

CART COMFORT – TRAINING DRAFT PART IB – BEFORE PART II:

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Karyn Beyer's draft training booklet is outstanding and she gives great advice. I've written up this addition because I found that jumping from training basic control (Karyn's Part I) to hitching the dog to the cart (Karyn's Part II) was not possible with my dogs. I needed a number of in-between steps that I will go over here. Not every dog has the confidence to be hitched to a cart without some help and familiarization beforehand. I will outline a number of techniques here that can be used in their entirety or in part. Each dog will tell you how much of this type of training they need before they are comfortable pulling the cart.

A cart is not a natural part of a dog's world, but you can make it be so. Give your dog time to be around the cart without asking for any specific behaviors. I started with the disassembled cart on the floor and fed my dogs next to (or on) the parts. I continued that practice until the dogs took no notice of the cart, then I moved it so it looked different and fed until that was boring also. Then I assembled 1 part of the cart and fed around that. All of this initial time is spent without moving the cart while the dog is eating. Mealtime is a great time to do this familiarization because you will know if they are at all uncomfortable about what you are doing because they will pause or stop eating. Continue this process one step at a time until the cart is fully assembled and the dog is eating comfortably by the cart. I even took it so far as making a game out of getting my dog to move between the shafts and eat there (facing both directions). So far, the dog has only been asked to be around the cart and eat with the cart stationary, I did all the assembling with the dog out of the room.

Once the dog thinks the cart is just another piece of furniture and will eat comfortably around the cart and even between the shafts, then you can try picking up the shafts while the dog is eating and putting them down. Start small and don't touch the dog at first. Your goal is that the dog will eventually continue to eat while you move the cart within the dog's view (no touching the dog yet!). Start with up and down motion, then add forward and back motion. You can even assemble and disassemble the cart while the dog is eating. Anything that will give the dog confidence that all the parts and configurations, stationary and moving are completely safe.

Once the dog is able to continue eating (without giving you the walleye) with you moving the cart around him/her, then you can gently touch a shaft to the dog's side while eating. Again, your goal is to be able to do this while the dog continues to eat without pausing. Take this step slowly and gently and don't jump too far ahead. This is critical to your dog trusting that the cart is not scary and things bumping him/her are ok.

These techniques of feeding while familiarizing can also be used for the draft harness. Many dogs will accept the harness more readily than the cart, but not necessarily all. And your dog will spend a lot of time in the harness, so better to be comfortable with it! You can use the breakfast/dinner routine to put the harness on the dog and mealtime is a great time for the dog to get used to wearing the harness. It can also give you a chance to observe the dog moving in the harness – use that time to make sure the harness fits properly and isn't restricting the dog's movements in any way. Once they are comfortable eating

breakfast/dinner in harness, take them for some walks in the harness to make sure they are completely comfortable in it and it doesn't bind their movement in any way. A note of caution here, many people do not allow their dogs to eliminate while wearing their harness, while many don't really mind as long as the dog is not hitched to the cart. Your dog eliminating during a draft test (while you are being actively judged) is grounds for disqualification, so however you want to train or prepare for this eventuality, make sure you dog has had ample chance to void themselves prior to hitching them to the cart.

Once the dog is able to continue eating with the cart moving and touching them, then it's time to use one of the traces. Attach the trace from shaft to shaft at the brakes. My brakes have an eye-loop to which I can hook the trace, or you can loop the trace around the shaft and hook it to itself. The trace provides the handler with a handy handle and it can be draped over the dog's withers, simulating being attached to a cart. Now the dog can feel a little pressure from the trace in a place where the harness will also put pressure, the cart will move when the dog moves, and it's easy to grab the trace and pull the cart up and away from the dog should he/she get nervous or panic. This process of draping the trace across the dog's withers is also done while the dog is eating. Presumably by this point the dog has already gotten used to the cart moving forward and back and up and down, so the action of moving the cart into place should be old news to the dog. Watch the dog eating to see if he/she takes note of the weight of the trace across the withers.

You can also go so far as hooking up the various parts of the harness to the cart while the dog is eating, but this could be harder to do without impeding the eating process. You might need to do this part with a partner feeding treats to the dog while you go about the hooking up process (see Karyn Beyer's Part II).

But before you hook up the dog and have them pull the cart (that's Karyn Beyer's Part II), you need to see if the dog is ok with something following him/her. Arm yourself with lots of awesome treats and feed, feed, feed. You can usually tell how bothered the dog is by the activity by how eagerly they take the treats from you. All of these training steps should be happy memories for your dog. There are a number of techniques that can be used for this. Put the harness on the dog and attach the traces to the harness rings. The ends of the traces can be attached to a drag-line (use a cross piece to avoid having the traces rub against the dog's legs) that then is attached to some kind of weight to drag. Start with a long line that you can shorten over time. Many people use filled gallon jugs (filled with water or sand, but nothing noisy), or a weighty piece of wood. Use your judgment about what to drag and observe the dog at every step. If the dog is uncomfortable or scared, stop the activity. You do not want the dog to associate the harness or any other draft equipment with being scared. The point of this exercise is for the dog to get used to something moving around behind them while they walk and a sensation of resistance pulling against the harness. Gallon jugs can be a little bouncy and move chaotically, so if that's not working, try for a 2"x6" or some chunk of wood that slides along the ground more smoothly. Use your imagination, but be reasonable – you are trying to simulate the cart / following action so don't get too far off that track. And don't worry about weight training at this point. It's just about the sensation of having to pull something with the harness.

Another good thing to work on prior to hitching the dog to the cart is to simply have the dog walk with you while someone else pulls the cart nearby. It's best to start with someone else pulling the cart instead of the dog handler, because you want the dog to start at a comfortable distance from the cart. You can have the cart puller angle towards the dog slowly as long as the dog isn't paying specific attention to the cart. The dog handler needs to allow the dog to view the cart if that's what they need to do. You don't want to artificially force the dog to ignore the cart out of obedience to your commands. Your goal in this is for the dog to acknowledge the cart is there and that it's ok for it to be moving next to / around him/her. The cart puller should move around to all sides and behind the dog, but always working at a comfortable distance from the dog. Comfortable to the dog! Gradually work your way to the cart puller walking next to the dog and gently touch the shaft to the dog's shoulder/side as the dog is walking. Remember you already achieved this while the dog was eating without walking. As long as the dog has gotten used to the proximity of the cart, then the dog handler can pull the cart while holding the dog's leash at the same time. The cart should be on the opposite side of the handler from the dog.

Once you have the dog happily walking with you with the cart moving along also, then test out your basic control routine to see if the dog is really ready to work around the cart. Once you have that under your belt, then you can use the trace across the shafts to have it rest across the dog's withers. Now you have the ability to walk with the dog pulling the cart and you have the control to remove the cart if it's too much pressure too fast for the dog. The shafts will be more free-moving in this situation than if the harness was attached to the shafts, so keep your hand on the trace and be prepared to still the cart's motion or take the cart up and away from the dog. You do NOT want the cart to be bouncing around in an uncontrolled manner that won't happen with the harness attached. This step should also only be done on a level, smooth surface without trying to turn. If you need to turn, take the cart away from the dog, line the dog up in the new direction, then bring the cart back. There will be time to learn to turn in Karyn's Part II. The point of this exercise is to safely simulate the pressure of the cart shafts around the dog and the cart following behind. Once the dog is happy with this step and will freely take treats and return to the cart for more, you are ready to move on to Karyn's Part II.

There are dogs who can happily skip some or all of these steps, but they are in the minority. This is about proceeding at the comfort level of your dog, not yours. So train the dog you have, not the one you wished for. And don't get discouraged if your dog needs more time. Both of my dogs needed many months in this stage before they were comfortable being hooked to the cart. My rescue has personal space issues that he needed time to get over and eventually went on to get his advanced novice draft dog title. He happily retired after that, but still loves being praised and fed for jumping between the cart shafts (he doesn't really want to pull the cart though, LOL). My second dog started this process as a puppy, but she is a very environmentally nervous and pressure sensitive dog. She is also reactive (barking & lunging) at things and people that scare her. I'm telling you this because she is a drafting success story. Taking the time to go through these steps at her comfort level allowed us to achieve the grand master draft dog award at 5 years old. The cart provided a steadying influence on her that helped us survive her younger years as a team. Hope this helps! Happy Carting!