

Peter looks at how harnesses work

I am sitting in a mini-bus owned by Kris Hoffman, an American dog musher based in Steamboat Springs in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, heading to his ranch 10 miles north of the town to enjoy the opportunity to mush (driving sled dogs) an eight dog team of Alaskan huskies over a 12 mile trail. As we approach, I can see Kris preparing the team that I will be driving: the dogs are jumping about in the snow whilst having their harnesses put on, obviously very excited in anticipation of pulling the sled.



People often say harnesses do not stop dogs pulling because they are used for sled dogs that are trained to pull in harness. This statement is both true and false. There are many different harnesses on the market, all of which are designed for different jobs. I have no intention of using this article to plug a particular range,

but to give some information about different types of harnesses and what they are used for. "Any equipment used on a dog has an impact on his posture and as posture and behaviour are linked it is important that the equipment used is of benefit to both the dog and the handler. Harnesses relieve pressure on the neck and can reduce common problems such as pulling, lunging and lead frustration, but if there is only one point of attachment on the back of the harness these problems can be exacerbated. Dogs that are walked regularly in harnesses with just one point of attachment on the back often learn to brace through the shoulders and tighten the back which can have a detrimental effect on the dog. Successful forward motion reinforces pulling behaviour. ***"A dog has more than 60 per cent of his body weight over his fore quarters and can naturally out walk a human. Having two points of contact (i.e., a back and front ring) is key to teaching dogs to move in balance by their handler's side and many owners are stunned at the instant effect two points of contact has on their dog's posture and behaviour when on the lead."***

There are a number of harnesses on the market specially designed with a front connection ring as well as a standard top ring. Xtra Dog, have a fleece lined walking harness with this in mind. This harness is designed by Marie Miller, who is recognised as one of the UK's leading dog behaviourists and a TTouch Instructor. She came up with the idea based on the front end of a sledding X-back harness. It sits on the shoulder of the dog, and goes under its front legs with two connections on the top and the front (breastbone).



Marie explains more: ***“There are a number of ways to help a dog to learn to walk in balance on a loose lead. The TTouch Balance Lead technique requires the use of a 6ft training lead. The simple action of looping the lead to form a containing barrier on the dog’s chest can be really helpful to teach him to walk in balance and can help the dog to regain self control if he becomes over excited. If he leans into the lead, briefly meet the pressure and then melt by relaxing again, giving the dog nothing to lean against. He may immediately lean again, so repeat until the dog stops leaning into the lead and stands/moves in his own balance. This is a smooth movement, not a jerk. Meet the pressure and then melt away. You can use the Meet and Melt technique when the dog is wearing a harness. You need a lead with a clip at either end so that you can have two points of contact. Your harness might have two clips, e.g., a ring on the back and a ring at the chest or you could clip onto the back ring of the harness and the flat collar.”***





I have heard scepticism of this technique for stopping dogs pulling and even though I have personally worked with several hundred dogs with a more than 80% success rate, not everyone believes that this will work.

Tessa Wakeling from *Klewagin Huskies* (who breeds, shows and races Siberian huskies) was a sceptic about this method for working dogs. When I first met Tessa, she challenged me to convince her that it would work. They have around 18 dogs, one of whom, Shnice is a racing dog, Tessa found her impossible to walk on a loose lead. I fitted a front ringed harness onto Shnice and Tessa took her dog with a double-ended lead. Shnice immediately changed her on-lead posture and started to walk quietly along-side Tessa – this continued for a quarter of a mile. Tessa became a convert and tells everyone about this approach to dog walking. The Xtra Dog harness is not the only harness on the market that benefits from a front ring to stop dogs pulling. Sarah Fisher's TTouch harness, also available from Xtra Dog, is specifically designed for this purpose as well as other aspects of Tellington TTouch. More information about TTouch can be found at www.xtradog.training, and there are others on the market too. An important point to think about when buying a harnesses is the fit. There are too many dogs wearing harnesses that do not fit them correctly. Many manufacturers sadly do not make harnesses in enough sizes and unfortunately pet shops often tend to sell harnesses that do not fit correctly. A harness should fit snugly, with space for two fingers all the way around, but not tight. If the harness has a front ring then it is essential that that ring sits on the breastbone of the dog and does not move when the dog is walked. It is also worth considering that some dogs, particularly some cross-breeds may not fit a standard fit harness, and some companies including Xtra Dog offer a custom fit service based on measurements of a dog.

Remember, whatever dog activity you take part in there may be a harness for that job. A harness designed for sledding will not work for loose lead walking or flyball. There is nothing worse for a customer to go home with a nice new harness only to find that it is either the wrong size or not suitable for the job intended. For example, we have had many customers who have bought our fleece walking harness and asked if it can be used for Cani-X. The problem with this scenario is that a walking harness will balance a dog and stop it pulling whilst a multi-sport type of harness or an X-back are both ideal for Cani-X and will allow the dog to lean forward and pull.