

## Harnessing Dog Power

The Iditarod, Call of the Wild, Snow dogs highlight what our canine companions are capable of doing in harness. This skill of the north can also be useful for our backyard buddies. Dogs are natural pullers. You usually don't have to teach them to do it. I see this natural talent being demonstrated daily. People walking down the street, arm fully extended, leash tight, dog straining at the collar in order to keep their people moving. Now what if you take this raw talent, refine it, and make it useful?

Dogs working in harness can be used for many things. Walking, hiking, jogging, dog scootering, skijoring, dog carting, and dog sledding. Once your dog is working in harness you are no longer taking the dog for a walk or the dog is taking you for a walk but are as a working symbiotic team.

To get started you and the dog must get properly equipped. A skijoring belt with or without leg straps for you. This belt goes around your waist, has a wide back section to distribute the pressure, is adjustable and has two D-rings up front to attach the dog's tow line. Your dog needs to get custom fitted for a harness. This is very important. Having an improper fit can lead to injuries for your dog. I like to compare it to buying the wrong size shoes to walk or run. It won't take long to get sore feet. Some points to check for fit of an X-back harness are:

1. The collar of the harness should be snug and sit at the base of the neck. It should not slide down over the dog's shoulder joints. In front the notch of the collar should hit just at the dog's sternal notch



2. As the harness angles diagonally across the side of the dog's body it should be hitting at just about the last rib.
3. Pull tension back on the harness to stretch it down across the dog's back, the tug should come to the base of the tail. The harness should not be able to slip down over the dog's hip joints.



Last, you need a tow line. Tow lines have a snap on the end to connect to the dog's harness, a quick release connection that goes to the D-rings of your skijoring belt and an internal bungee that acts as a shock absorber between you and the dog.

To get your dog started have a friend gently put pressure on the dog's harness while you hold the leash and encourage him to move forward. This tells the dog it is okay to move forward even though there is pressure pulling him back. If you are working by yourself you can have the dog pull a small tire or some other weighted object. Don't make it too difficult to start. Gradually add weight or pressure as your dog becomes more comfortable. Decide on what command you want to use to get your dog to move forward and use it every time you ask him to start pulling (mush, okay, hup hup, etc).

When your dog is in harness this is work time. Not visit-the-other-dog time, or pee-on-the-bush time. To get them to avoid these distractions, I give the command "on by." You can practice this with your dog on leash. If he looks like he is going to go off course, give a quick firm pull on the leash while giving the command "on by." You must be consistent with this. It is not okay to let him sniff at some things and have to go "on by" others. That becomes confusing. When the pull training lesson is over, he can sniff and visit as much as he wants. Don't forget to praise your dog for all correct actions. I'm a firm believer in training with lots of hugs and kisses.

Other useful commands are "gee" right turn; "haw" left turn; "line out and wait." This tells the dog to hold the tension out on the tow line and wait until the command to move forward is given. My favorite is "Whoa"! At the end of the pulling session take the dog's harness off immediately. This signals that work is done. Reward him and let him play. This also makes a clear distinction of when it is appropriate to pull (harness on), and not pull (harness off).

Working with a dog in harness can keep you and your dog fit. What you decide to do with your dog power is up to you. Remember a happy dog is a dog that has a job.

## TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTS

**Harness:** The apparatus your dog will be wearing when he/she is pulling.

**Tug:** The loop at the back of the harness where your towrope is connected.

**Towrope:** A 10ft. nylon rope with an internal bungee that connects you to your dog.

**Skijoring Belt:** The harness you will be wearing that the towrope connects to.

**Neck line:** A short nylon rope that connects two dogs together at the collar so they can run side by side when pulling.

**Line Out:** Your dog stands at the end of the towrope which is connected to the harness. He should have the towrope taught and be leaning into the harness. This puts the dog in the ready position to move forward. The dog should stand and wait with the towrope tight until you give the command to move forward. By training the dog to line out and keep the towrope tight, when they start to move there is less jerking on the dog and you.

**Hike** (or whatever command you choose, just be consistent): This will be your command that tells the dog it is now OK to move forward. The dog should pull forward after hearing this command.

**On By:** The command given when you want your dog to move by a distraction. This may be another dog you are trying to pass, a person, a squirrel, or just a good smelling bush or tree.

**Gee:** Turn right. The command should be given just prior to making the turn.

**Haw:** Turn left. The command should be given just prior to making the turn.

**Easy:** When you want your dog to slow slightly. This may be needed when negotiating a turn or when trying to get by obstacles.

**Whoa:** Stop. A very important term I suggest your dog know well.

Your dog is a natural puller and will pick up concepts quickly. Consistency in training you dog is the most important concept YOU can learn. Use the same commands every time. Don't change the lingo on them. Praise verbally or with a treat when ever your dog does something right. Keep reprimands short. It is not necessary to yell or hit your dog. If your dog seems confused about a concept, it may be necessary to go back to the last thing they were successful at doing. Praise the behavior when accomplished and then stop the lesson. All lessons should end on a positive note with the dog accomplishing the task. Tomorrow is another day.