

Leader of the Pack



His number was 648 but it wasn't attached to the front of his chest like the other runners in the Mother's Day Classic, it was attached to the side of his backpack. I had entered my dog to run (or trot) in the 8km fun run. Together we had raised over \$700 in donations from friends and colleagues for Breast Cancer Research. Not a bad effort for a patchy Dalmatian. We ran (or trotted) the full 8ks in rain and apart from a moment when it looked like he wanted to plunge into the water at Mrs Macquarie's Chair, he was focussed like the little pacer his breed was bred to be.

His backpack came in handy that day. It carried a dry t-shirt for me, a camera, our water supply, fold-up water bowl, training treats, poop bags, spare money and a super absorbent towel. Lots of people commented as they passed us or we passed them. Children especially liked that Scooter had his own number and was wearing his own pack. A number of people asked about the pack and where they could get one. Would their dog like wearing it and how did it stay on even through rigorous activity? I bought our pack when Scooter was around 7-months old. For the first few months I would just walk him around the neighbourhood with nothing inside it. He was still growing and I was mindful that carrying extra weight is not good for an undeveloped dog.

It's been useful for ferrying things like magazines and other work materials on our twice daily walking commute between the office and home. He's often carried the groceries back from the supermarket for me. Although I'm not really sure how happy Scooter is carrying home fresh meat when it's not for him.

There's a range of dog backpacks on the market—available in a variety of sizes and styles. Most start around \$70 for a small basic pack and run to \$200 for a quality Ruffwear brand that has on-board water bladders for hydration in dry conditions. My advice is to buy the best quality you can afford—the high-end packs are designed for a balanced load, have adjustable straps and have padding to resist chafing. They also have handles so that you can assist your dog in tricky terrain.

Some breeds may need to be fitted for a pack that distributes the weight on the shoulders rather than the back—this is true for larger breeds like the Wolfhound and Great Danes. Just as with agility and jumping in obedience, there is a risk of doing structural damage by putting an increased load on developing bones. In larger breeds you might need to wait until 18 months or older before your dog can carry any load. As always, check with your veterinarian to be safe.

Some dogs will need time to get used to wearing a pack so this may take patience and some tasty training treats.

Once your dog is comfortable wearing an empty pack you can then progress to items that are still lightweight and have more volume than weight. I noticed with Scooter that he sometimes misjudged the space between himself, the pack and other objects. It took a little while for him to not walk into cafe chairs, pavement signs and doorways. None of it was too scary for him and there was always a treat as encouragement.

Always consider the amount of weight that your dog will be carrying. If you have a midsized, fit dog then you should work on about 20-25% of their body weight. For instance, Scootersaurus weighs in at just on 30 kilos so I would never pack more than around 7 to 8 kilos in his pack. Start off with a ratio of 20% and work up from there. If you have a small breed like a Beagle, a larger breed like a Dane or a dog with a less athletic build, then the weight ratio should be adjusted accordingly. For older and less active dogs, lower the weight ratio down to 15%.

You wouldn't expect an overweight person to be able to run up a hill with a pack of rocks in their pack, so consider overweight dogs and lighten the load. Conditioning is the same for dogs as it is for humans—don't expect an overweight Labrador to be able to carry what a fit and athletic Border Collie can. As you increase the length of your walks or hikes you can gradually increase the weight in the pack.

If you're keen to hit the happy trails and take your dog on hiking trips then you need to get them used to the sort of objects they'll be carrying. Some training sessions with objects that clank, slosh and move about like half-filled water bottles and objects that go bump should be placed in the pack.

Don't put anything into a pack that isn't waterproof or could get damaged, especially if you have a dog that is prone to taking impromptu plunges in any murky body of water. If in doubt, seal it in a waterproof bag—particularly if they're going to be carrying their own dog food or treats. You don't want to be fishing out soggy, spoiled food at the end of your trek.

Packs are not just for shopping in urban areas or for hiking in the great outdoors. They can benefit dogs that need some extra exercise and can help hyper-active dogs to slow down and focus. Carrying weight increases the amount of exertion during exercise therefore helping drain excess energy.

Whatever your activity—from helping carry the shopping; to hiking and camping or just as an add-on to training, a backpack can be a fun and useful tool.

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BUYING & FITTING A BACKPACK

- Know your dogs weight before purchasing. If you can't fit your dog at point of purchase then have key measurements like chest and girth recorded.
- Check the bag for durability: Look for non-metal zippers and fasteners. Look for designs where the saddle-bags be easily removed while the main harness stays on the dog.
- Comfort is key so mesh or lined saddle-bags are best for ventilation and slip resistance. Look for other key features like fleece padding on the saddle and buckles to prevent chafing. It's doubtful that you'll find a completely waterproof backpack but look for other features like water resistant zippers and material.
- Another key comfort is how the pack is worn. Consider designs that have a V-shaped chest straps that will help disperse the load. One-piece across the chest straps can ride up during physical activity.
- Reflective trims help improve your dogs visibility in low light.
- Research outdoor magazines and websites and read their product reviews.

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