

# **Carting Excellent – Driving Your Dog**

## **Part II – Training**

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**Safety.** When I wrote Part I of this article, a section on safety didn't seem important. After all everyone knows to be careful of their dog's safety when the dog is fastened to a cart, and we're discussing advanced work here. Human safety? After working with horses for years – animals big enough to squash you like a bug – I never worried much about my own safety when carting with my dog.

Then I had an eye-opening experience while working a team and got hurt pretty badly. Those of you reading this article with the intention of driving your dog are undoubtedly all younger and more graceful than I. However, do keep this cautionary tale in mind. A sturdy cart attached to a large dog can be quite a weapon and should be respected.

**Candidates.** Can every Rottweiler drive? Every one of the few people I know who have pursued a CX title has succeeded. However, I suspect that just as not all dogs can do the highest level of work in other venues, not all dogs can be driven. The work is difficult and isn't self-rewarding for the dog in the way that agility and herding are. The best candidate is probably a dog with above average confidence in himself and in the partnership of himself and his human.

**The Foundation.** The very first concept you have to get across to your dog in order to drive is, in my opinion, the hardest part of the training: your dog must learn to pull the cart with you out of sight behind him.

Teach the dog to do this first without the extra burden of weight in the cart. The ideal place to work is an open, level area. You need enough space so that the dog can walk as much as 100 feet in one direction without needing to turn. Hitch your dog for driving with reins attached to the halter and position him at the beginning of such a long straight stretch.

Walk along briskly beside your dog at first but as he settles into the walk, begin to lag behind as pictured below. Your goal is to have the dog continue walking with you slightly behind. Do this on both the left and right sides. Work on stopping the dog, praising and rewarding when you are behind before he notices you're missing from his side and stops on his own.



Leave the reins absolutely loose as you do this. Your only goal is to have the dog keep walking forward with you behind. Your dog may wobble forward or walk in a circle. Stop him, reposition, and start again as necessary. If you try to steer with the reins at this point, the dog will stop. You want to avoid that and teach him to move out ahead of you.

Gradually extend the distance you are lagging behind until you can slip behind the cart. Don't expect linear progress on this. In the beginning you will get to the back of the cart for a few steps, have to go all the way to heel position again, and have to repeat the whole process many times. Some days you will think your dog has got it and then the next day he will have lost it again.

Once you can actually walk behind the cart for more than a few steps at a time, you can use the position to urge your dog forward and to keep him going. If he stops when you didn't tell him, instead of going to heel position and starting over, push on the back of the cart while using your verbal command for forward. Don't try to push hard enough to force the dog forward, just rock the cart a little so that the dog feels and moves away from little pushes on his harness. Praise and reward even one step to start with and build from there.

Choose any verbal commands that are easy for you for this work. If you have used a command in another area of training that your dog knows means to move forward on his own, use it. For instance, Geula Resnick and Randi Bolton used "Walkup" with dogs that already had herding experience. Susan Deal used "Go" for her boy Ra, who has started training for Utility go outs.

**Turn, Turn, Turn.** When you reach the point where you can ground drive your dog from behind the cart, stopping him with a verbal command and perhaps a slight tightening of the reins, and starting with a verbal command most of the time, assisted with a little pushing on the back of the cart occasionally, you are ready to teach turns.

To start, take the reins out of the guide rings on the harness back strap. If the rein runs straight from the halter to your hand in the beginning it will help the dog understand. Starting with a right turn: (1) get your dog moving out as briskly as possible with you walking behind the cart, (2) move out from behind the cart to the right, tighten the right rein enough that the dog can feel the pressure and at the same time give your command, "Come Right."

The technique is pictured at the end of this paragraph, although I should have had my right rein short enough for there to be light pressure on the right side of Schara's halter. Seeing you and feeling direct pressure on one side of the halter will bring about a turn of some sort. It may also bring about either a halt or hesitation, but you're

going to be out from behind the cart and in the drop back position you've used from the start and can maneuver as necessary to keep your dog moving. Be ready, keep your dog moving through the turn and get behind the cart again as quickly as possible.



At first the most important thing is to get a turn of some sort and for the dog to keep going. I used "Go" as my forward command, so I'd be commanding, "Come right. Go, go, go! In the beginning, work a small series of turns in one direction, do some straightaway work your dog already knows, then a small series in the other direction.

Once your dog shows an understanding of turning and you don't have to come out from behind the cart for a turn, run your reins through the guide rings. Continue to work on keeping your dog moving through the turns while you stay behind the cart.

Remember, you should use the reins only to signal the dog what you want, not to try to force the dog to do it. So keep your rein pressure as light as you can. Use only one rein for the turn until you are sure your dog has confidence in turning without stopping. When you have reached that goal, you can begin to control the degree of turn by length and firmness of rein pressure. The final part of controlling turns is to add a little pressure from the opposing rein when necessary.

Practice 90-degree turns first, then work on 360s. After your dog has mastered doing simple turns in one direction only, start on serpentines, which can be confusing as you use first one rein and then the other in rapid succession. Don't start serpentine work trying to do flat serpentines with minimal turning around the cones. Do nice big loops in the beginning, giving your dog a few straight steps between your demand to go in one direction and then the other.

**Finishing Touches.** Teach the Fast while you are still ground driving behind an empty cart. Use your usual Fast command in the kind of light happy tone you use when playing with your dog. Keep urging, rock the cart a little. Be satisfied with a few steps at first and work on getting a good trot that continues until you tell your dog to return to normal pace.



Working on Slow can wait until you are riding in the cart. You can use both your voice and rein pressure to accomplish the slower pace. By watching the speed at which the ground goes by you can be sure you are accomplishing a distinctly slower pace.

Start training Backup now while you are ground driving with the empty cart, but be careful to do as little work on this as you can to be sure your dog will back the cart with you using your voice, and reins if necessary. The reason for caution here is that most dogs go through a stage of backing up on their own when you don't want them to as a form of avoidance or resistance. This

usually doesn't start until there is considerable weight in the cart, but working on Backup may provoke it.

Be ready for unwanted backing and be ready to stop it. Don't just let your dog know verbally you don't want this, physically resist it. If you are ground driving, push against the back of the cart until the dog stops. If you are driving in the cart, put your feet on the ground and resist. (Be careful doing this!) My girl kept this up until I let her back the cart into a tree twice. The jolt of the absolute stop finally convinced her it was a bad idea.

Try to back your dog with a verbal command only. This produces a straighter back up than pulling on the reins.

**Really Driving.** Your dog now has all the basics he needs for driving the ARC Carting Excellent test. Work on getting more precision on starts, stops, and turns while you begin adding weights to your cart. You can probably start actual driving once your dog is used to 2/3 to 3/4 of your weight.

When you sit in the cart and give the same commands you have been using for ground driving, your dog may just obey and off you go. Ripley did that for Randi, and his dam Riley did that for Geula. It was different for me and I think for David Craig with his boy Koda. Schara found having me in a different position disconcerting, and I had to do quite a bit of urging and even rocking the cart a bit with me sitting in it. (I was working alone or might have tried having someone lead her at that point.) Make sure the first time you ask your dog to start off with your full weight you are on level ground or a *slight* downslope.

Although I'm generally a big fan of training every day, once you are driving, consider training only every 2 or 3 days. Driving really is hard work for the dog, and you can sour him on it all too easily if you overdo. Other than that caution, have fun! You've earned it.

Thanks to Randi Bolton for taking the pictures for this article.