

Carting Excellent – Driving Your Dog

Part I – Equipment and Initial Considerations

Ellen O'Connell

In early 2009, when I decided to train my girl, Schara, for her CX title, I expected it to be easy. After all, I had experience training horses to drive and also had worked with Randi Bolton when she started her boy, Ripley, driving the year before. My dog is high energy. Any time she isn't heeling, she is as far ahead of me as the leash allows. She was accomplished at the Intermediate level. How hard could it be?

Harder than expected. In fact, training my girl to drive was one of those humbling experiences dog people mutter about. Since that time I've helped another couple of folks in the local carting practice group who want that CX title. It is my hope that setting out the things I've learned may be helpful to others whose dogs have achieved their Started and Intermediate titles and who aren't sure where to start training to drive.

Evaluate yourself and your dog. The weight limit bandied about for a driving dog to pull is three times its own weight. Pulling a person over the level surface of a carting test isn't the problem, although it's definitely work. Overcoming inertia to start and stop the cart is the hardest part, and our test requires getting the cart going at the Start and a stop and a start for the Halt, before the Gate, after the Gate, and twice for the Backup. The closer you can keep the total weight to twice the dog's weight the better, and at 2.5 times the dog's weight, in my opinion it would be time to rethink this project. Don't forget your cart and harness weigh 35-50 pounds.

Is your dog already comfortable with carting? Did he do CS and CI happily? ARC Carting Rules allow entering any carting class without titling at the previous level, and I am sure there are people who start carting at the driving level. One way or the other, your dog needs a solid carting foundation before training to drive.

Equipment. ARC Carting Rules allow but do not require a head halter with reins for driving, and all the dogs I worked with were trained with a head halter. However, some people do use reins attached to a collar. I tried driving Ripley once with reins on just the collar and scared myself.

If you decide on the tried and true use of a head halter for driving, make sure your dog is accustomed to wearing the halter. The easiest way to do this is to put the halter on at home and then do things the dog likes. Feed him with it on, play with him with it on, go for walks using collar and leash but having the dog just wear the halter. Once he is wearing the halter in those circumstances without a fuss, attach leashes to the side rings and teach him to turn his head towards a slight rein pull.



Ryza models a customized alpaca halter from <https://secure.llamaproducts.com>. Note the D rings for the reins.

If your harness doesn't have D rings for the reins near the top of the back strap, you need to add them. Without these guide rings, the reins tend to catch on shaft ends or other parts of the harness. If your dog shakes his head, a rein can flip right over the head so that you no longer have steering. Running reins under the back strap or another part of the harness stops the tangling and flipping, but it also puts so much drag on the reins

you don't have good use of them. Get guide rings on the harness



Guide rings for reins were added to this harness made by Geula Resnick.

Narrow 6-foot leashes with small clips work well for reins.

If you have not yet decided on a cart to use, attend a carting practice or test and think about what's best for you and your dog. A cart designed only for one dog is narrow and easy to maneuver through the carting course. However, it will also give you a little of the feeling an adult gets sitting on kindergarten furniture. The double cart can be set up for one dog or a team and feels more "adult" to sit in. However, the 4-foot gate opening dictated in the ARC Carting Rules only gives you 6-7 inches on each side of the double cart.

Not all carts have carbiners on the shaft ends for hitching. Some are designed for the shafts to go through shaft loops on the harness and for use with traces. Your cart and harness must be designed for the same kind of hookup.

Make sure the 2-wheeled cart you use for driving is properly balanced. Have your dog stand on level ground when hitched to your cart. The shafts should be parallel to the ground. If the shafts are closer to the ground

at the dog's shoulders than at his rear, the dog is going to have too much weight on his back. If the shafts are farther from the ground at the dog's shoulders, the cart is going to "float" and there will be undue pressure on the dog from the bellyband.

With your dog still hitched and standing on level ground, sit in the cart and have a friend lift each shaft slightly. If the cart is properly balanced, there should be very little weight on the shaft. Your friend should be able to lift the shaft up with only her fingers. You can affect the cart's balance by sitting back or forward, so do these tests with the posture you will use when driving.

Be careful to keep a sharp eye on your equipment every step of the way as you train for driving. One of the most important things is to be sure your tires always have at or close to maximum pressure. Taking your wheels to a bicycle shop and getting heavy duty inner tubes and leak proof filler can make this less of a chore.



The single and double carts shown above are Forrester carts.

See: www.bansheesrotties.com.

Resources. Sulky type carts are made locally by Glenn Haskin and in Albuquerque by Jennifer Barajas (barajas@aol.com). For a harness with shaft loops and traces, see www.blackicedogsledding.com.

Next Time: Part II will address training your dog to drive – starting out, turns, and other elements of the ARC carting test.