

Tips and Tricks for (Draft) Tests!

Since its inception, one of the things that makes draft popular with so many enthusiasts is the camaraderie and positive environment typically found at tests. The dogs are never in competition with each other, and everyone entered has the same opportunity to excel on that day. The sport continues to increase in popularity both in our own breed and in others, as more and more tests are being opened to all breeds.

Whether you are a newbie preparing for your first test or an old timer with multiple titles, we can all use the following tips and tricks to help ensure successful tests for everyone – handlers, committees, judges and stewards and spectators alike!

Know Your Regulations. When you send in your entry, you sign a statement asserting that you have read the regulations and are familiar with them. Yet, judges often encounter handlers with only the most rudimentary passing knowledge of the regulations that govern our sport. Judges expect questions during the walk through, and there are certainly circumstances specific to every test that necessitate clarification, but the basics of the draft program should be clear to entrants beforehand. This includes such standard issues as the length of the stay exercise, wait v. stay on the load/unload, touching your dog, fouling the ring or freight haul, using food and how far the dog must back. Many handlers – and judges! - read over the regulations in their entirety before a test, no matter how many times they've been in the ring. This is good practice for everyone, and can help speed up the walk throughs, not to mention strengthen your own performance at a test, as it cuts down on the possibility of surprises!

Armchair Quarterbacking aka Good Sportsmanship. Sometimes, decisions are made at a test with which you may disagree. This happens in every sport, not just draft! We've all been there when we believe we've simply been robbed of our due. No matter how frustrating, however, we all should exhibit good sportsmanship. Armchair quarterbacking – handlers who are unhappy with the judges' decision regarding some aspect of the test, which usually leads to someone failing – is not going to change the outcome. This, in a nutshell, is bad sportsmanship. There are two judges in the ring at every test, and when a decision is rendered, the judges must agree. In the case of a grey area requiring a subjective response, those judges must reach consensus on the final decision. If that decision goes against you, no amount of moaning and complaining is going to unmake that decision. If you truly believe the judges erred, then address the issue to the DWC after the test. Causing a ruckus at the site and complaining to all who will listen is not going to change the outcome of a performance. Extend your judges the courtesy they deserve for the job they are doing. This includes judges outside the ring as well. If another draft judge happens to be at a test as an entrant or part of the test committee, it is not appropriate to put them on the spot and ask them to evaluate the performance of the judges in the ring. Only the official test judges get to make a call and evaluate a team's performance.

Preparation – of your dog, Preparation – of your equipment, Preparation – for the exercises. The more time and preparation you put into your draft training, the better your odds of passing the test with flying colors!

First – prepare your dog, give them ample time and opportunity to learn the skills required to pass a test. There are a few handlers out there who are “title happy” and want that BMDCA Versatility Award. Draft is a required element of a Versatility Award. So, a couple weeks before their local draft test, they slap an old harness on their dog and hitch them up. You can all guess how that performance turns out! Training for draft does not happen overnight. It takes time and effort, like any working event. Rushing the training is more harmful than helpful, and besides a failing performance, it also usually results in a frustrated dog and a frustrated handler. Judges are always looking for teamwork, and a dog who is slow to respond, doesn’t know the commands, doesn’t wag their tail or enjoy their work is not likely to pass a test. These teams are usually evident as soon as they come into the ring, and as the test proceeds, it just gets worse. The handler gets more frustrated and the dog gets more cowed. Your dog can’t read, and she/he doesn’t care about titles. If you are going to do an activity, make sure it is one you both enjoy! No title or award is worth destroying the bond between you and your dog.

The second “Preparation” regards equipment. This is a physical activity, and your dog can be injured. Make sure your equipment fits properly and is in working order. You wouldn’t send them over an agility A-frame that was wobbling and bending; don’t ask your dog to pull an open load in an ill-fitting harness. Safety first, folks! Don’t risk your dog’s comfort and safety for the sake of a few bucks – many people re-use equipment from dog to dog, and if the equipment fits each dog, then that’s a great thing! But don’t force your big male to wear your smaller female’s harness. Spring for a new harness that fits properly. If you aren’t sure how to fit the harness, then ask for help. And don’t stop at the harness – make sure your cart is in proper working order and fits your dog appropriately. Shafts are the most common problem area. Shafts that are either too high or too low interfere with the dog’s ability to pull the load, as well as move comfortably when turning or going up/down inclines. There are enough well experienced draft folks out there these days who can assist with properly fitting a harness and adjusting carts. If you can’t find someone near you, e-mail any of the draft judges – our addresses are all on the bmdca webpage, and we are always happy to help out! We may also be able to direct you to someone close to you that can assist with equipment issues.

The final “Preparation” concerns conditioning. Get your bouncy little couch potato off the sidewalk and into some sand, hills, deep grass, etc. For the most part, our dogs are out of shape. The well muscled, healthy canine athlete is in the minority of our breed population. Test sites are known at least 6 mos. before a test. Check out the site! If it is filled with hills, deep sand and gullies, start training for that environment. Even novice dogs need time to get in shape, but it’s the open dogs that really need ample preparation. Do not rush your dogs into the open class unless they are ready. This means that they need to be pulling their required weight comfortably and safely through a variety of ground surfaces and inclines well in advance of the test date. Dropping 100 lbs. into the

back of your cart two weeks before the test is likely to only lead to injury, not a passing performance.

Common Courtesy Helps Everyone! Sometimes, it's the smaller details that can make the biggest difference at a test. Punctuality and organization are the biggest courtesies we can all extend to everyone else! They apply in so many areas – the test committee should be on site bright and early for set up, stewards need to be in place before teams enter the ring, secretaries need to have paperwork well organized and ready to go. A good secretary is the key to a draft judge's heart! ☺

As handlers, we always want to make a good impression on our judges. The best way to do this is to be on time and prepared for the equipment check, which is usually our first meeting with the judges. Equipment check occurs at every test – it is NEVER a surprise. Handlers should be on site, set up and ready at the specified time. That means equipment in place, weights at the ready, collars, leads and harnesses available for review. Many, many tests start late – more often than not, it can be attributed to waiting on handlers who arrive late or chasing down handlers who are on site, but not ringside and ready to go. Be sure to factor the appropriate amount of time into your morning schedule that allows you to get to the site, set up your spot for the day (ex pens, pop ups, etc.) and get yourself, your dog and your equipment into position in a timely manner.

Another area of courtesy: Courtesy to your fellow judges and handlers with regards to the freight haul. If you NQ at an obedience test, do you simply leave for the day and forego the long stay exercises? The freight haul is no different. Just because your dog has failed is not a valid reason to skip the freight haul. Instead, approach the stays and the freight haul as a fabulous training opportunity! How often do you get to work with your dog in this kind of environment? A freight haul is a great exercise for both of you as it gives you a chance to work in a strange environment with new distractions and plenty of other dogs. Don't pass up this opportunity, and please don't pass it up with a poor excuse. Too often, handlers use weak excuses to get out of the freight haul, and it's quite frustrating for the judges. If the freight haul was safe enough and your dog was able to do it with a passing ring performance, then the same should be true after a failing performance.

Finally, add your dog to those who deserve your courtesy and kindness! Don't blame the dog when things go wrong. Yelling at the dog, losing your patience, jerking him/her either inside or outside the ring are unacceptable – and can get you failed or even disciplined. We all get frustrated when things don't go our way, but the last one who should perceive this frustration is our dog! We ask much of them in any activity, and they deserve to always enjoy themselves, regardless of the outcome. Rarely is it the dog who makes the mistake – most times, errors can be attributed to the handler for lack of preparation, unclear commands, muddled communication, rushing the dog into the ring before he/she is ready, etc. If you really feel the need to punish someone for a failing performance, then find a newspaper, roll it up tight and bonk yourself over the head with it! ☺

This is a great sport, and one quite unique to the dog world. Everyone involved has played a part in making it the most active and successful Draft Program in the country and we should be quite proud of the program we've developed. So many great things are happening in Draft – the caliber of entrants is constantly improving, and teams are much better prepared, better trained and better focused at tests, and their performances reflect this. In addition to entrants, clubs are putting on much better tests. Most clubs have now gotten a few tests under their belt, and they are becoming well oiled machines, from obsessively organized secretaries, to site selection and hospitality. As we welcome enthusiasts from other breeds to share in our heritage, let's all do our part to uphold the camaraderie, courtesies and successes that make this program such a source of pride for the Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America.