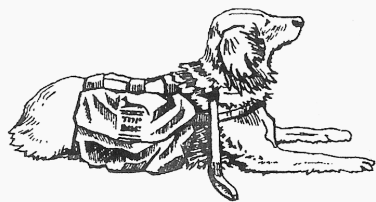


# Using Backpacks Wisely

by Kathleen L. Galayda



We at TOP DOG would like to bring to the public's awareness a matter that has concerned us for quite some time. That matter is the use of backpacks on dogs, most especially service dogs. As a service dog organization, we feel it behooves us to give our opinion on this topic for the purpose of enlightening the dog loving public, and perhaps saving a few dogs' physical well-being.

Backpacks are very useful items, and they can be safely used. We believe Backpacks can be safely used, provided several factors are carefully considered by the dog's owner. These factors include the dog's overall physical condition, circumstances under which the backpack is carried, the dog's breed, conformation, size/weight, *how the weight of the backpack is distributed*, where it is positioned on the dog's body, and the actual physical arrangement of the backpack. I will explain TOP DOG's opinion on each of these factors.

One can find in some books on dog care and training statements to the effect that it is safe for a dog to carry up to 20% of its body weight. TOP DOG believes this may be safe in some circumstances, provided the dog is in excellent physical condition. For example, larger breeds, such as Bloodhounds or Rottweilers, which may spend much time on long runs hunting and/or hiking with their human companions, might be able to comfortably carry 20% of their body weight for *limited* periods of time. However, this is so only if a dog is in top condition.

Service dogs tend to lead rather sedentary lives, spending many hours lying by their companions' sides, often while wearing loaded backpacks. They are also asked to carry their packs under rather challenging circumstances, e.g., while climbing stairs, entering buses, elevating themselves on chairs so their masters may reach the packs and, again, while lying down for long periods of time. Under these conditions, it is TOP DOG'S opinion that such dogs never carry more than 10% of their body weight; less is preferable.

Breed is also important. Various physical problems, such as hip dysplasia, plague certain breeds. The propensity towards physical problems must be thoroughly considered before placing a backpack on any particular dog. We believe responsible owners who are considering the use of a backpack should consult their veterinarians to determine if their animals have any such weakness. This is especially true if they own a breed, such as a German Shepherd, which has a well-known tendency toward not only hip dysplasia, but also shoulder problems. A dog with such problems should never carry anything, except perhaps in its mouth. Of course, this must be considered on a case by case basis; no blanket decrees can ever be made in this matter.

Closely related to breed is conformation. The bone structure, size, and weight of an animal must be considered before allowing it to carry a backpack at all. The lighter boned breeds are at greater risk for physical problems and ailments if they are overloaded. Common sense should rule here. It seems obvious to us that a 100 pound Rottweiler could probably carry a little more weight than a 100 pound Doberman, as a Rottweiler's bone structure is almost massive compared to that of a Doberman's. Even though the two animals weigh the same, the difference in their bone structures has an impact on how much weight each animal can carry.

The position in which a backpack is carried is of utmost importance. Owners using backpacks should be knowledgeable about the proper way to "tack up" (to borrow a term from horsemanship) the dog. A pack should never be placed over, or anywhere near, a dog's hips. Packs should always be forward on a dog, over its shoulders. Care should be taken that the pack does not have a tendency to slip back. Slippage is where the importance of a pack's weight distribution becomes relevant. Even if the backpack is properly placed on a dog, the weight being carried in it should not drag the back towards the dog's hips, or to ride to either side. The pack should at all times remain balanced over the dog's shoulders, with equal amounts of weight on both sides. Therefore, an owner should be very cautious and closely monitor at all times how s/he places items within the dog's pack, and where the pack is on the body.

Finally, the actual physical arrangement of the pack must be thoroughly reviewed. A dog's backpack should be well fitted; it shouldn't drag on or near the ground, or ride so high it binds a dog's shoulders. It should be snug, but neither confining nor restricting. It is important the pack be well constructed and padded, for example, with fleece lining. An owner may save money in the short term by purchasing an inexpensive, ill-made backpack. In the long run, however, he will spend more money on the medical problems such a pack will cause the dog. One of our employees has a brother who is a U. S. Mail Carrier. He suffers what is commonly known as "postman's back", i.e., he has terrible pain from spinal misalignment caused by constantly carrying 60 lbs of mail on one side of his body over one shoulder for ten years. Dogs carrying improperly arranged backpacks can and do suffer similar discomfort. Let us again stress that each dog should be individually monitored.

TOP DOG's main concern is that too few people are aware of the negative impact the improper use of backpacks may have on a dog's physical well-being. As a service dog organization, we would like to see more service dog users be made aware of this impact. These people go to great lengths of time, expense, and effort to obtain and/or train their own service dogs and then, unwittingly, shorten the animals' careers, and possibly even their lives, by the improper use of backpacks. Our aim is to inform the public, and the disabled community in particular, about what we believe is a very important matter. If this information lengthens the career of even one service dog, or spares the health and well-being of any dog, we will be eternally grateful for the opportunity to share it.