

Newf Draft Work - Things To Consider Before You Start

By Lori Littleford

If you are like most owners, you're eager to get started but please take a moment to consider that you are asking your Newfoundland to participate in a potentially dangerous and cruel activity. Dog carting has been periodically banned in several European countries. Closer to home, the San Francisco Humane Society would not allow a carting demonstration at their annual dog walk. Banning these activities is not entirely misguided. Unless the handler selects properly fitting equipment, properly conditions his dog and uses good judgement regarding the demands he made on his partner, carting and draft work can indeed be cruel to the dog. One of the goals of this seminar is to provide the information the handlers need to insure that carting and draft work are both enjoyable and safe for you and your dog.

Please consider:

Your dog should be old enough.

NCA regulations do not allow a dog under one year of age to enter a draft test. Many trainers believe that a dog should not be asked to pull weight (light carts and training wheels are fine) before his rapidly growing bones have hardened, usually by age two. Why risk permanent orthopedic damage? (See the next article for what to do while waiting for magic 2 years)

Your dog should be in good health.

No dog should be asked to work if ill or injured. Start with a healthy dog and watch for subtle changes in attitude while your dog works. Trail surfaces vary. Rocks may cause stone bruises, burrs may lodge between tender toes. Besides, carting and draft work are athletic activities in which the dog may find and use muscles he didn't know he had. Most Newfs have a high pain tolerance and their desire to please will often keep them working. Be particularly aware with a dog that suddenly "refuses" to perform a task. "Won't" sometimes means "can't" and many times means "shouldn't be asked to" due to an improper apparatus.

Your dog should be in good physical condition.

Draft work is not an activity for couch potato Newfoundlands. The draft test has a one mile minimum course; at most cart pulls a dog might log three times that distance. Build your dog up slowly, over several weeks if necessary, to be able to comfortably handle these distances. Dysplastic dogs can do draft work and are often more functional and comfortable when kept well muscled. If your dog is overweight, cutting back somewhat on his food (no more than 25%) and increasing his exercise is the fastest, safest way to shed those pounds!

You should be in good physical condition.

Be sure you can physically handle those distances too. While you will eventually train your dog to allow you to set the pace, you'll need to be able to keep up with his during the

first few training sessions. Most Newfs initially like to pull at quite a brisk pace so your training walk should boogie!

Educate yourself on equipment selection and maintenance.

Your responsibility as a handler is to minimize the effort required by your dog to perform a given task. Harnesses should be properly fitting, wheel bearings greased, and tires inflated. Bent shafts should be straightened or replaced. Shaft length and backup ring locations must fit your dog. Be sure to have enough helpers to control a novice dog. A three to one ratio is ideal - one person for each side of the cart and one for the rear. Most of all, remember to have fun. Newfs respond much better to praise than punishment.