

# Introduction to Brace Draft Work

## By Karyn Beyer



Working with a brace draft team is a whole new adventure from working with a single dog. Many approach brace draft with the idea that two trained draft dogs equals one trained brace team, but that is rarely the case! Brace draft presents its own unique set of training needs and the formation of new partnerships – between the dogs themselves, and the team and the handler. There are many steps involved in creating a successful team that works with precision and style, but it takes time to bring it all together.

### **Who goes where?**

One of the first challenges when putting two dogs together as a brace unit is figuring out which dog will be on the inside and which will be on the outside. This is usually not up to the handler – it is up to the dogs! Most dogs doing brace have a very clear preference for position, and they decide this on their own. Rather than hitching them up and forcing them into a position, spend some time walking the dogs on a coupler without the cart. Do basic obedience and draft skills with them paired together, such as change of pace, stop, turns, etc. Alternate their positions so each dog gets a feel for each side. More often than not, the dogs will determine the best pairing. You will recognize this by how they work with you on basic commands and how they work with each other. Once they have it figured out, most teams will leap frog and adjust themselves back to their preferred locations. For some dogs, forcing them to work outside of what they deem correct is like asking a right-handed person to write with their left hand – it feels unnatural and uncomfortable!

### **Harness and Hitch**

When you are harnessing up a brace team, each dog will have a period of downtime while you work with the other dog. This is another time of experimentation for you. Who should be first? Who will hold the stay longest? Should you harness each dog and then hitch them at the same time, or harness and

hitch one dog, and have it wait in the cart while you work on the other? The only correct answer here is what works best for you and your team. If you are focused intently on one dog, will the other dog wait quietly? Or will he wander off to greet the judges and sniff the grass? Your goal here is efficiency and success. The longer it takes to harness and hitch a brace team, the greater the opportunity for one or both dogs to lose focus and misbehave. During a test situation, you should be able to harness and hitch the team in approximately five minutes or less. (Draft judges have timed this exercise at tests to work out basic averages.) If it takes longer than five minutes in practice, you should probably start rethinking your approach and experiment with other methods.

### **Don't Let the First Time Fool You!**

The first time you pair two dogs together in a cart, it can lead to a misleading impression that "Hey! They work great together! This will be easy!" Very often, the dogs work well that first time out because they aren't entirely sure of this new set up. As they evaluate and adjust to having a partner, they may work more quietly and cautiously. As handlers, it's easy for us to assume that this is a harbinger of what is to come – an easy, well managed team that works as well as a pair as each works on their own. This is not always the case. That first time out may look neat and tidy, and suggest you have a well settled team, but first times can be deceiving...

### **Banging Heads and Synchronicity**

The second (and third, fourth, even fifth) time a pair is hitched up together can quickly demonstrate the work needed to build that teamwork. As the dogs adjust to each other and working with a partner, you will see a few key issues present themselves. First, watch for them to bang their heads together. They aren't used to having someone beside them, and they have to adjust how they use their body and their movement to accommodate that partner. Knocking heads is a common occurrence as they make their adjustments. The more time they spend together, the faster they will make the necessary shifts and transition from two individual dogs into one team. Don't ask for complex maneuvers as you are starting out. Long walks with lots of stops and wide turns work best as the team adjusts and gets comfortable. Very often in the early stages stopping is a challenge, as the dogs often mistake basic carting for the Iditarod and it turns into a race, with one trying to get a step or two in front of the other. One trick is to use a dowel rod across the front of both chests when you give the halt command, reminding them to STOP and not fuss about.

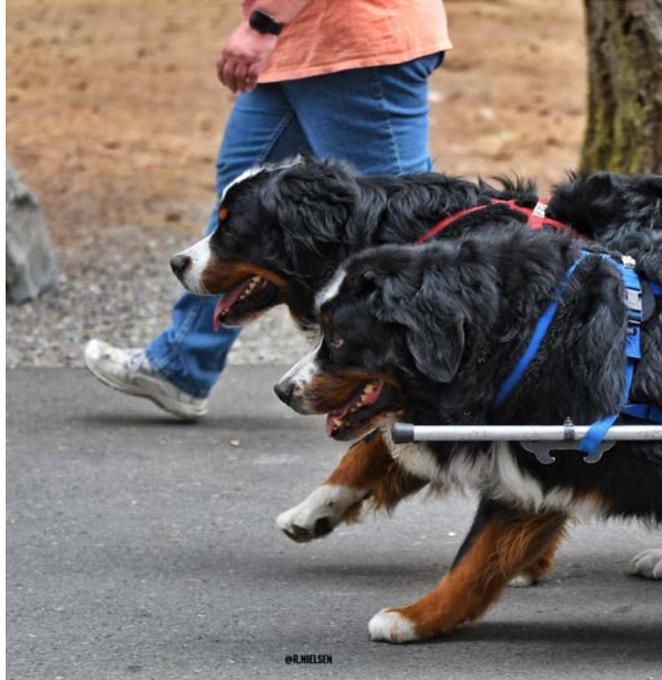
I cannot emphasize enough the need to give the team time to establish a working partnership. Each dog must make adjustments and accommodations to his/her working style and basic movements in order to develop a synchronized work style and partnership. Time spent coupled together and walking on leash is incredibly helpful. You can build that teamwork without the cart. The size of the dogs is mainly an issue in terms of making sure the equipment is well fitted to each dog. But two dogs that appear mismatched in terms of height and weight can work well together once they have had the time to adjust. My Archie was paired with his mother, Pepin, in both open and novice brace (Picture 1). Archie outweighed Pepin by more than 30 pounds, and was significantly larger than her in height and body mass. My Hubble has been partnered with Jennifer Brightbill's Jaci and the difference between them is more than 40 pounds and five inches in height. That did not impede their working ability, though we did have to design shaft modifications to accommodate the height difference. In both pairings, each dog had to adjust its stride and turning radius, but they came together as beautifully synchronized pairs. Archie and Pepin turned in ten consecutive passing performances without a single fail.

As the dogs adjust to each other and develop their ability to work as a team, you will see certain characteristics come together. Their heads will move in the same direction, and that knocking about will stop. The stops will become more consistent and controlled – with no more stutter steps as they vie for position. The change of pace will be smoother. And perhaps the biggest mark of their teamwork – synchronized footwork. They will step in time with one another, not just when moving out and forward, but into their turns, change of pace and back up as well.



### **Who handles the team?**

If both dogs live in your own home, then you are the obvious choice for handler. But if you are working with a dog that belongs to someone else, picking the right handler is much like deciding which dog goes on the inside, and which on the outside. Some dogs work better for other people, while other dogs only work for their own handler, and shut down and act out when handed off to someone else. This is another time when you will be experimenting. Trade off handlers in the early stages, when the dogs are just walking on leash/coupler and in their first few times hitched up together. One tool that is incredibly helpful is to have both dogs live together with the selected handler for a period of time, especially as you are starting out with the team and before tests. This not only builds on the teamwork and relationship of the dogs, but helps the non-owned dog bond with the handler as well. The more time everyone spends together, the better!



Brace draft is incredibly fun and rewarding, and an entirely different experience from working with a single dog. The biggest key to building a successful team is time – give the dogs time to establish a working relationship and develop a comfort level with each other. You are asking them to dance with a partner – as the handler, you may be the choreographer, but they have to do the footwork and routine!

About the Author: Karyn Beyer has been a BMDCA Draft Judge for nearly 20 years. She has earned three Grand Master Draft Dog awards. In addition to draft, she also competes in obedience and agility. She and Archie (CH Alpenblicks Archibald v Lenk UD GO RE NAP ANDD MDD ANBDD MBDD Can CD Can DD (BG #76483) currently hold the BMDCA Draft record with 37 consecutive passing performances – with Karyn handling, Archie has never failed a draft test!