

Dog Scouts of America

Backpacking Preparation

Choosing the right pack for your dog

Dogs can carry a good deal of weight on their backs, which is helpful in trekking across country, as your dog can then lighten your load by carrying his own provisions at the very least. It is important to place the weight which your dog will carry over the shoulder blade (withers) area, and not in the middle of the back. The shoulders are built to carry the weight--the spine is not. This is especially important in long-backed breeds. Get a pack that places the weight over the dog's shoulders.

If your dog's pack is loaded, and he is doing any kind of climbing, uphill walking or pulling, you will want to be sure to have a non-restrictive harness on your pack. Non-restrictive means that the dog's shoulder movement (point of shoulder) is not impeded by any kind of horizontal strap across the front. A non-restrictive pack would have a harness hook-up which goes over the dog's head like a sledging harness, comes to a "V" at the hyoid bone, and continues down between the dog's front legs. This allows the pulling pressure to go on the middle of the dog's chest, and not on the forelegs, which would restrict his movement. Get a pack that is non-restrictive.

Whether you want padding or not on your pack depends on the weight and the amount of pulling your dog will do. It will also depend on what type of coat your dog has. A short-coated breed would benefit more from a padded harness if there will be a lot of rubbing of the pack. Padding is usually in the form of polar fleece or fake lamb's wool. Some packs are padded under the saddlebags, and some are padded around the neck and chest areas of the harness.

Color is a matter of personal preference, but remember that your dog will be in the woods, and a high visibility color, like orange, yellow, or red will help you (and others) spot your dog from a distance, without mistaking him for a game animal.

Packs should be made from a lightweight, waterproof material, with adjustable nylon web straps and quick-snap buckles for ease in getting on and off.

Conditioning yourself and your dog for exercise

Just like any other physical activity, you will want to prepare yourself and your dog for the new strain on the muscles that may not have been used regularly. Start out slowly, walking only a mile or less the first day. Slowly build on the distance you will cover on your hikes. Remember to stretch your muscles (your dog's too) before exercising. When you start having your dog carry his pack, start out light (or empty), and add weight gradually each trip.

Getting the items you need for your pack

There are some clubs that offer titles for backpacking. Some are breed clubs for specific dogs (like Malamutes). Each one has different requirements as to what must be carried in your pack and what percentage of the dog's total body weight must be carried to qualify for their titles. If your breed has a backpacking title program, contact your national breed club for rules and requirements. Dog Scouts of America will confer titles on your dog, provided you pack along the necessary items in your dog's backpack. These items include: first aid kit, water, bowl, spare collar and leash, matches, knife, at least three baggies (for clean-up), compass, flashlight, owner's I.D. and map of the area (if needed).

Logging your miles

Each time you pack a mile or more with your dog, keep track of the distance, date, weather and trail conditions in a log book. It is good to have your hiking buddy (if you have one) sign your log book. When you have logged 50 miles of backpacking, you can take a check-out test, which is a 5-mile hike. A Dog Scout Camp staff member must sign your log. Then you will be eligible to receive the Pack Dog title from the Dog Scouts of America.