

PREPARING FOR YOUR FIRST DRAFT TEST

By Karyn Beyer (BMDCA Draft Judge)

Your first draft test is a few weeks away, and you and your canine partner (whom I shall call Partner) have been working hard on your training and preparation. You and Partner can execute nice tight turns around the trees in your yard and Partner slides the cart through those narrows like nobody's business. You have both mastered the freight haul and can comfortably pull at least 35 pounds (just to be safe) at least two miles without panting (that goes for both of you).

But are you really ready? Have you mastered the finer points that judges evaluate? Many draft teams fail not on maneuvering the ring obstacles (narrows, movable object, load/unload) but on the seemingly minor details that make you and Partner a true working team — control, leashwork, control, clean stops, control, change of pace, control, backing up and control.

Judges watch for a true working team. Is Partner focused on you? Is he waiting for your next command? Is he working *with* you or is he just enjoying the day and the distractions, occasionally following you when you move away? Do you find yourself repeating commands two to three times before Partner responds? Are you yelling your commands hoping your loud voice will break his concentration as he sniffs the ground? A well-focused, well-prepared dog responds quickly and readily to your first command. His interest is in you and what you and he are doing. He knows he has a job to do and performs it quickly when asked.

LEASHWORK

Leashwork is a major problem for many draft teams. As soon as you get in the ring, your hands start to fret. You aren't conscious of it, but you are slowly gathering up the slack. Before your first turn, that nice loose lead has gotten so tight your hand is only inches above Partner's head.

Or perhaps you aren't the nervous gathering type. Another common sight are the flailing hands, clapping, swinging, guiding the 747 overhead in for a safe landing...

The easy thing to say, and the hardest thing to do, is RELAX! We all know how those nerves hit. When you and Partner are out practicing, fold your left hand into your stomach, holding the leash at a comfortable loose length, and LEAVE IT THERE. The leash is not a steering wheel, a hand brake or attention getter. Partner should be responding to your voice and your body, not your leash. The role of the leash in a Novice Draft Dog test is defined in the BMDCA draft regulations: "All exercises except the recall, harnessing, hitching and group stays are performed on leash, however, the leash must be visibly slack and is not to be used to physically guide the dog during the exercises. Guiding, jerking and/or tight leash will result in a failing performance."

Picture this: You are approaching an obstacle that requires a right turn. You say "Partner, right! Come on, right!" Partner, on the other hand, wants to go straight, since there is a really cute puppy on the other side of the ring. You are going one way, he is going another. You are missing the turn and the leash is getting tight. What do you do? Do you: (a) move closer to Partner to keep the leash loose, keep yelling "Right!" at him and hope he turns; (b) hope the judge is also looking at the cute puppy and give a quick jerk on the leash, pulling Partner's head back towards you and into the turn; or (c) tell Partner to stop, evaluate your location, get his focus back, adjust accordingly (reapproach the turn, back up if necessary) and complete the exercise.

Most folks choose (a) and move into the dog to maintain the loose lead, even if it means getting off course. Unfortunately, this usually does not work, and the judges recognize it for what it is — poor control leading to poor leashwork. Handlers often compensate for the tight lead by moving closer to the dog, rather than getting the dog back on track. This can happen on turns, during the heel on the basic control, on the freight haul.

The correct answer is (c). The situation is very common (the distractions differ) but it doesn't mean an automatic fail. But you can't execute (c) without those critical elements of control. In this case, the most important control command will be STOP!

STOP!

Stop is the most important command in your training. If you and Partner are working at a safe, controlled pace, the stop should come quickly and easily, and on the first command. It may take a few steps depending on the speed you are moving at, but Partner should respond to the command immediately. Being able to execute a clean Stop can save you in a number of situations. If you misjudge a turn, STOP and adjust. If you are heading into an obstacle, STOP, back up if necessary and reapproach the obstacle correctly. If you momentarily lose your memory and have no idea where you should go next (yes, this does happen), STOP and ask a judge.

Stopping is easy to practice. No matter what you are doing, STOP. Doing turns? Stop in the middle. Practicing the freight haul? Stop every few feet. A stop is a stationary position. That means no creeping. Once Partner is stopped, he should stay stopped. If he moves while you open the gate, take the load, evaluate the situation, he will fail. When you tell Partner Stop, can you walk a few feet away without him moving? Can you circle the cart and/or stand behind him without him moving? Once you have stopped successfully, you may tell Partner "sit" or "down" or "stay" - whatever command will leave him in stationary position.

CHANGE OF PACE/SLOW

Perhaps the second most important command in training is SLOW, or the change of pace. Changing pace is a required exercise during the test, but it is also very important for successful execution of the obstacles and the freight haul. Many handlers overlook this

command. When they get in the ring, they merely slow themselves down during the change of pace exercise, assuming the dog will adjust accordingly, or the judge will see the handler walking slow and somehow miss the dog maintaining his normal work speed.

Dogs not accustomed to doing a SLOW don't adjust to the handler, they merely move out to the end of the leash and work at their normal speed. Now, not only has the team failed the change of pace but the leash is probably stretched tight as well.

A well trained change of pace can come in quite handy in many areas. The most common benefit is the narrows. Picture this: You approach the narrows, stop Partner and look at the distance on either side. Partner is approaching straight and even with the sides. You give him the command to move forward. He starts at his normal pace, veers slightly and the wheel hits the side. By the time you say STOP, he is halfway through.

A safer approach is to tell Partner SLOW. He steps forward one step, two steps, three steps. You see him starting to veer off path. You say STOP! Back him up and start again, moving slowly. This time, he goes straight and clears the sides.

A successful SLOW can get your through most of the obstacles safely and clearly. If Partner can change his pace when you ask, it gives you those extra few seconds to evaluate the position, the distance to the obstacle, the angle of the turn. And if you see a problem, you tell Partner STOP and adjust accordingly. If Partner works only at one speed, by the time you realize the problem you will likely have failed to obstacle.

The SLOW is also critical on the freight haul. You and Partner have been working solo in your training, but during the test you will perform the freight haul in a group. This likely means teams in front of you, teams behind you and hills. Partner has no trouble at home and the two of you work at a nice brisk pace. Unfortunately, during your test freight haul, the team in front of you is a nice older handler, with a sweet well mannered bitch. They are in no hurry and their natural pace couldn't outrun a turtle. You can ask to pass, but a judge may say no. A judge will want to see if you can control Partner and work at a slower pace to accommodate the team in front of you. You tell Partner SLOW and he does just that, slowing down enough to maintain a safe distance between you and the team in front. You have now demonstrated suitable control to the judge, and at the next stop you and Partner are allowed to pass.

The SLOW command may be your only tool to combat gravity on the downhill. Partner has the cart and the weight behind him, and it is pushing him forward. He doesn't want to fight it, he wants to move out and get this over with. If you let him, you are not only showing a lack of control, but placing you and Partner in danger. Failing the test will be the least of your worries if the cart rolls with Partner still in harness. Take the hills slowly and be safe. The freight haul is not a timed exercise. Judges are looking for teamwork and control, not speed.

BACKING UP

Like SLOW, this is a required exercise in the draft test. And also like Slow, this command can save you and Partner from many potentially failing situations. In all the sample scenarios above, the dog is heading in the wrong direction. If this wrong direction is into a tight corner, there may not be sufficient room for Partner to turn around. Or, if you are in the narrows, turning may not be an option at all.

But if Partner can back up on command, you can often maneuver yourselves right out of a problem and back into safety. What you ultimately demonstrate when you do this is Control. Yet many teams choose to play the odds and only move in one direction. You must train Partner to back up regardless; start incorporating into your maneuvering and obstacle work. It could make all the difference!

The common denominator to all aspects of a draft test is basic control. Many failing teams can maneuver the ring obstacles, but their performances are fraught with tight leashes, sloppy stops and a questionable change of pace. If they do get into trouble, few teams think of backing out of the problem. Blind luck and limited training will not prepare you and Partner for the draft test.

The little elements that tend to get overlooked and not emphasized in training are usually the very things that cause a team to fail. Even if you have never gone through the narrows or encountered the movable obstacle, if you can successfully execute a Stop, a Slow, and a backup without waiving your hands and leash like you are trying to guide a plane to landing, you and Partner should be able to handle any ring obstacle or freight haul situation.

And finally, the single most important thing to remember when training for the draft test, when you are in the draft test and after the draft test (regardless of whether you pass or fail): HAVE FUN!!!