

# Weight Pull

## *A Positive Introduction*

*Weight pull is an excellent low-impact activity that any breed or size dog can enjoy. In this article, Karen Pryor Academy Certified Training Partner Katherine Ostiguy explains how she uses a clicker to train dogs to weight pull.*

by Katherine Ostiguy Originally published at

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*Editor's Note: This article presents a training method for weight pulling, and does not necessarily reflect AMCA weight pull rules.*

### Weight pull is year-round fun!

Are you and your dog looking for something new and different? Have you been wishing for a fresh activity to learn with your dog, something that can be started even in the cold winter months? Canine weight pull is a competitive sport offered by three organizations in the United States: the United Kennel Club (UKC), International Weight Pull Association (IWPA), and American Pulling Alliance (APA). Although the rules differ from group to group, the general idea is the same in each venue. A dog, wearing a specially-designed harness, pulls a weighted vehicle a distance of sixteen feet in sixty seconds or less. Dogs earn qualifying scores, championship points, and other awards based on the percentage of their body weight that they pull.

All dogs competing in a pull are weighed in by the judge first. The dog's weight determines the class in which he competes. Each pulling organization divides its weight classes differently and determines the qualification requirements for earning titles. As an example, a dog must pull eight times his body weight to earn a qualifying leg on a wheeled cart in UKC.

There are three types of weighted vehicles used in weight pull: a wheeled

cart, a cart on a rail system, and a sled on runners. Wheel and rail pulls may be done on natural surfaces, such as grass or dirt, but are more commonly done on carpet. Sleds are always pulled on snow.

Any breed or size of dog may compete in weight pull. Staffordshire bull terriers, American bulldogs, and American pit bull terriers are among the most popular breeds, but there have been successful representatives of many breeds in this sport.



**Weight pull harness.**

At a weight-pull competition, pulls are completed in rounds. A pre-determined weight is added to the cart prior to the start of each round. Handlers choose the weight at which to start their dogs—an inexperienced dog might come into the competition on an empty cart (anywhere from seventy to two-hundred pounds), whereas an experienced large dog might come in at over a thousand pounds!

Weight pull is a very enjoyable sport to watch. While it is not as fast-paced as agility or as precise as obedience, it has its own unique skill requirements just like any other dog activity. The myriad of breeds that compete and the ever-increasing weight on the cart add to the excitement. Weight-pull competitions can be found across the country year-round.

### Get started with the proper harness - and a clicker

Although the premise of weight pull is simple, it is a little more complex to train. Even in the early stages of training, dogs must wear well-fitting harnesses made specifically for weight pull. Harnesses used for leash walking or sledding are not appropriate for this sport. There are several online retailers that supply custom weight pull harnesses based on a dog's measurements. Most dogs do not mind wearing their harnesses, but some dogs require some classical conditioning to get used to it. If your dog is uncomfortable wearing his harness, put it on him prior to feeding him meals or playing with his favorite toy so he expects wonderful rewards from his new apparatus.

Once the dog is comfortable in his harness, the training process begins. Proper pulling form is multi-faceted with several criteria on which to focus. The goal of the trainer is to teach the dog the best possible physical posture. A dog with

ideal pulling form walks forward in a straight line toward his handler, pulling the cart as he goes. His head should be very low, with his nose almost touching the ground. As the weight increases, he should dig his nails into the substrate for traction. (Owners often do not trim their dog's nails for a few weeks leading up to a weight pull so that the nails can act as cleats, digging into the ground.)

Traditionally, dogs have been taught to pull by putting them on leash and guiding them through the act. Unfortunately, problems abound at a competition where a dog must complete his pulls off-lead. Fortunately, clicker training lends itself well to teaching the dog without guides or props! The clicker can be used to mark the specific behaviors we want to encourage, such as a low head or digging into the substrate. Behaviors that we don't want to see in the chute, such as barking, spinning, and jumping, are ignored. Much of the initial clicker training for weight pull can be done in the backyard or even indoors on carpet.

## Follow my plan

Since clicker training is new to many weight pull competitors, and classes on the topic are few and far between, I have devised a training plan from scratch. This training requires two people, a trainer and a helper, along with a dog that is comfortable in his weight pull harness. Here are the training steps that I follow:

### Step 1: Click for a pull

The goal for this first step is for your dog to put tension into the harness and to drive toward you regardless of the resistance.

Begin by having a human helper sit on the floor and hold the cross-bar on the back of the dog's harness. Stand about two feet away from the dog and encourage him to come to you, clicking and treating any attempt to pull the helper your way. At first, click even the smallest attempts and the slightest bit of tension in the harness and then gradually shape a longer pulling duration, until you have built up to approximately three seconds of pulling.

This first step is the hardest to teach. I quickly discovered that, if I asked for too much too soon, my dogs would exhibit stress behaviors. My first weight pull dog, Tessie, would spin in circles when the rate of reinforcement dropped too low. My second weight-pull dog, Strata, would offer a slew of behaviors including barking, whining, sniffing, and leaping into the air!

If your dog starts to offer unwanted behaviors, ignore the behaviors. Attempting to "correct" the behavior only gives your dog the reinforcing attention he was seeking. Occasionally, when Strata got too persistent with vocalizing, I would turn my back on him for a few seconds until he quieted down. Only then would I resume training.



Click for tension in the harness.

### Step 2: Add a cart

Next, introduce an object to follow the dog as he pulls. The cart needs to be something you can add weight to during the next step. Consider a garden cart or even a sturdy plastic sled. You'll also need a carabiner to connect the cart to the back of your dog's harness and a second handle of some sort for your helper to use as a brake.

Have your helper man the brakes, prepared to prevent your makeshift cart from bumping into your dog's hind end when he stops pulling. Connect the dog's harness to the cart and repeat Step 1, clicking and treating your dog for any attempt to pull the cart your way.

The goal of this step is for your dog to pull the empty cart toward you without offering any stress behaviors. If at any point your dog starts trotting or running, move on to

Step 3 immediately. Too much speed discourages proper pulling form and could result in injury if your helper can't stop the cart in time.

### Step 3: Add weight

Once your dog is pulling the cart consistently, it's time to start adding weight. Cinderblocks are a good choice for most dogs, but smaller dogs could be overwhelmed by that increase in weight. Consider using 12-packs of soda instead, or even a small bag of dog food. Follow the same training pattern as in the steps above, clicking and treating your dog for any attempt to pull the weighted cart your way. At this stage, decrease your training sessions to just two or three times per week, as now it is more about the physical conditioning than about teaching behaviors.

The training process went very quickly for my dogs, and I introduced more weight to the cart steadily to prepare them for the rigors of competition. Canine weight pull is like human weightlifting, in that the athlete must gradually increase the amount of weight in order to build muscle and prevent injury. It took approximately a month of regular training before either of my dogs was ready to compete at their first weight pull competition.

## You're invited

If you haven't watched a weight pull before, consider this your invitation. It's a fast-growing and fun sport with many fantastic participants, both human and canine. Weight pull is an excellent low-impact activity that any breed or size dog can enjoy. It's a wonderful cold-weather activity, too, so now's the time to give it a try!

### About the Author

Katherine Ostiguy, KPA-CTP, is the head trainer for her business, Spring Forth Dog Services ([www.springforthdog.com](http://www.springforthdog.com)), located in eastern Massachusetts. She enjoys competing in a variety of canine sports, including agility, obedience, rally, and weight pull. When not trialing with her own dogs, Katherine inspires the next generation of dog trainers by helping out at regional 4-H clubs. Katherine can be reached at [info@springforthdog.com](mailto:info@springforthdog.com).