



# DOGGIE DIPLOMATS

help create a different type of bond  
between people and their pets

STORY ■ TERRA CIOLFE

Size matters not, a wise man once said.

"It doesn't matter: Big or small," said local dog trainer Carol Ralston. "Any dog can learn to cart."

It all about what the dog is trying to pull, she said.

Ralston is one of two local dog trainers who are teaching dogs some typically unheard of tricks—no matter what size.

Ralston and her training partner, Jan Kay, two experienced dog trainers, run a series of classes each spring teaching locals, and their dogs, how to cart.

Also known as drafting, dog carting is an activity in which a dog learns to pull a cart behind them.

Usually reserved for larger dogs, when it comes to the democratization of dog carting, Ralston and Kay are trailblazers.

"A lot of people thought only their breed should do it," said Ralston, referring to the days when classes and testing could only be done through breed associations. "[But], we just felt there was room for more."

The unique team runs a group called Good Guys Carting Dogs, a group of dog owners who use their dogs skills to travel around and raise money for local charities by giving children rides on their dog carts. As an example of their charity work, the past two years, the group has gathered at SnowFest in Caledon to raise money to help buy pet oxygen masks for the fire departments in Caledon and Orangeville.

The team also teaches a carting class together to motivated dog owners in Ralston's backyard in Schomberg each spring.

"Any dog can pull," said Ralston, it's just a matter of making sure it is proportional to the size of the dog. "It's a great partnership between the owners and their dogs."

Carting can be used for a variety of purposes, whether it is to help with yard work, carrying groceries, or rides for kids.

In the past, dogs trained by the one-of-a-kind team have been used for everything from parades to birthday parties, garbage clearing to yard work, and one time, as a sled/delivery service for presents from Santa.

But for the two dog lovers, it's not just about functionality, it's also about helping people form a different kind of bond with their pet.

"We consider our dogs our partners as opposed to a tool or object," said Ralston. It's not about the master and the obedient one, she said. "It's your best friend and your partner."

There's a certain pride to it as well.

"Your dog isn't just doing something on its own, your doing it with them," she said, which gives her a feeling she can't describe. "The satisfaction and the joy you see in someone's face when their dog pulls for the first time is amazing."

It all began in 1988 when the two Newfoundland dog owners, Ralston and Kay, met at a carting workshop in Ottawa one weekend. After teaching their dogs to cart, the two would volunteer their time at a few tree farms during the winter season to help cart people's Christmas trees out from the depths of the forest to their cars.

But as the seasons started to get warmer and the snow in Southern Ontario started to show up later in the year "it started to become impossible to drag the trees out without ruining people's trees in the mud," said Ralston.

Soon they started giving rides to kids instead. And as the word started spreading about the uniquely trained dogs, the two started fielding questions and inquiries about teaching their dogs to cart as well.

"If you find enough people, we'll teach the class," Ralston recalled telling people.

Once they found enough interest, the two started renting the TAMSU learning facility in Orangeville, a



dog training facility, to teach the class. But as the learning centre began to fill up with other classes, they decided to make the move to Ralston's backyard in Schomberg, where they have taught the classes every spring since .

The class runs at night for eight weeks and goes at the pace of each individual dog and its owner.

"There's no two dogs that are going to train exactly alike," she said.

Whether it's six weeks or, in one case, three years, the classes move in slow intervals at each dogs progress level.

"We are not forcing our dogs to do anything, we are teaching them, not forcing them," she said.

The classes go through a series of small steps, starting with getting the dog used to wearing the harness, teaching it commands, dragging a water jug that progressively gets filled with small amounts of water to get the dog used to the increased weight, training on different surfaces, adding travois, and little wheels, eventually moving to a small cart.

They always work at the dog's comfort level, said Ralston.

While it could be easy to believe that the dogs are being used as an object or that they are being worked too hard, Ralston is sure to point out that's not the case. The dog also benefits from the relationship and from feeling useful.

"When you go to get your harness out of the cupboard and your dog is going bananas in the hall and just can't wait, you know you're not abusing them," she said.

It goes back to a partnership. The classes help create a different type of bond between people and their pets - a type of bond Ralston takes pride in helping people find.

"It's great," she said. "It's great because they've finally acknowledged that their dog is an individual and not just an object."



Left: Matthew Noble, 3, gets a sled ride from Dydie during Snowfest in Caledon Village on Family Day. Above: Julia Micallef, 3, gets a sled ride from Brodie during Snowfest. Good Guys Carting, a group of dog owners who train their dogs to cart, were giving kids sled rides to raise money to buy pet respiration equipment for local fire stations.



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