

A Falconry Dog in the Making The Continuing Saga of Parkland Mews

By Robert Wheeldon

By way of introduction, it is clear that the Deutsch-Drahthaar can be used for falconry. Beyond that there is the belief the DD system of breeding and testing—including particular disciplines such as the Armbruster Halt and bringsel work—provide a mechanism for producing falconry dogs of outstanding caliber. What follows is the process of developing a DD for future use in falconry, from choosing a pup to completion of the VJP. Mention should be made of the unstinting assistance provided through the whole process by Michael and Jeanne Schell, the breeders of “Cory” — Corinna II vom Jagdkönig.

The steps toward the VJP began not with the purchasing of a pup, but rather several years earlier with an intensive and at times confusing search of the various German bloodlines that were in evidence at the time the quest began. The VJP, after all, either validates or eliminates the attributes a certain dog has on a given day by a given handler, a crucial snapshot viewed not through the subjective eyes of the breeder or handler but rather the more objective filters of trained judges.

Issues such as where in Germany the lines were produced, to what degree the line changed when it was brought forward into North America, the effects of geographical location, the type of game that was predominantly hunted, the impact of the second world war and the results from the breeder’s previous breeding were just some of the pieces of the puzzle that slowly began to build a picture of various kennels for further consideration.

What began as a belief that the DD could be a suitable falconry dog turned into an investigation involving many long distance phone calls, meetings with breeders, attending events, seeking advice and a compilation of copious notes. However preferences began to emerge, and it was during a conversation with Jim Dunn and Michael Schell while attending Group North America’s Annual General

Meeting in Iowa, that the options finally narrowed down to a point where a decision was made.

Although elaborating on this background search may appear a somewhat unusual approach to an article on the VJP, it seemed an appropriate place to begin. The future of a kennel with the aim of breeding dogs for falconry depended in large part on the selection of a suitable puppy and the eventual outcome of the VJP for this puppy and its littermates.

So just what are the particular attributes in a Deutsch-Drahthaar that weigh in favor of its use with falconry? Keeping in mind that the following attributes are all important, if pressed to choose one above all others it would be COOPERATION.

The reason for this choice comes from the ultimate primary working relationship in which the human merely serves as the glue that binds the dog and bird together in a cohesive partnership in the field. In a sense it is an attempt to contrive the natural symbiotic relationship that exists in the wild between foxes



Parkland Mews Kennel

Left: Corinna II vom Jagdkönig (195360)
Dam: Ursie vom Jagdkönig
Sire: Augustus vom Herbstwind

Robert with one of the Peregrine falcons
Right: Liesel (Konni vom Weierhof – 175239)

and falcons. Falconry is the kind of hunting that is about as close to nature as one can get. The human involvement may be construed as vicarious, experiencing the hunt through the talent of the dog and the speed, eye and talon of the falcon in order to bring game to bag. Falconry has in the offering breath-taking, awe-inspiring, and heart-stopping action against a natural canvas of light, expanse and multi-hued landscapes. When the bird leaves the glove the human is the spectator and the falcon keys in on the dog to produce game for that final onslaught from the utmost extent.

Excellent NOSE, POINT and MANNERS ON GAME are all attributes beyond price and essential to the falconry dog. False pointing is a heinous crime and not to be tolerated! The dog must be honest and true. Because falcons are aerial predators of game birds and waterfowl, obviously the ability to RETRIEVE and swim like an otter as well as a strong desire to SEARCH on land and in water is invaluable. And what about those moments when the falcon is down on a kill and at risk from Great Horned Owls or Golden Eagles? Defending the game and protecting the hunter's means of acquiring food is also critical to continued days in the field, so even the HARDNESS TEST is valuable. By now the reader will begin to see how the various testing disciplines dovetail so neatly with the needs of falconry.

After much forethought, the plan included a pup that had been line bred, one with common ancestors present in both the dam and sire's genealogical history. The inbred coefficient on this litter was 11.8 %. By way of explanation, if the biological relationship between mates was parents crossed with offspring or the crossing of full siblings the coefficient relationship is 50%. If the cross was between half siblings, double first cousins, aunt/nephew or uncle/niece, then the coefficient relationship would be considered 25%. First cousins would be 12.5% and second cousins 6.25%. Immediately beyond that is a gray area where the breeding could be considered line breeding or out-crossing, before getting into territory that is firmly regarded as out-crossing. The choice of dam and sire had already been established from the options that were available from Michael's breeding

program, including the desire to take a pup that was born in October.

Choosing a pup from the litter was helped by the decision to take a bitch. With twelve dogs in the litter—split evenly between males and females—right away the field narrowed to six. Also a lot of data had been sent to Michael not only describing the preferred attributes, but the various temperament tests and questions of litter dynamics and anecdotal information that would aid in the selection process. Michael was somewhat surprised when, after receiving all of that information and countless hours on the phone, the responsibility for the final choice was left to him. After all was said and done, his and Jeanne's insights over seven weeks of observation coupled with line history was far more instructive than I could have gained from a much more limited opportunity to make a choice. Temperament, point and manners on game were already much in evidence even at just over seven weeks, so it was those characteristics—along with Michael's estimation that the other bitches would need a firmer hand—which led to the selection of Corinna II vom Jagdkönig, born 1st October 2004.

Sixteen hours of continuous driving, punctuated with necessary toilet stops for the pup, eventually saw her in her new home in Canada. What began with several weeks of sleeping with her on the pillow at night (bonding) led to a structured and full routine of exploration, exposure and environmental conditioning.

Tracking to the food bowl was encouraged from an early age, along with obedience exercises in the house during the brutal, long winter months here in Manitoba. Tracking appears to be a hurdle for some young dogs and handlers in the natural ability test. Tracking exercises were begun early in the belief that the exercise can reveal a lot about the dog's future potential, not only in terms of scenting and how the animal exploits information to its advantage, but also in terms of the necessary character attributes including confidence, desire and temperament. It appears tracking requires more of the dog in terms of natural ability than, say, simply the ability to point. There were forays outside when the temperature and wind chill permitted.

In spring a trip was made to Minnesota to observe a VJP and a decision was taken to enter her in a Natural Ability test in the NAVHDA system for the late summer. She would be eleven months and three weeks old at the time of testing. The NAVHDA Natural Ability test has some similar aspects to it as the VJP with the addition of water work. There are some differences in the way dogs are handled according to judging preferences but the test would provide exposure to gun sensitivity, search, nose, point and tracking and so provide an indicator of the dog's natural ability. Hopefully, the test would also reveal any areas that would need to be honed prior to the JGHV test. Spring also took on a more intentional program of exposure and exercises ranging from introduction to scent pointing to tracking and careful management of fondness for water during the spring run off and beyond.

Understanding the dog became an enjoyable pastime. Subjects ranging from information exchange in the olfactory system to aspects about the brain function in tracking were vigorously pursued. It became apparent the natural ability test required a much more in depth working knowledge of physiology and anatomy in relation to scenting and tracking and how exposure and memory played into the equation than was previously thought. This background information on understanding the dog proved an excellent way to enhance both handler and canine preparation toward the VJP. While the theory helped, it was the fieldwork that actually determined the steps in training.

The approach to training was rudimentary. It began with teaching, i.e., showing the pup what was expected, followed by repetitive steps and bridging techniques for exercises that were more extensive. For longer term results the training regime called for a combination of exercise repetition for seven minutes a day three times a day, and, lots and lots of positive reinforcement. Note the absence of punitive action at this stage. While puppies in the wild do play at this stage of development the intent by the handler was to begin teaching tasks beyond play. Only when the pup had accomplished the task was there an attempt to move on. In other words the pup revealed when it was ready to move on, and not the other way round. All that was required was

to observe what the pup was demonstrating in



Pointing exercise from the bird's view!
Robert has a Chukar partridge planted well out of sight of the young dog.

terms of task accomplishment.

It quickly became apparent that tracking was not progressing as planned, even though a third of the dog's brain is given over to the olfactory system. The dog appeared to lack focus even though the automatic response to the TRACK command was truly entrenched from a very early age. Laid tracks or 'drags', although done with frequency, were viewed more as steps in the process of encouraging the dog to get its nose down and move in a forward direction and a way to assess obedience and cooperation rather than an indicator of tracking ability.

The NAVHDA Natural Ability Test requires a pheasant track and as pheasants are produced on site it was not a lack of birds or exposure to scent that was the problem. The problem was the assumption that by giving the command to TRACK coupled with a freshly laid track was all that was needed; clearly this was not enough.

Understanding that scent travels up the dog's nose to sensors and fits into a particular shaped "scenting cell" for that particular scent molecule

(the lock and key theory) and that nerves transmit a particular scent's molecule message to the dog's brain by assumed electrical impulse where it is registered by the dog made it difficult to understand why Corinna was not focused on the pheasant track. Careful examination was made of the nose, checking for moistness. The nose contains a volatile mucous critical for dissolving the scent molecules and making them acceptable to the scenting cells for onward communication transmission to the brain. Furthermore the issue appeared to be more complex based on the knowledge that she was not restricted to just the residual odor left behind by the pheasant but also had the use of disturbed bacteria and scent from crushed and displaced grasses caused by the running bird to aid her in the track. Having witnessed other dogs search for and follow odor trails even to the point of developing search images of model habitats (objectives) where game might be found led to even more questioning.



Robert used a long line with outdoors tracking so that he could control the dog during training. He didn't want her to have an opportunity to go off on her own at this stage.

There was no doubting that the genetic or acquired faculty for tracking was in the dog and that Corinna was able to use odor for sensory input. It was more a question of finding a way for the dog to bring this ability to the fore, much in the way the progression had been made from sight pointing to scent pointing. Scent pointing for Corinna had begun with a wing on a string, followed by sight pointing a game bird before finally letting her find a bird on her own and seeing it fly away when she got too close. This

was all necessary for scent pointing to become a recognizable trait. Not to mention a great foundation for future steadiness work.

It was eventually decided to provide a visual cue prior to laying the track by letting Corinna see the pheasant first run down a prescribed path made by vehicle tracks, through a field and then bring her up to the starting position indicated by the plucked feathers. When let out of the truck and tethered by a long check cord, the dog on the command to TRACK kept her head down and stayed focused on the path of the bird for over one hundred meters before pointing the pheasant at the end of the track.

Just how much memory combined with the added visual stimulus played into the learning/exposure equation on this occasion is uncertain. The results could not have been more dramatic; the light bulb appeared to come on through a three-step exercise, visual stimulus, command to track and a fresh scent trail to move the dog forward. Once the visual association had been made two more blind tracks were laid (scent only, no visual stimulus) and the outcomes were successful.

It is realized that after using scent to locate game wolves will switch to visual sensory perception, which indicates that canines can use multi-sensory ability and are not limited to a singular source for locating game. Furthermore it is believed that while tracking is an innate trait in wild canines there is a critical need for training or exercising those traits, which in the case of wild canines comes about through the daily life and death struggle for survival. There may be a natural ability to track at birth but it needs to be exercised in order for it to become effective. "You snooze, you lose" could almost be the euphemism that applies to the tracking exposure exercises required for living in the wild and has a certain application to tracking training for the VJP.

In the earlier tracking exercises only part of the instruction had been provided. The lack of a visual cue and reliance on just the provision of a scent trail (including the use of live birds and drags of feather and fur) combined with a command to track appeared to be the issue. All that remained was to lengthen the tracks and do

them in mown areas during the heat of the day to extend the dog's working experience. Just as well the problem was solved, because the test date was just a couple of days away.

Having drawn seventh in the running order, the practical part of the NAVHDA test began with water work. At the Natural Ability level NAVHDA requires that the dog willingly enter the water and swim twice. A bumper is thrown to entice the dog into the water. Corinna was led down to the shore, commanded to sit until the collar and Jaeger lead were removed. The bumper was thrown and she was sent into the water. The bumper had been thrown out quite a long way, which led onlookers to question "why so far"? Corinna made the retrieve, completed the delivery to sit beside the handler facing forward and waited for the customary two strokes down her back before placing the dummy in the proffered outstretched hand. A maximum of two commands were given for the entire exercise. [Remember: There is no water work in the VJP—one of the differences between the NAVHDA and VDD natural ability tests.]

The judges next proceeded to examine Corinna's physical characteristics and with a knowing look by the judges, it became quickly apparent they believed too much pressure had been placed on such a young dog. The level of performance by Corinna compared to the other dogs being tested was apparent and was later confirmed by the judges when directly questioned by the handler.

The field search resulted in five finds and points, her performance being marred by a single long chase on one of the flying chukars. Apart from giving the odd command the instruction to the handler was to remain "stum" (silent), a practice that was to continue through the VJP. After all, the goal was to assess natural ability and not to have that masked by verbal commands by the handler unless otherwise directed by the judging team.

The NAVHDA outcome was encouraging with a perfect score in all categories and a snapshot of what she was capable of on that day. Furthermore Corinna was one of only two dogs to achieve tracking scores out of the nine dogs tested that day.

Summer was drawing to an end, autumn was arriving and with it great anticipation of hunting. It was also time to introduce her to a Peregrine Falcon.

"How is a dog stopped from eating a tethered falcon?" is the question often asked by people confronted with the sight of a Deutsch-Drahthaar and falcon being in close proximity to each other. The reverse is sometimes asked about why the falcon doesn't claw the dog. The answer lies in the training. Just how would the pup fare seeing a tethered bird in the living room feeding on a freshly killed quail? The actual moment was met with great curiosity. The reaction of the falcon was to spread its wings and look defiant raising its hackles in an aggressive posture. The response by the handler was to growl the words "aaahhh phui", but not too loudly for fear of damaging the fragile relationship that was being forged between man and bird. The falcon either from fright or nervousness, launched off her block with the sound of bells ringing from her legs only to be pulled up short on her leash before flying back to her perch. Shock registered in the young dog and an immediate crouching down to avoid eight talons digging into her cemented the first lesson. A healthy respect ensued where the pup would avoid walking near the bird for a long period of time, although when confidence returned she would sometimes go right in and sniff the bird or its food, the bird all the while remaining watchful and aloof, ready to launch off at a moment's notice. This was a classic case of the bird teaching the dog very effectively and with a minimum of human input.



Cory and the Peregrine learn mutual respect.
It's a matter of training, says Robert.

Due to climatic conditions upland game hunting was abysmal in 2005 with no points on wild birds. Ducks were patchy and most contact came with Canada geese at which she enthusiastically would wail from the blind in anticipation of seeing them fall into the water. Being attacked by a full grown Canada on land is a lot for a young pup and her preference was to grab them in the water even if they proved too heavy for her to handle after reaching the shore. Despite many hours in the field the bird hunting season passed all too quickly and with not much to show for it. By now the Peregrine was also flying well overhead and keeping an eye on the dogs as they worked the fields. Early indications were of a dog with good potential for falconry. There were times when Corinna was put on the fresh trail of a running jackrabbit and away she would go giving tongue through the stubbled fields of fall.



Many of the White-tailed Jackrabbits weighed upward of 3 kilos and had to be carried through belly-deep snow. This muscle development is great preparation for the fox work in the VGP.

Fourteen months old now, and again snow on the frozen ground. Time to hunt White-tailed Jackrabbits (*Lepus townsendii*)—differing from Black-tailed Jackrabbits (*Lepus californicus*) with respect to the color of the top of the tail—hence the vernacular names—and size, following Bergman's rule.

These are stunning creatures in their own right. Herbivorous in nature, they feed primarily on succulent grasses and forbs that are either pre-reproductive or in the early reproductive stages of development. When these foods become dry

in winter shrubs are eaten. The breeding season begins in late February and lasts for nearly 150 days with litter sizes averaging four or five. Predators include coyotes, gray wolves, red foxes, golden eagles and hawks.

White-tailed Jackrabbits are considered the least sociable of all the hares and are nocturnal creatures hiding in forms during the day. When fleeing they may cover up to 5 meters per stride and have been attributed with a running speed of up to 55 km/ph. These large lagomorphs would congregate in fields of up to seventy or more, running in straight lines or short zigzags before sitting on their haunches or crouching on all fours.

Beautiful scent trails enhanced by droppings, treeless vistas providing excellent viewing and a multiplicity of rabbits provided much in the way of exposure and tracking opportunities. There were still moments of confusion when on one occasion a Jack had been wounded and was lying in a ditch parallel with a country road, the blood track clearly visible. The dog would begin to track and suddenly as if pulled by an invisible thread would suddenly turn at right angles and begin tracking something not seen. The pattern was repeated several more times before the blood trail connected to the wounded Jack and it ran. Yes, she tracked it, ran it down and retrieved it to hand. It was only afterward that one of the other hunters let it be known that several other jacks had crossed the path after the wounded jack had left its blood trail and she was distracted by the fresher scent of the following rabbits.

Many of the rabbits weighed upward of 3 kilos and were great for developing the dog's neck muscles and leg muscles having to retrieve through snow that was up to her belly. Good for her stamina as well.

About this time a call was made to the test director of the upcoming VJP as to what kind of rabbit were to be used in the test. The answer: Cottontails. The remaining winter the dog was left to track Cottontails that lived around the house and the woods beyond. Exposure, exposure, exposure! Additionally, cottontails were trapped and released in a variety of habitats

under a range of different conditions right up until just before the test in spring.

Basically the preparation was complete and all that remained was to get through the doubts that assail the pre-test handler.

Redlin Farms, the test venue, is located in the northeast quadrant of South Dakota. Ideally suited for a test, a 1,200 square foot lodge offers accommodation on site and is set in 4,000 acres of farmland enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program. The habitat was comprised of mature mixed grasses and treed shelterbelts. Dogs worked on wild pheasants and Cottontail rabbits.

The whole test team did a very professional job. They were extremely well organized, friendly, accommodating and a credit to GNA.

The day was cool with showers and some afternoon sun, a nice breeze and beautiful scenting conditions. The test began in an atmosphere full of differing undercurrents. Four-by-four vehicles, camouflage-clad figures, wet dogs, damp earth, nervous and expectant handlers, exaggerated guffaws, camera flashes, wives and girlfriends all coming together in a powerful and respectful silence when Senior Judge Leigh Betsch began outlining the day's programme. The moment had finally arrived that more than any other, would define the outcome of years of preparation for this evaluation of the dog's natural ability in general and future falconry potential in particular.

Quickly and efficiently the judging team began with a physical examination of the dogs before moving into a nearby field for the gun sensitivity portion of the test.

Then there was a brief drive to the area set aside for working wild pheasants. Corinna was distracted by territorial pairs of red winged blackbirds, lacked focus and came up without any discernable pointing ability. Placed second on the running order she was run again after all the other dogs had successfully located game.

Shortly after being told to release the dog on the second run she pointed a sitting hen pheasant and immediately gave chase. After that she began tracking another bird and put that one up.

Judging team and handler moved off in the opposite direction and she caught up after



Judges examine the teeth and bite.
Not my favorite part of the event, says Cory.
Let's get on with the fun stuff!

revisiting the location of her first-ever wild pheasant. This time out there was a discernable difference in her demeanor—she was all business, ignoring songbirds and with a new intensity once the exposure process had been awakened. The memory of that moment will remain for a long time so dramatic was the change; it was if she was for that brief spell an advocate for the whole breed. “Of course I am productive about finding game, not only that but with fire-brimmed passion. Just leave me alone and let me get on with it.” This was the morning's drama. Naturally after the first run the gallery, upon learning of no finds were respectful both in terms of distance and of quiet. After the second run there was a curious lingering and then an almost palpable relief when it was learned the dog had located game and established point for the judges to score. What a strong contrast between planted chukars in the NAVHDA test and wild pheasants in the VJP.

After late morning refreshments back at the lodge it was time for the hare track. For Corinna

the first track was almost a non-starter. The second was very long and exciting to watch. So with a poor track and an excellent track, another



was called for to verify her tracking ability.

Working wild pheasant was a whole different ballgame from the planted quail. Cory was all business, showing a new intensity and much different demeanor.

That was also a good one, causing the comment that the handler had painted a white line for her to follow.

From a handler's point of view the outcome of the day's performance was very uncertain and it was not until evening at supertime that the results were finally learned.

In the meantime the test committee went out of their way to accommodate a pre-Armbruster test. Corinna's x-ray results had already come back from Germany as HD-Free and Lynn Whitely

had graciously given permission for a pre-Armbruster test to take place after completion of the VJP. This was achieved to the judge's satisfaction.

Corinna's siblings had scored 63, 69, 72, 72, and 77. She was to join them with a 72. The credit for her performance belongs squarely on the shoulders of her breeder, Michael Schell. This "C" litter second time round was the result of knowledge gained from 28 previous breedings and decades of experience in the field.

So what are the conclusions from the experience? One thing it is not about is test scores of an individual dog. The answer is confirmation of a system comprised of individuals, past and present, dedicated to continuing a tradition of quality performance standards that originated in another country more than a hundred years ago, producing versatile dogs of outstanding ability in the field. The belief that this is also true for falconry is stronger than ever.

A quest such as this is not a solo quest and would not have been made possible without the generous support of many people in Group Canada and GNA. Breed wardens, breeders, test directors, judges, hosts, executive members of both organizations, fellow testing participants and, last but not least, training partners, including Jeff Gresham, now of Alberta, and my wife Nancy, who through many seasons contributed to Cory's good days in the field.