

TRAINING DRAFT PART I: Don't Put the Cart Before the Dog! Simple Steps to Starting Draft Work with Your Dog

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PART I

The first step to carting with your dog is the **MOST IMPORTANT STEP**: basic obedience. Nearly all of the basic control you need with your dog in the cart can be introduced without the cart. Many handlers make the mistake of putting their dog in the cart well before the dog can walk nicely on a leash, let alone stop and change pace on command. This is a bad idea. It makes training considerably harder, it overly stresses the dog and it's dangerous. Dogs can be seriously injured in the cart and better to train beforehand than to risk injury.

Before you hitch up your dog, there are some basic commands that your dog should know, and know well. They aren't difficult to train, and can all be done while out on your morning/evening walk.

The first thing is being able to walk nicely on a leash. This doesn't have to be AKC obedience-quality heeling, but there should be minimal pulling, minimal yelling of repetitive commands and your walk should be at a nice, even pace. While doing this nice walk, introduce the slow or change of pace. Most dogs want to move out very quickly as soon as they are hitched (thinking they can get away from that contraption behind them), and it's important that when you tell them **SLOW!** they actually know what you mean. Introduce that change of pace while on those morning/evening walks. Simply slow down and walk at a greatly reduced pace than normal. Put a command on it, saying **SLOW** or **EASY** as you go. Then, take the dog back to normal.

Finally, the most important command – **STOP**. It's simple, it's basic, it's critical. Integrate this into your walks, from both the normal pace and the slow pace. Getting a sit when you stop is not important; in fact, some dogs don't initial like to sit in the cart because they roll onto the shafts or bump them when getting back up, both of which can be uncomfortable and startling to the beginning dog. Don't cheat on this – **STOP** is an extremely important command. If the dog gets nervous in the cart, starts to jump or flail, or startles from a distraction, **STOP** can be a lifesaver, or at least an injury preventer.

Teaching these three basic commands can go very quickly. Discipline yourself to take a 20 minute walk every morning or evening, with lots of treats in hand and a happy voice. While you are working on these basic leash commands, you can also begin introducing the dog to the cart. Put the cart in the yard. Feed the dog his/her meals in the bed of the cart, or even between the shafts. Take the cart for a walk with you and the dog (either you pulling it on your right side or someone else pulling alongside you). The dog should be accustomed to the sight, sounds and smell of the cart. Better yet, get the dog excited about the cart – putting special treats in the cart bed for the dog and feeding the dog in or around the cart can help acclimate the dog to the cart.

When you are confident in your dog's abilities to walk nicely on that leash, go slowly on command and stop, and the dog is unfazed by the sight and sound of the cart, you are ready to hitch the dog. Please, I am begging you – don't take short cuts on this. You want your dog to enjoy carting. From the minute the dog is hitched, you will use those walk, slow and stop commands. Your dog will be much more confident if you are using recognizable commands, things that he/she knows. Asking a dog to hitch up to a cart, pull a strange obstacle behind them (which is clearly trying to attack!) and respond to your foreign commands is asking a lot – perhaps too much – from your dog. Dogs that have very negative experiences when first hitched will approach the cart with trepidation and even fear they next time the cart comes out. Prepare your dog first!

A word about prong/pressure collars. I believe that prong/pressure collars have their place in training, but they are NOT a substitute for training. Please don't assume that you can skip training the basic commands because your plan is to simply slap that prong on the dog as soon as you hitch them up. A prong/pressure collar is a correctional device, and if your dog is getting massive corrections when first introduced to the cart, he/she may not have any idea what it is you want – “gee, I'm hitched to this contraption and I'm walking forward, but my person keeps snapping the collar and yelling at me! What the hell do they want? This carting thing sucks!” There may be a point where the prong/pressure collar is needed with the dog, but use it wisely and appropriately. A prong/pressure collar is NOT a substitute for training, it is an aid in training and should be used appropriately.

PART II

So, you've trained, you're confident and the dog wags his tail every time you go near the cart. You are ready to hitch up! Before you start, be sure to pick the right location. You want to hitch your dog for the first time in an area that is level, quiet, and has a LOT of room. Most dogs cannot/will not do tight turns when they are first starting out, so try to find a spot where you can proceed in a straight line for quite a ways, and do large, gentle, turns – more of a veering right or left rather than turning right or left. Empty parking lots are great locations, as are school yards and ball fields.

When hitching a dog to a cart for the very first time, there are two things you must have on hand – tons of GREAT treats, and a second person. Even the best trained dog is hard pressed to hold that stand-stay while you come up behind them with that thing and start attaching it to them. You want a second person that the dog knows. One of you should be at the dog's head, gently kneeling and holding the collar, talking to the dog, feeding treats, etc. The second person will approach from a straight line behind with the cart, slowly advancing the shafts up along side the dog. Throughout this process, keep talking to the dog and giving treats. For some dogs, you may only get as far as advancing the shafts. If the dog is clearly stressed, jumping about, twisting around to see what is going on, don't try to go any farther. Just aim for the dog's comfort level – can you bring the cart up behind the dog and into position, just short of hitching the dog up? Work on this until the dog is comfortable.

When comfort is achieved, you can get the dog hitched. This might be a slow process the first time in, because you will likely be adjusting the harness loops where the shafts go through, and the length of the traces. The dog may not have a lot of patience for you fooling around back there, so better to get a feel for lengths and any needed adjustments, take the dog away (big praise, big treats), make your adjustments, and then bring the dog back. Don't try to make all those changes while forcing the dog to stand there, semi-attached to the cart.

When you are finally hitched up, your traces are the right length and the equipment is properly attached, you and your helper should each stand on either side of the dog and move forward. Keep talking, keep praising, keep treating. Do not let the dog move out too fast or get out of control. If you sense ANY problems coming up, or suspect the dog is starting to stress or get out of control, STOP. Stopping and starting are the keys to this first pull of the cart. If the dog seems to be getting out of step and discombobulated, STOP. Dogs are unlikely to walk themselves out of it and correct themselves. Better to stop and start again.

At this point, you will be glad you are going in a straight line, and hopefully have lots of room in front of you. When the time comes to turn around, if you cannot execute a huge looping circle, then have your helper go to the back of the cart. As you begin to turn the dog around, the helper should pick the cart up off the ground and swing it behind the dog back into position. For most dogs, turning in a cart is an acquired skill, not necessarily a natural one. They must learn to cross their paws over each other, and get a feel for the shaft. The location of the shaft will at first seem an impediment to turning, because as they move right or left, they immediately hit a solid object, so instinct is to move away. Once they get a feel for the shaft, the equipment and the process, they can pick up turns quickly. But for the beginner, don't rush them into it. Turning should be introduced in increments, and as the dog progresses in skill and comfort level, you can gradually tighten the degree of your turns.

As you continue with this first carting foray, you've probably quickly discovered the value of training leash walking, slow and stop. These are the only three commands that you will be using on these first few carting trips. Don't expect your dog to do much more than this for awhile. Fine tuning and finesse can be added when the dog is comfortable in the equipment, and their security level is such that they are ready to move on. Don't rush it, and don't force it – you want your dog to enjoy carting, and if you move too fast, your dog will quickly go in the opposite direction when the cart comes out for practice!

The most important thing with carting, as with all dog activities, is to have fun. That goes for you and your dog. If your dog has a tucked tail, wide eyes, heavy breathing and shying away, then you are moving way too fast and need to back up a few steps. For most berners, carting is quickly learned and readily enjoyed. Its instinct, its their heritage, and most will step up and enjoy having a job to do. However, there are the occasional dogs who do not take to it readily, and its your task to conduct the training and introduce the equipment at the dog's pace, not at yours. Take your time, lay the proper groundwork and have fun building this working partnership!