**Chapter 42: Booties**

Extreme temperatures or other environmental factors can necessitate the use of protection for your dog’s paws. This chapter will discuss why this is important, give examples of situations where booties might be necessary, and detail the use of the booties that Guiding Eyes issues. Changing seasons can bring with them intense cold or heat which affects the environment that your guide dog works in. We will be going over how to handle all aspects of these environments in the Going Home lectures.

There are four common situations where your dog’s paws may require some protection: extreme heat, extreme cold, salted sidewalks, and sharp or very rough substrates. If your dog finds a surface painful to walk on, he or she will exhibit a behavior called “padding”, when the dog holds its feet up alternately to try to alleviate the pain. The dog may also try to lay down to take pressure off his paws. Often this is most evident when the dog needs to stand still, as you would at a curb while waiting to cross a street. If your dog repeatedly experiences discomfort at the curbs, he will likely begin to avoid them which can lead to serious work issues.

**Heat**

The surface of roads and sidewalks can become extremely hot even when the air temperature is relatively cool. Asphalt, brick, metal, and other dark surfaces tend to heat up more quickly, but concrete and other light-colored surfaces can become quite hot as well. It is very important to be aware of this as it is possible for your dog’s paw pads to become severely burned, causing them to blister and peel, and costing a trip to the vet and several days recovery before your dog can work comfortably again.

**Cold**

Dogs generally tolerate cold temperatures fairly well, but there is a point at which they may experience painful conditions when their paws contact extremely cold surfaces, especially when standing still. Typically, this becomes problematic as the outside temperature approaches zero, but all factors should be considered and ultimately each dog will have their own degree of tolerance. Walking on packed snow or ice can cause similar issues if the temperature is cold enough, and loose snow can also form little ice balls that cling to the fur on your dog’s feet. Though dogs typically do not need to wear boots for extra traction, it is important to consider all of these factors when determining how to best keep your dog comfortable.

**Salt**

Many municipalities utilize rock salt or other chemicals to prevent ice from forming on roads and sidewalks during winter months. Typically, this becomes problematic when the temperature is hovering around or just below freezing. Moisture from the melting snow and ice causes your dog’s paw pads to become soft and susceptible to small abrasions from the coarse salt, ice, and concrete surface. As your dog continues to walk, pieces of salt are continually pushed up between the paw pad, literally rubbing salt into a wound. Anyone who has experienced this knows it is quite painful, and dogs may respond similarly either by padding, limping, or by attempting to lick or chew at their feet.

**Rough or sharp surfaces**

You may find that your dog is uncomfortable walking on some surfaces such as rough or jagged gravel, or areas with thorny vegetation. Remember that your own feet are protected by wearing shoes, but your dog’s are not. And although their feet are generally pretty tough, they may find particular surfaces uncomfortable and attempt to guide you around them, or even refuse to walk on them altogether. If walking over such surface is necessary, you may find that booties are also necessary to ensure your dog’s comfort.

During class, everyone will have opportunity to practice putting booties on your dog. We have several sets of gently used booties for this purpose. Your instructors will help you determine if you will need a set of booties at home and if so, a new set will be issued and fitted to your dog. If you are not issued a new set to take home, and the need for using booties should arise during class, a used set will be provided for you.

All of your dogs will have been acclimated to wearing booties before, but it's important to keep in mind that wearing anything on their feet is unnatural for dogs, and many of them may continue to show some resistance to the process. They have no way of understanding that wearing the booties is really for their own good. Most dogs will respond in one of two ways when you first put the booties on. They will either become inhibited, freezing in place and acting as though they can’t possibly respond to any cues or even move at all, holding their feet up one at a time as though they’re broken. Or they will become activated, moving quickly to the end of their leash, kicking their feet, jumping around or attempting to gallop. They may even come up with some combination of both responses, with some dogs being much more dramatic than others. They generally all settle down and acclimate after a few minutes, and the more you can practice, the smoother it will be. If you find that you only need to use the booties seasonally, be sure to dedicate some time to practicing as the season approaches as well. If you do find that your dog accepts the booties without any fuss at all, you can consider yourself lucky!!

The standard booties that Guiding Eyes issues are made by Ruffwear. They come in several sizes in quarter inch intervals. They have a Vibram rubber sole for good traction, and mesh top similar to a sneaker. Each bootie has a Velcro strap that cinches around the top. All four booties in the set are exactly the same, there is no need to differentiate between right and left, or front and back. Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the booties before attempting to put them on your dog.

**Putting Booties on Your Dog**  
Generally, it is easiest to put all four boots on before moving with the dog, but if your dog is resistant you may find practicing with two booties at a time to be beneficial. Do your best to maintain a calm, relaxed demeanor throughout. You may find your dog's behaviors amusing, or maybe even frustrating, but it’s important to keep your own emotions in check as that will translate to your dog and it’s best if they can remain calm and relaxed ad much as possible.

1. Sit or kneel on the floor with your dog if you are able to. Take a minute to help them relax and settle into a down position, then lay on their side. You can lay a hand on them, or pet them with firm, slow strokes to help establish calm. Run your hand down each leg and practice holding each foot. Praise your dog softly to let them know they are doing a good job.
2. Starting with whatever paw is closest to you, you’ll need to gently hold the paw with one hand and the bootie with the other. Be sure the Velcro on the bootie is unfastened and that the bootie is open as wide as possible. The fit should be fairly snug, so you may need to gently push and twist slightly as you put the bootie on, as you would fit a shoe on a toddler. Be sure all the toes are inside the bootie, and that the dew claw also stays inside the bootie on the front feet. Remember to continue to praise your dog for their cooperation.
3. Once the bootie is all the way on, pull the Velcro strap tight and wrap it around to secure it. It should be secured tightly enough that the bootie cannot slip off the dog’s paw. You can check by giving it a gentle tug. Once you have the first bootie on securely, repeat the process with three more paws. Stay calm, be patient, and offer plenty of soft praise for your dog.
4. Now that you’ve got all four booties on, it’s time to try moving with your dog. You can offer food reward at this point and say “Let’s Go” to ask them to stand up (if they have not already done so). Remember, it may take a few minutes for them to feel comfortable walking normally. Start to walk with them, and whenever you get a moment of relaxed, normal walking, you can mark with “Yes” and reward with a treat. When your dog is able to walk normally, you can try asking for specific behaviors such as Sit or Down. If your dog is not able to comply at first, do not correct, but simply walk a bit more and try again until you get a rewardable response. Be generous with praise and reward until your dog has completely accepted the booties.
5. At the end of your practice session, it is easiest to remove the booties with the dog in a standing position. Unfasten the Velcro and open the bootie fully. Gently lift your dog’s paw to remove the bootie or hold onto the bootie and allow your dog to lift his foot out. Many dogs will want to lick and clean their feet for a minute or two afterward. If this behavior continues for longer, you should check the paw for any debris or rubbing that may be irritating the dog. Finish with plenty of praise!

*Updated September 2020*