

# DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

## Finding the perfect fit with harness maker Shilon Bedford.



It seems simple to say that a dog should have a well-fitted harness. Certainly if we want our dogs to perform well in competition or on a team, the fit of their harness will contribute to their ability to achieve their maximum performance. That being said, those of us who have run and pulled weight with dogs know that the majority of their achievement results from the drive in their brain. But that does not absolve us from providing our dogs with a harness that meets the basics of a good fit.

When harnessing a dog with either a traditional sledding harness or a weight pull harness, I prefer to position a dog between my knees with their head facing forward. A dog's head enters a harness from the underside and then slides into the neck hole. When the dog is between my legs, I have good control of the dog, my hands are free to work with the harness and the position is excellent for slipping the harness over the dogs head.

Fold the breastplate of the harness in half, lining up the sides of the harness with the sides of the neck. Then slip the harness over the dogs head, remembering that the dogs head is coming up through the bottom of the harness. Let the sides of the harness fall loose and settle the neck of the harness down onto the base of the dog's neck. Be sure that the dog's collar is pulled forward of the harness. At this point, you should be able to lift the front legs through the side straps of the harness. Often a harness will look bunched up on the back of the dog. You should grab the loop at the end of the harness and apply pressure straight back to allow the harness to seat itself and conform to the body of the dog. In the case of a weight pull harness, pull the spreader bar over the rump of the dog and then straight back parallel to the ground.

It is important to remember that the harness must fit properly when the dog is actively pulling, so to evaluate the fit of the harness, you must act as the weight behind the dog. This

### About the Author

Shilon Bedford and her husband David purchased their first malamute in 1982. Although Shilon enjoyed conformation, as a couple, she and David bred and trained some of the top weight pulling and freighting dogs in the late 80's and 90's. Shilon was instrumental in starting the Minnesota Malamute Club, served on the AMCA Board and the Working Dog Committee for many years and has judged the AMCA National Specialty twice. She now owns Black Ice Dogsledding Equipment ([www.blackicedogsledding.com](http://www.blackicedogsledding.com)), and enjoys helping beginners learn the joy of working their dogs.



evaluation can often be better performed if one person acts as the weight behind the dog while you check the critical points. Pressure should be applied to the harness as if the dog was pulling a loaded sled. You will often see the harness move back four to five inches.

Check the fit on the neck first. The protruding breastbone or prosternum of the dog should fall under the cupped area formed where the harness neck straps cross below the throat. If the prosternum is above the cup, the harness is too large on the neck. If it falls below the cup, the harness is too snug on the neck. We want the neck of the harness to lie firmly and snugly against the base of



**Top:** Too big - my top finger is on the tip of the breastbone and this harness sits too low.

**Bottom:** Good fit - the prosternum of the dog is underneath the cupped area of the harness.

the dog's neck. Your dog drives forward into the neck of their harness, and if it is too large, the harness will slip around to the sides and compress the dog's shoulders, impeding their forward motion.

Once you are comfortable with the fit of the neck, have the dog pull forward. On a sledding harness, the webbing should come to the base of your dog's tail. Being within an inch either way is considered a good fit. The side strap will run along the edge of the rib cage. Also, check the fit just in front of the dog's hind legs. When the dog is pulling in harness, those side straps will fall just in front of the rear legs. If the harness is too long, the straps might lie on top of the rear legs or cut into the haunches and interfere with their movement.

With a freighting/weight pull harness, pull the spreader bar over the rump. The exact distance of this bar from the dog's rear is not as critical, but I prefer that it is within two to four inches, as shown in the photograph to the right.

You will notice that when a dog is competitively weight pulling, the bar will move upwards away from the dog as the dog digs in and pulls, rarely interfering with their effort. If you use the freight style harness for sledding, you do want to be sure that the spreader bar does not interfere with the extension of your dog's hocks and the freedom of their motion. For that reason, I like to see the bar close to the rear. The weight of what they are pulling will move the bar a sufficient distance from their rear.

Regardless of the age of your dog, a well-fitted harness is important. Protect their joints, give them a good experience and optimize their performance. Happy Trails!



## DRESS REHEARSAL

Neck of harness lies firmly at the base of dog's neck and does not compress shoulders

Cupped area of harness falls over the breastbone



Side strap runs along the edge of ribcage

When pulling, side strap falls in front of the hind legs and does not interfere with movement

When pulling, the webbing comes to the base of the tail, give or take one inch

