

# PART 1: THE UTILITY PREPARATORY TEST

## A Good Measure of a Serviceable 'Hunting' Dog

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“I don't want to get all wrapped up in this testing stuff, I just want some help training my hunting dog!” This is a statement you will hear from a lot of people new to NAVHDA with their first versatile dog.

Many people's first exposure to NAVHDA is by their breeder, who may suggest that new puppy owners join NAVHDA in hopes they will get their puppies evaluated in a Natural Ability (NA) test as a measure of their breeding program. That, and they know that NAVHDA chapters are a good way for them to meet other people familiar with the versatile breeds and get them on the right track.

The Minnesota Chapter is a very large chapter, averaging over 300 members annually the last several years. As with many chapters, we do get a fair number of new members who join for a year, participate enough to get their pup through the NA test, then they go on their way, and we never see them again. There is also another group of people who get involved with the chapter's exposure and training days, get through their NA test, get bitten

by the NAVHDA bug and camaraderie, and then say, “Now what?”

We realize that for most handlers and their dogs, especially new people, the goal of a Prize I Utility dog is probably not realistic. What we do stress, though, is that there is a lot of “middle ground” that can be covered between the Natural Ability Test and a Prize I Utility Test performance that will truly make your dog a better hunting companion.

After the NA test, the next test in the NAVHDA system is the Utility Preparatory Test (UPT). The NAVHDA Aims book describes this test as follows: “It is a test midway between the Natural Ability Test and the Utility Test. The dog's level of obedience and training should demonstrate that it is on its way to becoming a Utility dog.”

In the NAVHDA Natural Ability (NA), Utility Preparatory (UPT) and Utility (UT) tests, a dog that earns a “Prize,” even a Prize III level, is said to have “Passed” a particular test. What does this mean? In general, at each test level, this means that the dog met or exceeded

the minimum standards as set by the NAVHDA Aims & Rules for that test. Let's look at the minimum standards required to “Pass” the Utility Preparatory Test.

All NAVHDA tests use a 0–4-point scoring system for each segment of a test. The highlighted column of scores in parentheses in the far-right column in the chart indicates the minimum score necessary to obtain a Prize III level (passing) score in the test. So, what do those numbers mean, and what would a dog need to do to achieve those minimum scores?

While I am a NAVHDA judge, I want to emphasize that at a NAVHDA test, there are three judges, and the scores earned are a consensus score of what all three judges saw and evaluated throughout the dog and handler team's performance that day. For a full understanding of the NAVHDA scorecard system,

handlers should consider attending an official NAVHDA Aims & Rules Clinic.

If you look at the minimum Prize III requirements for the UPT test, for a dog to “Pass,” this is my own short synopsis of what I would be looking for, *in general*, for a dog to obtain a passing (Prize III) score.

Do a productive field search, point birds for the handler and consistently be at least “steady to flush” so the handler can flush the game in range of the gunners.

Retrieve all game it is sent out for *or breaks for on its own* (land and water) and bring it back to within reasonable reach of the handler no matter how efficiently it does it. (Game recovery is a key NAVHDA principle)

Do a several minute water search within reasonable shotgun range. A retrieve is not required unless the dog locates the dead duck.

Have decent manners on the way to and around the duck bind in the presence of gunfire and a thrown duck.

*Doesn't that sound like a “passable” HUNTING DOG?*

“Passing” or obtaining even a Prize III in UPT test proves that you have a useful hunting companion on land and water, before and after the shot, and will be a good foundation for further training and testing if you choose to.

# PART 2: THE 2022 MINNESOTA CHAPTER WINTER OBEDIENCE CLASSES AND UPT TRAINING GROUP

Minnesota winters are long, and for many, many years the Minnesota Chapter has held winter indoor obedience classes for its members. For 2022, I altered the course format to really gear it for those people wanting to test in UPT or UT. I called this foundation obedience class ‘Versatile Dog 201-Heel, Whoa, Fetch.’ Sixteen handlers/dogs participated in the class, spread into three groups, which met once per month for four months. At these sessions, they worked

with their own dogs to learn obedience concepts and training methods that they could then work on their own at home in between the monthly sessions. We even started a private Facebook group where participants could share their experiences and videos and get feedback on their progress.

Out of these class groups, I offered to take a small group of handlers and dogs and continue working with them toward participating in a UPT test. Seven handlers

Scoring System for the Utility Preparatory Test

Test	Index Number	Max. Points Attainable	Prize I	Prize II	Prize III
<b>Water</b>					
Water Search	4	16	16(4)	12(3)	8(2)
Walking at Heel	2	8	6(3)	4(2)	2(1)
Steadiness by Blind	2	8	6(3)	4(2)	2(1)
Retrieve of a Duck	3	12	9(3)	6(2)	3(1)
<b>Field</b>					
Search	5	20	15(3)	10(2)	10(2)
Pointing	4	16	16(4)	12(3)	8(2)
Steadiness on Game	3	12	9(3)	6(2)	3(1)
Retrieve of Shot Bird	3	12	9(3)	6(2)	3(1)
Retrieve by Drag	3	12	9(3)	6(2)	3(1)
<b>Judged Throughout</b>					
Use of Nose	6	24	24(4)	18(3)	18(3)
Desire to Work	5	20	20(4)	15(3)	10(2)
Cooperation	3	12	9(3)	6(2)	3(1)
Obedience	3	12	9(3)	6(2)	6(2)
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>184</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>79</b>

Minimum score for each prize classification is indicated in parentheses.

Utility Preparatory Test	Sex	Breed Reg #	Yr-Mo	WATER	FIELD	T/OUT	Pts	Prz	Owner/Handler
FAUCI SUGAREE LILACS VAN DE VELDE	F	SP-003231	2-1	43 44	44234	44 43	170	II	DEREK VAN DE VELDE
JUNIE BEE GIRARD	F	GS-023034	2-6	42 14	44233	44 42	156	III	ROBERT J GIRARD
FOREST HILLS RUNNING THE RIDGE TOP	M	GS-023852	1-3	24 43	44212	44 22	140	III	CHAD J GILLETTE
TEETH: MISSING 306,308&408									
RUSING BRUDER DE LA HNF	M	BS-001699	2-1	42 22	44233	44 43	155	II	ADAM M NELSON
TEETH: EXTRA 105									
SAGE XII	F	GW-013003	2-7	44 44	44344	44 43	178	I	LOGAN WEISS
JUDGES: BRENT A KROLL; DAVID M HAHN; MICHAEL L NEIDUSKI									

Score Legend: WATER-Search for Duck, Walking at Heel, Steady by Blind, Retrieve of Duck  
FIELD-Search, Pointing, Steadiness Total, Retrieve of Shot Bird, Retrieve by Drag  
TOTAL OUT-Nose, Desire to Work, Cooperation, Obedience

and dogs came out of this class with June 4<sup>th</sup> circled on their calendars for their UPT test. It was stressed to the participants that the work they did indoors over the next couple months would be the key to their success in June. To help cement this concept, I often tell new handlers: “Utility Dogs are NOT made on the fields and water of Kelley Farms in May, June and July, but they ARE made in your garage in January, February and March!”

Spring and ice-out came very late to Minnesota in 2022. It was late April before the group could get out on the water to work on duck searches. The water was still cold well into May, and two of the handlers’ dogs were just not showing enough progress on duck searches to move on to final test preparations. That June 4<sup>th</sup> test date was looming. They decided to not rush things and push the dogs too hard and they pulled from the test. That left five dogs and handlers in the June 4<sup>th</sup> UPT test. THEY ALL PASSED, and I have to say I was very proud of the group and their scores, especially their duck search and overall retrieving scores.

Here are some of the handlers’ stories and observations:

**BOB GIRARD AND JUNE (2 YEAR, 6 MONTHS GERMAN SHORTHAIRED POINTER)**

I signed up for the course because, never having a pointing dog, I was unsure/afraid that if I did something wrong there would be a chance that I would mess up the things June was already doing well. I felt that if I committed to the test, that it would hold me accountable to stick with it through the good days and bad.

My end goals were to improve on June’s retrieving and to get steady to at least shot.

The retrieving was definitely a struggle. I had no consistency. The best thing I learned was to break everything down to its smallest parts and then repeat, repeat, repeat... The last two weeks before the test, I had her



retrieve the same two wing-clipped chukar and pigeon about 100 times.

When I started this training with June, I did not have any desire to hunt Junie for ducks. To me, the duck search/water retrieving was just in case I dropped a rooster in a pond, the dog would get it, not me. Two weeks after we took the test, my 6 1/2 year old black lab, “my duck dog,” had to be put down because of kidney failure. Well, Junie just inherited a new job. She doesn’t hit the water like he did or do hand signals, but she got it done. This fall, I put down 63 birds and never had to take the boat out or wade out to get them. I’ll call that a success!

The one thing I was not expecting, is that I’d want to test again. I thought that after June got better at our goals I would be done. Now I have a new set of goals and want to improve on the original ones.



**ADAM NELSON AND BRU (2 YEAR, 1 MONTH OLD BRITTANY SPANIEL)**

I always had ambition for training my dog toward a Utility Test, but it wasn’t until I saw the Versatile 201 course with the Utility Preparatory Test group training option that I decided to give it a go. I know I wasn’t the only one in the group debating if we had what it takes to compete in the UPT, but when the ice finally went out, the progress we made in the Duck Search along with the obedience fundamentals we established during the winter gave us the confidence to proceed with the UPT.

I knew from the previous hunting season that just “Hold and Carry” training and reinforcement was not going to be enough, so a more complete Force Fetch/Retrieve training program was going to have to be part of the program. I learned the most about my dog and how to train him during this process. The investment we made in that will also give us the biggest payback in our future hunting seasons. Bru can be stubborn and get bored with training at times. Learning how to keep the task at hand fun for both of us was important for us. Could I have

gotten mad at Bru for some of his shenanigans during the test? YUP! But he is young and was having a ball. By far the biggest take away for me was that training shouldn’t come at the expense of the dog. There is no rush.

**DEREK VAN DE VELDE AND FAUCI (2 YEAR, 1 MONTH OLD SPINONE)**

The winter obedience class the chapter offered provided a hub of information and a philosophy that this is YOUR job, and the chapter will not train your dog for you. This is a place to hang out and train dogs together. It was a collective. An interactive experience. I started posting pictures and videos of the struggles and successes. It was a great group and awesome conversation. It felt like I was in contact with someone almost every day trying to dial in the process.

There was finally a point where we had that breakthrough in teamwork and understanding. Remember, you’re going through this together.

After the winter foundation course and at home training, we moved toward getting ready for the test. How the dog would handle birds was still on my mind. Is she going to pick up that challenging bird during the test? Well, we did it with a 170/184 UPT score. Was it perfect, no, but she did better than I expected!

This fall, as we approached hunting season, I thought, will all this training and test scenario stuff transfer to wild bird hunting? After a dozen or so woodcock wild flushed on us early season, I finally found her in the woods locked up on a woodcock. This was the moment I’ve been waiting for. I flushed the bird, shot, and it went down. She was on the search for that downed bird and I stood there wondering if it was coming back. I could not see her. From what I could hear she was focused in a spot and it seemed like she was struggling as she did in past hunting seasons and the woodcock was a new bird to her. I gave out a confident



“fetch” and I could hear the rustling in the brush come to an end and then saw her coming back to me. I almost started crying when I saw that bird in her mouth. She sat down in front of me and presented just like we practiced. I wish there was someone there to video the excitement in the woods at that moment.

To see that all come together was amazing.



**LOGAN WEISS AND SAGE (2 YEAR, 7 MONTH OLD GERMAN WIREHAIED POINTER)**

When Pete first announced his Versatile Dog 201-Heel, Whoa, Fetch course in December of 2021, I reached out immediately. I’d joined NAVHDA the previous year with my GWP who was too old to run NA. I hunted a lot, and I knew I wanted to run her in a test eventually, but as a first-time handler that seemed like a long way away.

The course provided a framework for what we should focus on in our training and deadlines to hit to be on track for our test. Pete made it clear he wasn’t going to train our dogs for us, but he was always available to answer questions, and I also got a community of guys working on the same things at the same time. By the time our June UPT test came around, I felt ready, and we ended up with a 178 Prize I.

With the confidence of completing UPT and the course which pushed us to work through duck search and force fetch, I signed up for a UT test later that summer. We worked on steadiness and clean retrieves until the test, and we finished with a 194 Prize I. I certainly couldn’t have gotten to that point without the foundation laid by Pete and the UPT group.

Last spring led me to really appreciate the UPT test, it seemed like the right test for the group - attainable, yet challenging. Our group shows that a lot of first-time handlers can get a dog to the UPT level over the course of the winter, and once you’re there not only do you have a dog with solid hunting skills, but UT finally seems attainable too.

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