

## **Hegewald From an Observer's Perspective: What I Learned**

*By Don Amboyer: The author is a VDD-GNA member in the Atlantic Chapter. He is temporarily re-located to London with wife Andrea and Yago III vom Altmoor; his first Deutsch Drahthaar.*

This article is written for the average GNA member who may have tested through VJP and HZP but wonders what the Hegewald test is all about. Maybe you even have aspirations of taking a long, expensive journey to run that special dog in this prestigious test. That aspiration is why I attended the 2013 Hegewald in Großefehn, Germany. My intent is to share what I learned so more GNA members will participate and arrive knowledgeable about the test conditions.

A few words about me: I am neither a judge nor breeder and don't have intentions to do either. I value this club because of the breeding regulations and balanced testing system that produced a great hunting dog for me. Handlers with more experience and judges would undoubtedly have seen more nuances in the tests and dog work than I did.

### *Event Preparation and Organization*

Hegewald is truly a special event. The sheer number of Drahthaar owners, breeders, handlers and judges gathered for these dogs is remarkable. Besides Germans and Americans I met people that traveled from across Europe including Austrians, Dutch, Greeks, Italians, Serbs and Ukrainians. Some came to test their dogs while others came to view the stock and connect with breeders. Don't be surprised if it's assumed you are there to shop.

I don't speak German so this is a serious handicap to communicating effectively. Bring a German-speaking friend or, better yet, learn basic German so that you bridge the language barrier. Don't assume your judges will speak English with you.

On the topic of partners: I imagine it would be downright hard to do this test alone. I think a normal test is stressful enough. Now imagine adding air travel, dog through customs, back-roads driving in an unfamiliar country to remote areas and tight time schedules to those stressors! A friend to help manage logistics, program the test site addresses into the GPS (you did buy a GPS loaded with European roads, right?) and offer support would be invaluable.

Do thorough research and planning! By reading the publically available information on past tests I was able to get a sense of the environment. The dogs are split into two groups testing over two days. The groups alternate so that while one is doing fieldwork the other is doing water work and breed test evaluations. In some cases the test locations were 20+ miles from the headquarters where the breed test takes place. Be certain to give yourself enough travel time.

### *The Field Work*

Prepare to be flexible! Test sites are unique with different types of cover, proximity to roads and structures. For example, the field site I attended was rich with hares but pheasants were relatively scarce. A judge spotted a pheasant in a long strip of thick, reedy cover adjacent to a barn on arrival at the site. Two dogs were put down quickly to do a field search in the hopes of getting a pointing evaluation. We probably would have stayed in the area except that the cows came over to check out what the fuss was about! Don't assume wide-open areas with CRP-like cover. A quick point of a roe deer or pheasant in a slough filled with cattails might be the only opportunity.

My impression is that Germans are very focused on hare tracks. I also experienced this at a German VJP I attended in April. In both cases we spent the vast majority of field time doing a line push through six-inch tall, thick grass cover for hares. Sometimes a dog would be searching in front of the line. This often resulted in a hare being jumped and chased. Other times all dogs would be on lead while the line jumped hares. A good hare would flush in front of the line and be visible for 1,000 yards. But a dog might also be put on a hare that flushed behind the line.

Where I come from we don't have hares. In contrast, one handler told me that his dog has been on more than 100 hare tracks. This is a dog that is familiar with hare and has probably experienced bumping into boar or roe deer while running a track. Seems to me there would be a marked performance difference from an eastern American dog accustomed to cottontail rabbits versus a dog experienced with hares. Making contact with German VDD members that could help with familiarizing a dog with local game and arriving at least a week early would be the ideal.

Bring your choke collar! Each dog I saw wore a choke collar in the field and before being released in the water tests. In talking with handlers I learned that this is normal practice. Makes sense because you may be walking a line for 4+ hours with young, highly driven dogs.

My observation is that Germans put great emphasis on strict obedience. In researching past test scores I noticed many dogs with Armbruster Halt awards. Most of the dogs that I saw in the field were trained to Down at the whistle at distances of 50+ yards. Walking calmly at heel was required and enforced with the choke collars. The tactic of positive re-enforcement with treats was used heavily in front of judges throughout the fieldwork. By contrast, don't be surprised to see harsh punishment of disobedience from a minority of handlers when the judges aren't looking.

### *The Water Work*

I was fortunate in spending a day at a water site that, in my opinion, was very well suited for testing. It was fully enclosed by fence and about 5 acres large. The site was a nice combination of open water, water lilies cover and thick reedy cover where the ducks were thrown into for blind retrieves and search. [Insert

included photo of water test site] I heard from other handlers that water sites varied to smaller bodies measuring 40 by 200 yards with mixed cover. In contrast to my testing experience, handlers were allowed to give regular verbal and hand signal communications to dogs during search. These included overs, backs and whistle commands. I also saw that judges were actively speaking with handlers during the search. The judges are there to help the handlers and evaluate the best possible work from the dogs! A well placed shot or stone throws helped several dogs complete the tasks with good scores. In fact, I witnessed a 12 score in duck search that included 3 shots plus a kill shot for retrieve. A judge later explained that the dog had been exclusively searching in the thick cover for more than 20 minutes while the duck attempted to evade by circling around the perimeter of the cover; hence the shots.

Open judging was made after each dog took its turn in the sensitivity, blind retrieve and search tests. Thorough explanations of the dog's conduct and reasons for the scores were announced to the group. I was lucky to have an interpreter to explain the conversation. High value is placed on thorough searching through thick cover versus open water and water lilies. Time of search was not mentioned but average search time was about 10 minutes by my watch. A long search with duck evading in heavy cover was highly rewarded.

#### *The Breed Show*

This portion of the test was done at the headquarters building. Dogs scheduled for water work would be evaluated for coat and confirmation on either the morning or afternoon of the water tests. I didn't have an interpreter so cannot describe themes and results of judging. Having an interpreter to explain the scores would be key to understanding the results.

#### *Focus on the "Hunt" in the Hunting Test*

In closing, the theme I took away from the tests is that they are conducted to closely simulate an actual hunt. I heard several times that if you speak or direct your dog while hunting then you should not deviate from that in the test! The relationship between judges and handler was very collegial.

It was often repeated that the judges are there to help because they want to see the best from the dog and give as many opportunities as possible. For example, a dog in the field test began the day working very close to its handler. It worked so close that there was not adequate separation between dog and handler to test gunfire sensitivity. The dog was allowed to continue with the group for the morning field search and tracking tests. After the lunch break the dog began to range out from a handler and successfully completed the gun sensitivity test. Later that day it earned a 12 in hare track after repeat tracks that produced hares and lasted more than 800 yards!

My experience at Hegewald provided insights into the German hunting traditions and approach to testing. I'm grateful to the VDD for allowing me to watch their tests so that I can become a more successful handler. It was also wonderful to be

a part of the atmosphere at this special test. I hope more GNA members will make the trip to Germany to observe or handle dogs in this test so that first-hand sharing of knowledge mutually strengthens the organization.