



BMDCA Info Series

Bernese Mountain Dogs & Draft Work

2023 #9

History ► Bernese Mountain Dogs were working dogs for generations in the Bernese Oberland of Switzerland.

Traditionally, Bernese hauled dairy products, such as milk and cream, from the farms to the dairy often accompanied by children and occasionally alone. As a working dog, the Bernese contributed significantly to the family's prosperity.



Draft in America ► The BMDCA approved Draft Test Regulations in January 1991 and the first test was held in New England in the fall of that year. Since then, the sport of Draft in the Bernese community has grown tremendously, with many titles earned by enthusiastic teams. Regional clubs across the country hold one or more Draft Tests a year and every BMDCA National Specialty since 1992 has offered Draft Tests. To both recognize and promote the Draft heritage of the Bernese Mountain Dog the BMDCA *Versatility Award*, established in 1995, requires a BMDCA Draft title as well as a championship and one other working title. The BMDCA Working Dog Award also required a Draft title.

BMDCA Draft Tests ► The Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America Draft Tests are a series of exercises designed to develop and demonstrate the natural abilities of purebred Bernese Mountain Dogs in a working capacity involving hauling. Bernese have historically functioned as draft dogs in various capacities, and performance of these exercises is intended to demonstrate skills resulting from both inherent ability and training that are applicable to realistic work situations. Efficiency in accomplishing the tasks is essential. It is also desirable that the dogs evidence willingness and enjoyment of their work in a combination of controlled teamwork with their handlers and their own natural independence.

BMDCA Draft Tests are judged by two BMDCA approved Draft judges. Entrants are evaluated on their performance of the exercises, teamwork, willingness, ability, enthusiasm, naturalness, and smoothness. The handler is encouraged to talk to the dog during most portions of the test. Draft tests are divided into three parts.

Basic Control: This is not designed to be a precise obedience performance but a demonstration of basic responsiveness and control prior to hitching up. A simple obedience style heeling

pattern including turns, change of pace, and halts must be executed successfully when instructed. A recall is also required in this part of the test.

Maneuvering: In a large (100 x 100) flat ring and with an empty cart/wagon, the team must negotiate a course that includes turns and circles around obstacles, "slow" (change of pace) for at least 10 feet, successfully greeting strangers, loading and unloading the draft rig, and navigating a narrow area that is twelve inches wider than the widest part of the cart. The dog must back a distance of one foot in Novice Draft or four feet in Open Draft, successfully pass by audio and visual distractions, and wait while the handler moves an obstacle from the dog's path.

Group Stay and Freight Haul: The three-minute group stay is performed in the ring while hitched to loaded carts. Novice Draft handlers remain in the ring and the Open Draft handlers go out-of-sight. Following the stay the teams leave the ring for a half-mile freight haul, which traverses the natural terrain of the area, ideally including uphill and downhill slopes and changes of terrain. Teams demonstrate their ability to pull and control the assigned weight over the course. The freight haul finishes back in the ring.

BMDCA Draft Titles ► Eight Draft titles can be earned through the BMDCA.

- **Novice Draft Dog (NDD):** All exercises, except the recall and stay, are performed on leash. The handler stands across the ring for the three-minute group stay. During the half-mile freight haul the dog pulls twenty pounds.
- **Draft Dog (DD):** All exercises are performed off leash. The handler is out of sight for the three-minute group stay. During the half-mile freight haul the dog pulls its own weight, rounded down to the nearest ten pounds (e.g., a 93 pound dog will pull 90 pounds).
- **Brace Novice Draft Dog (BNDD):** This class is for a team of two dogs working side by side and on leash. Each of the dogs must have already earned their NDD. The maneuvering exercises are identical to those in Novice Draft. During the half-mile freight haul each Novice Brace team pulls forty pounds.
- **Brace Draft Dog (BDD):** This class is for a team of two dogs working side by side off leash. Each of the dogs must have already earned their BNDD and DD. The exercises are identical to those in Open Draft. During the half-mile freight haul each team pulls the combined weight the individual



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dogs would pull in Open Draft (e.g. a 96 pound dog teamed with an 83 pound dog will pull 170 pounds).

The following titles are earned after passing the respective classes five times under at least seven different judges:

Advanced Novice Draft Dog (ANDD) in Novice Draft (NDD), **Master Draft Dog (MDD)** in Open Draft (DD), **Advanced Brace Novice Draft Dog (ABNDD)** in Brace Novice Draft (BNDD), and **Master Brace Draft Dog (MBDD)** in Brace Open Draft (BDD). **Grand Master Draft Dog (GMDD)** is earned after all four Advanced and Master titles are achieved. A Draft title is required for the BMDCA Working Dog and Versatility Awards.

Getting Started ► The most important thing to keep in mind is to have fun. Whether you are interested in Draft titles, parades or having your Berner help you around the home, carting should be an experience you both enjoy. Start slowly and progress gradually, always keeping within your dog's zone of comfort. Take the time necessary for your dog to be happy and comfortable at each step of the training. As with all training, use lots of praise, food, rewards and positive reinforcement. Many Regional Bernese Clubs across the country sponsor Draft clinics, seminars and classes to help you get started.

Basic Control: Draft work will be much easier to teach if you have established a basic working relationship and control with obedience training. Your Bernese should be able to walk on a loose leash, to stay, and to come when called off leash. Heelwork will be necessary if you plan to enter a Draft Test.

Safety: Safety is paramount when teaching your dog draft work because an out of control dog hitched to a cart is a hazard to himself and all around him. During the early stages of training always keep your dog on leash, and when first hitching your dog to a cart, work with a second person to help manage the situation if the dog should panic.

Harnesses: There are two basic styles of harness to choose from, buckle and siwash. The buckle harness is the traditional harness often seen in older pictures of Bernese carting in Switzerland. Its distinctive feature is a band that crosses the dog's chest horizontally across the sternum. The siwash harness is the style of harness used in dog sledding. A siwash harness allows complete freedom of movement of the dog's shoulder assembly that may be restricted by a buckle harness. Some dogs are more comfortable with one type of harness than another, so be flexible. Regardless of style, the harness should fit fairly snugly, without chafing. A properly fitted harness keeps your dog comfortable and safe.



Carts and Wagons: Two wheeled draft rigs are called carts and four wheeled are called wagons. A cart is easier to maneuver, especially in tight corners, but any load must be carefully balanced to avoid too much weight on the dog's shoulders. Wagons are usually larger and less maneuverable, having a wider turning radius, but since any load is fully supported by the four wheels, balance is not a concern. Wagons are more suited to pulling heavy weights. Your choice should be based on your needs. Some people adapt antique carts or wagons, and others

make their own. They can also be purchased from a variety of sources.

Training: Introduce the harness to your Berner first. Let the dog sniff it, then put it on and let him wear it around the house and on walks until he's completely comfortable. Now add the traces and let your dog get used to them dragging. Then attach a light drag to the traces, such as a small piece of wood or partially sand filled milk jug. Remember, all this should be done on leash! Your Berner should be completely comfortable at each step before proceeding to the next. Solid shafts cause some dogs to feel very confined. Time, care, and patience must be taken in introducing them.

Let your dog thoroughly investigate your new cart. Pull it around your yard while the dog follows along. Walk your dog on leash beside, behind and in front of the cart. Carts can make odd noises that the dogs need to become accustomed to. Some people even feed their dogs from the cart or beside the cart to create a very positive association.

The big day! Before actually hitching your dog to the cart, place him between the shafts and have him walk between them while you pull the cart. Only when your dog is comfortable at this step should you consider actually hitching him to the cart. When you do first hitch the dog have a person walk on each side for safety. Take just a few steps and praise, then a few more and praise. Increase distance slowly as your dog becomes more and more comfortable. When you can do long straight lines introduce big wide turns and only gradually tighten them. Your dog must become used to turning into the shafts and this can take time.

Maneuvers such as backing are best taught first without the cart and then with lots of help and praise with the cart.

Careful introduction, an upbeat attitude, lots of praise and lots of patience will reward you with a happy working partner eager to join a parade or give a child a ride. You will smile, your Berner will smile and so will that child in the cart!



Final Thoughts ► Although your Berner may not enter a Draft Test until he is two years old, even a little puppy may be introduced to a harness and dragging traces. Heavy loads, such as required for Open Draft, should not be introduced until a dog is fully mature, at least two years old. Load weight should always be increased very gradually over weeks of time. Your draft dog is an athlete and should be carefully conditioned. So, with safety always first, and your Berner and your patience in hand, enjoy exploring the draft heritage of your Bernese Mountain Dog.

Draft References ► Draft regulations, draft test schedules, and draft judges are posted on the BMDCA website (<https://www.bmdca.org/draft>). For information on training, workshops, and matches, contact your regional BMD club. The BMDCA website provides links.