.