

## Getting Started

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With the East Side Draft Clinic coming up September 16<sup>th</sup>, and the Draft Test October 14<sup>th</sup>, it seems a good time to start the beginning drafting series. Take advantage of the upcoming events to learn, practice and watch! We will start off with a discussion of preparing your dog to do draft work, and continue on with a discussion of equipment and training in subsequent "Corners".

### Getting your dog ready to pull

*Health.* Before you begin to harness and hitch, you must be sure your dog is ready for drafting activity. Make sure your dog is sound and fit enough to do drafting. Hip or elbow dysplasia will not necessarily prevent your dog from pulling, but care must be taken to work with your veterinarian as to how much work the dog can do if affected. It is wise to have your dog's hips and elbows evaluated by radiograph at about two years of age. Age also plays a role in how early you can begin drafting with your Berner. Bones, joints and muscles need time to develop; it is not recommended that you have your Berner pull a lightweight cart before one year of age and wait until two years before pulling any weight. In any case, a careful conditioning program is important to draft work. You can start conditioning your dog by walking without a cart. As you progress in training, you will need to gradually introduce your dog to longer distances and increasing weight.

*Stress.* Care should also be taken that the introduction to equipment and draft training is as positive an experience for the dog as well. A more bashful dog may take longer to get used to the cart than a bolder dog. Always judge your Berner's mental state while training and stop before the dog gets stressed. Frequent short sessions are better than a few long session for most dogs, and most importantly for the young and inexperienced dog. Use positive reinforcement as much as possible, with food and vocal praise.



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*Training.* Training in basic obedience is as essential to draft work as it is in the rest of your dog's life. It is important that your Berner be quiet and obedient on leash, and responsive to voice commands before you even try hitching up. You can begin obedience training when your dog is a puppy. Take a basic obedience class; as your dog progresses, practice working on leash in all different situations so that when you begin in a cart the dog will listen to you and not be worried about his surroundings while learning to pull.

Talking to your dog is encouraged during all parts of drafting, even in competition. Besides the common commands (heel, sit, down, stand, stay, wait), you should add specific commands for each thing you want your dog to do. A well trained draft dog should be able to pull forward, stop, stand, stay, back up, turn right and left, while hitched. It is simplest to introduce and practice these commands without a cart first, then practice while hitched.

Good training will ensure that you and your Berner have a safe and enjoyable drafting experience!

Next issue: Carts and cart design.