

Cani-Cross Badge

Description, Training and Video Submission Information

Cani-cross is a dry-land mushing sport that involves a team consisting of a runner being towed by one or more dogs on a cross country course. This is not simply running with a dog – special equipment is used and dogs are trained to pull the handler to help propel them forward faster. It is a great way to improve canine and handler fitness, get outdoors, have fun, and possibly even engage in some friendly competition!

Equipment Needed:

- 1) A well-fitting harness for the dog designed for mushing. The x-back style harness commonly used in sledding is acceptable and is often used; however, a “shorty” style harness specifically for skijoring or cani-cross is preferred. Sledding harnesses distribute weight most appropriately if the weight is transferred directly across the dog’s topline. Since the point of contact on a runner (the waist) is usually higher than the dog’s back, the x-back harnesses can cause pressure on the dog’s intercostal muscles in the stomach if used for cani-cross. Consequently, veterinarians now tend to recommend a “shorty” harness, which attaches behind the dog’s shoulder blades. These harnesses are very similar to a standard non-restrictive walking harness, but have more padding around the chest and elbows. Front-attachment, no-pull, or harnesses that restrict shoulder movement are not acceptable.



Euro-short Harness (www.canix.co.uk)



Shorty Harness (www.canadoq.ca)



X-Back Harness

- 2) An attachment line with a bungee for shock absorption. The bungee can either be integrated into the line itself or attached at the handler belt to absorb shock. Line should be approximately 6-7 feet in length.



Cani-cross line with bungee.

- 3) A belt for the handler to connect to the line. Belt should be well-fitting and ideally have padding.



Waist belts.

- 4) If para-cani-cross, an appropriate wheelchair and attachment for pulling on cross country terrain.

Criteria:

Dog and handler must demonstrate that they can safely participate in running a one mile course with the dog pulling the handler. Dog should be pulling the majority of the time. The line should only be slack during a warm-up and cool-down phase, or if trail conditions warrant a slack line for safety, such as on a steep downhill, loose or uneven surface, or slick patches.

The dog should be trained cues to pull ("line out"), turn left or right, proceed past a distraction, and to slow down and allow slack on the line (helpful for going downhill or on unsteady terrain). Dog should be able to be passed by another team and not interfere.

As endurance activities can cause stress on developing joints, this activity should not be performed until the dog is at least one year of age and/or the growth plates are completely closed.

For safest running terrain, grass and dirt trails are the best, followed by sand, wood chip and crushed gravel. Asphalt paths can also be acceptable; however, concrete should be avoided as a running surface, as it creates too much stress on the joints, both canine and human.

Note that distance running is an intense activity and both handler and dog should be in good physical condition in order to safely perform this activity. If you are beginning an exercise program for yourself or your dog, you may want to consult a physician and/or veterinarian first .

Training Information

1) Accepting the Harness.

Many dogs don't enjoy having something put over their head, so it is important to introduce the harness gradually, and help them to associate it with positive things. You can do this with a few treats, and a verbal marker or clicker.

Before ever putting the harness on your dog, first just hold it in your hand out to your side and mark/reward him for simply looking at it. Reward for looking a few times, then wait for him to begin to approach it, mark, and reward. Have him voluntarily approach closer and closer to the harness until he is touching it with his nose before receiving the reward.

Once he is happily targeting the harness with his nose, you can begin shaping him to put his head through it voluntarily. Hold the harness in front of you so that it hangs open. You will be holding the portion that will go over the back, and the neck and chest straps will be hanging down. Mark and reward for the dog's nose starting to go through the opening. You can feed in position by holding the treat in the harness neck opening, but resist the urge at this stage to continue to pull the harness over the rest of the dog's head. As the dog becomes more comfortable, only mark and reward when he puts his head through further and further. With a few repetitions, you can have a dog who happily "gets dressed" himself – when he sees the harness come out, you can make it a little trick for him to pop his head in the opening.

Some harnesses require you to either lift the dog's paws to get them through the leg straps at this point, or to bring the chest strap underneath and attach the girth straps. If your dog is uncomfortable with this type of body handling, continue to go slow, and reward for each small increment (for example, touching the paw, or reaching underneath his chest).

Once your dog has his harness on, head out and have fun! Just as dogs learn that a leash means a walk is coming, they can also learn that the cani-cross gear means an exciting run, and will begin to look forward to getting suited up to go!

Notes on fitting a harness:

Information and videos on fitting either a "shorty" harness or x-back harness can be found here: <http://www.canadog.ca/pages/Measuring-and-Fitting-Sled-Dog-Harnesses.html>

2) Training the dog to pull.

Many dogs will do this naturally, so all you need to do is get it on cue! As you start out, give your cue word ("line out," "go", etc.) and take off. As you start to pair this with training your

“easy” cue in the following step, your dog can learn at which times he should be pulling, and when he needs to slow down.

If your dog is reluctant to pull, you may need to train this behavior. Find something that your dog is excited about, and have him run towards it. For instance, you may have another dog/runner team run up ahead of you, or have an assistant call them towards a toy or treat that he really loves. Praise the dog when he forges ahead and have him pull you towards the desired reward. Begin at short distances at first, and start adding in your cue word when you know he will pull all the way to the reward. Over time increase the distance, and as he begins to learn the cue for pulling, you can start to fade out the motivator in front.

3) Training the dog to run on a loose line.

If you have trained your dog to reliably walk nicely on leash, then you will just need to begin pairing an “easy” cue as you begin running with him on the loose lead. For this type of dog, you will probably need to work more on teaching them that it is OK to pull in the cani-cross harness, and will likely be working more on the steps in #2 above.

If your dog is a natural puller, then you need to teach him that he must sometimes let up the pressure on the leash when asked to. By adding a cue to the pulling behavior, as above, you will start to help him understand that pulling is something he can do when asked. You can also use his love of pulling to reinforce his periods of running on a loose leash, by using the Premack Principle.

While running, give your dog the “easy” cue, and slow down. If he adjusts his pace and lets pressure off the leash, praise him and give him the “go” command again and pick the pace back up. You may need to come to a complete stop, and wait for him to ease up on the leash pressure. When he looks back and takes pressure off the leash, praise, release him to “go” and begin again.

After a couple repetitions, start asking for a couple steps on a loose leash before releasing him to pull again, then build up gradually until the dog can continue running on a loose lead until the “go” cue is given.

4) Training “left” and “right”.

You can begin training cues for “left” and “right” simply sitting in your living room. Sit at a chair, and position your dog in front of you, so you are both facing in the same direction, straight ahead. Hold your dog under his belly. (Note: if your dog is uncomfortable being handled like this, you may need to back up and work on making him more relaxed in this position first.) You want to start with the dog looking ahead. If he just wants to turn back and look at you, toss a treat in front to get him turned straight again. Once he is facing forward, gently tap one of his hips. He should turn his head to see what you are doing, at which time, you will mark and reward with a treat placed near his hip. Do this on both sides, until he gets used to turning his head in the direction of the hip tap.

Now you will start adding a verbal cue before the hip tap. Say “left”, pause for a second, tap the left hip and reward when he turns. Proceed this way until he learns that the verbal word is a cue for the head turn. When he has that perfected, work on the other direction.

Next, change the position of your reward – instead of feeding at the hip, once the dog’s head turns in the correct direction following your cue, toss the reward a bit forward and to the side and let them go get it. This will help them learn that the cue means to turn and proceed in that direction. You may want to practice your throwing mechanics before trying this with your dog!

When you are ready to take it out on the trail, start by making the correct decision the easy one for your dog. For instance, when your path is naturally taking a turn to the left, give the “left” cue as they approach and praise and/or reward when he turns. As this becomes more reliable, you can start making it more challenging, such as at intersections. If the dog does not respond correctly to the cue, simply stop, and wait for them to make the correct decision. Once they turn in the correct direction, praise and proceed forward.

5) Training the “on by” cue.

This is essentially a “leave it” while moving. Tips for training a basic “leave it” are available on the DSA site at http://dogscouts.org/Article_links_page.html. Once you have a reliable “leave it,” start to add the motion of running. You may need to start with the distraction far enough to the side for your dog to be successful, and work on gradually moving closer to it over time. When your dog makes the decision to proceed past the distraction, reward out in front of the dog in the direction of travel – either by tossing a toy or treat out in front for him to continue running to, or have a helper out front offer the reward. This will help the dog understand to pass the distraction and continue moving forward.

6) Training the dog to be passed.

Again, the general concept is that of a “leave it” with motion, although some dogs may find this challenging as it may trigger their desire to chase. As before, begin with the passer moving by several feet to the side – far enough so that the dog can be successful - and decrease the distance gradually. Continue to reward out in front of the dog.

If your dog is particularly excited by other dogs running past, start this out with a distraction that is less exciting, such as a runner without a dog.

Requirements for Video Submission

-Video must demonstrate the handler putting the harness on the dog. Dog should not show fear or resentment of the harness being put on. Video should show detail of the harness on the dog, demonstrating that the fit is appropriate.

-Video should show the line and belt, to demonstrate that they are appropriate and safe gear for use in cani-cross.

-To demonstrate that the dog understands the “line out” and “easy” cues, video camera should be situated to the side of the runner and dog, not directly in front or behind. Video must show the dog running while pulling for a distance of 50 yards, and running on a loose leash for 50 yards on flat ground.

-“Left” and “right” cues should be demonstrated at a fork or intersection in the trail, so that it is clear that the dog is understanding the correct direction to turn.

-When demonstrating passing and being passed, both the dog being tested and the “distraction” team should be traveling in the same direction, in order to demonstrate a race scenario. The passing should occur with no more than 6 feet of lateral distance between the two parties. If another cani-cross team is not available to assist in the filming, another runner with or without dog or a bicyclist may be used.

-The one mile check-off run does not need to be filmed. Handler should log when and where the run occurred and the distance, and should provide verification from a witness, a GPS file, or by tracking the route on an on-line site (such as www.mapmyrun.com) .