



CARTING WITH BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOGS - TRAINING ARTICLE

Written by Gale Werth

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My phone rings often from people wanting to get started carting with their Berner puppy or young adult. That phone time and cost could be better spent in other ways, hence this article. I have carting articles from the Newfie Club which I have given out for years but those articles are referring primarily to formal carting for a certificate.

My own aim here is to advise the novice dog or puppy owner how to get started having fun and add a new dimension to their lives and that of their Bernese Mountain Dog.

Carting commands are normal obedience commands used along with a few added ones. Prior to harnessing your dog to the cart you would put your dog or pup on a "stand-stay" so you could either harness him and drop the shafts over him or so that you could draw the cart up to him. You would also use "stand-stay" when finished as well so you could unharness the dog without him fidgeting.



"Let's go" or "Pull" works well in getting a dog to lead out and lean into the traces.

Encouragement and enthusiastic praise along the way is a must. "Whoa" can be your halt word or choose whatever command you wish. You should not need any other commands except the word you determine on for backing

up with the cart such as "get back", "back" or "back up". This command can present problems in utility obedience but I won't take time here to cover that.

Initially one should have a harness. Ideally as an adult the harness should be made specifically for a dog that size with added strap length to make adjustments for growth changes or another dog of approximate size.

Pups, however, and older pups need not have so specifically "their own" harness. I have a Siberian Husky non-adjustable harness which I use on pups from 20 - 45 pounds and it sort of self-fits. The strap under the tail gets rather tight on bigger pups and then I graduate to a larger home-made harness or an adjustable one.

Put the harness on the pup and let him wear it around enough so that he forgets it is on. Young puppies hardly know it is there in the first place, whereas older puppies need more acceptance time. Acceptance time might be 5 minutes or it might be 3 days of wearing the harness all the time, Generally a few moments is all that is required and then it is just a matter of getting the pup used to having it put on and taken off without rolling over on its back. That is where the obedience command "stand-stay" comes in. You can prepare a beginner "cart" by punching holes in the front bottom outside corners of a cardboard box about 18" x 24". Take a cord of about 5 feet and run it thru the holes. Reasons for using cardboard boxes are 1) they are cheap and usually available; 2) they make relatively no noise; 3) they do not run up on the dog; and 4) they provide a sense of "something" behind without being completely distracting and frightening. Once a pup is accustomed to harness he easily can be harnessed to the cardboard box cart.

The box itself should be some 5 feet from the rear of the dog to prevent it from frightening him too much. It will startle him when it moves, but head out at a brisk walk and disregard his fears and he soon will forget it is there, other than an occasional glance backwards. In the event the box bounces too much, put a light object such as a jacket in it, just to give the box some "pull" and keep it flat to the ground. Keep the chatter going and keep moving briskly. Treats can add to the fun, but don't rely on them to get the dog to move-use them as a reward as well as your voice after the dog has done what you wanted.

Use the command "Let's Go" or "Pull" each time you set out. As the pup gets familiar with the routine of harnessing and pulling I would vary the terrain a bit - first on the grass, then on gravel or cement-not necessarily in that order. Vary the routine with hills, buildings and distractions of other animals and kids. Give pup plenty of experience at each of the following levels before progressing to the next. If at any time you reach a problem, back off one or two, steps and begin again and build confidence.



(1) Harness; (2) box; (3) terrain; and (4) distractions.

Some dogs never get beyond pulling the "cart" with just a harness and line. Part of this might be from the fact that their owners don't want a cart or don't have a cart. It matters not, however, as the family and dogs still can enjoy the exercise, companionship and discipline that carting brings.

For winter fun and learning, children's round metal sliding saucers {often called snowflakes) are ideal and kids love rides. The flat plastic sleds are cheaper but break more readily and attaching the "line" to them encourages breakage. Saucers have several advantages over the flat plastic sleds or regular runner sleds. Due to their rounded bottoms saucers have the ability to go any direction easily and quickly-even backwards, whereas, runner type sleds only can go forward or make very slight turns. Flat plastic slides offer no handholds for kids and any "freight" would slip off immediately. I have used my saucer for hauling wood, kids and junk. It gives marvelous experience to the dog. Problems arise only when either going too fast and stopping suddenly or going downhill where the saucer can "run up" on the dog. The handler must be aware of such conditions and their possible consequences and learn how to avoid or prevent fearful experiences.

Spring and summer make us think a bit on how we can progress without significant expense, yet still get experience for our pups. If you have fooled around with pulling a lot you will more than likely wish to graduate to a real cart. They can be expensive but present a once only cost and you can easily re-sell your cart to other Berner people, should you decide to "up-grade" or quit for whatever reason. Set a - nominal price on the cart and it will trade hands quickly.

There are 3 major transitions which take place in the change over from pulling on a line to pulling a cart. They are as follows: 1) Shafts restrict free movement of dog; 2) Cart has more weight and feels different; and 3) Cart is generally noisier and presents the "chase" factor.

The first transition is by far the most difficult for the dog to accept. I have found an easy way of getting around the problem of getting dogs used to shafts. Understand that

the shafts on a cart generally are finely affixed to the cart and often are not removable; hence it is difficult to give the dog a chance to get used to the shafts without the cart being part of the act. I devised a cheap and simple set of "training shafts" from two 4 ½' foot pieces of flat wooden moulding. I drilled three holes each about 4 inches apart toward one end of each piece of moulding and threaded an 8-10 inch piece of light cord thru each hole. The other ends of the moulding were nailed to a 15" piece of 2 x 4. The moulding strips are my shafts and I can attach them to the harness in whatever position I wish, using the cords to tie the moulding to the harness shaft loops. The closer the hole is to the end of the moulding, the farther back it will ride on the dog so it does not interfere as much with shoulder action. The 2 x 4 base piece acts not only as a connector for the moulding strips, but it presents another pulling situation with something following the dog.

Once the dog accepts the shafts in the farthest back position with no hesitation, move the shafts up one hole, so the shafts reach farther forward. Work dog at this level until he shows no qualms about the shaft action. Be sure to do lots of turns, as that is where the hesitation or distress about shafts comes in, due to the restriction of the shafts. At such time as you feel you have done your homework with the harness, shaft and pulling training then you can think about a cart.

You can build your own or you can purchase one. Ready-made carts seem to be better balanced than homemade carts and in some cases can be easily taken apart for storage and transport, which does eliminate some problems. Use your own judgment.

Preliminary to harnessing the dog to the cart itself, it is a smart idea to walk around the yard or driveway with the cart and the dog. Ideally someone else should pull the cart so the dog has to be between you and the cart-just for exposure to your cart's own peculiar noises. A preamble to this would be taking walks with the dog while pushing a stroller or pulling a wagon-it all aids in getting him used to wheels and noises which go along with wheels.



*If no flat moulding available, door stop would work just as well. The next step would be putting the dog on a stand-stay and dropping the shafts over the dog's back

several times, so he understands what is going to happen. Be firm about the dog holding the stand-stay. After you have done the dropping the shaft bit a couple of times, attach the harness to the shafts and again drop the shafts over the dog and let the harness rest on the dog's back. Raise and lower the shafts several times, each time ending up by resting the harness and thereby the balance weight of the cart on the dog's back.

At such point as the dog doesn't care-that is when you slip the harness over his head. As yet I would not fasten the belly band though - just encourage dog to move forward a couple of steps and you move the cart so it comes along.

Now is "Buckle Up" time! Ideally a second person will help at this point. The handler and the dog start off slowly with the second person (helper) holding the cart back so that it doesn't spook the dog. Move forward using a lot of encouragement. Helper may want a dog lead attached to the rear of the cart, so he can be farther back or not have to bend over but still have control. I, myself, prefer to hold onto the cart with my hands in order to slow it or even lift the cart around, so it is straight behind the dog, should the dog turn in the shafts or if you are working in a restricted area.

A long straight drive is what you would want, but in many cases we are in a ring or small area. Until dog is willingly pulling straight, don't expect turns to go well. Any assistance offered to begin with on tight corners will stand you in good stead later as the dog won't have a built-in fear of turns due to the tightness of the shafts against his inside shoulder from those first experiences of cart and comers.

Once the dog seems to be moving with his tail up and doesn't appear concerned about the cart behind him, you can dispense with the helper and move right out with the dog in a trot. BE AWARE that at times the dog will try to snug up to you and the shafts will hit you just behind the knee (and produce pain and beautiful bruises). If at any point you anticipate distress on the part of the dog, halt and discuss the matter and then head out again. After that it is merely a matter of exposure and gradually increasing weights. The acceptance time for a dog to handle the shafts is called 'inspanning' time and actually can and often will be only a matter of several minutes.

This article is not to be taken as gospel, but merely as a vehicle to give you several good ideas and suggestions on how to get started and widen the horizon you and your Berner have before you. GOOD LUCK, ENJOY, AND HAPPY HAULING!
Gale Werth and Broken Oaks Berners



Draft with Bernese Mountain Dogs - Links

Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America

- ▶ **BMDCA's Draft Index page** <http://www.bmdca.org/pages/Drafting.php>
- ▶ **BMDCA's Draft Calendar** http://www.bmdca.org/pages/BMDCA_Draft_Calendar.php
- ▶ **BMDCA's Info Series "Draft"** http://www.bmdca.org/info_sheets/drafting.pdf

Bernese Mountain Dog Club of Canada

- ▶ **BMDCC's Draft page** <http://www.bmdcc.ca/carting1.htm>
- ▶ **Berner.org Draft Links** <http://www.berner.org/links/pages/Stuff/Drafting/>
- ▶ **Sierra West BMD Club's Draft page** <http://www.sierrawest.org/draft.html>
- ▶ **Box Style Cart Plans** http://www.bmdinfo.org/bernerpedia/BOX_CART_PLANS.pdf
- ▶ **Bernerpaws website - equipment, articles** <http://www.bernerpaw.com/>
- ▶ **Ikon Outfitters, harnesses** <http://www.ikonoutfitters.com/>
- ▶ **BMDCSEW's Draft DVD's, "Training Your Draft Dog" & "Showing your Draft Dog"**
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