**Chapter 9: Initial Harness Work & Instructor Commands**

This chapter will talk about harnessing your guide dog, when and where to pick up the handle, the goals and expectations for working with your dog on the initial routes, and cues or prompts you may hear from your instructor while on route.

**In the first few days with your dog we are going to ask that you do not pick up your harness handle unless specifically instructed to do so by your instructor.**

When you are issued your specific harness, instructors will assist in making sure it is fitted to your dog correctly. Here are a few points to keep in mind when harnessing your dog:

* + The dog should be comfortably sitting or standing at your left side. Secure the leash over your arm or under your foot by stepping on it.
  + Secure the belly strap inverted over the back strap in one hand, the other hand will reach through the head opening and locate the dog’s chin. Slide the harness body over the dog’s head and rest it on the dog’s back. Release the belly strap and reach under the dog’s torso (if your dog was sitting it will stand when you do this) and fasten the belly strap to the D shaped ring on the harness body. Make sure the belly strap goes behind both front legs.
  + Once the harness is on the dog make sure to pull the leash through the chest strap. An easy way of doing this it to rotate the collar around until you feel the clip of the leash come through, then gently pull the remaining leash up through the chest strap.

The first few routes with your new guide dogs are designed to demonstrate how working with your guide should feel. Instructors will make use of a “Support Leash” to help ensure the route goes smoothly. During the initial routes you will be focusing on:

* Command sequence and cues
* Praise timing
* Food delivery
* Finding your optimum following position with your dog
* Getting into a good walking rhythm with your dog
* Feeling any lateral movements or pace changes through the harness
* Turn Mechanics

The instructor will be working to facilitate good communication from you to your dog and from your dog to you. They will also try to keep some flow of the route to keep the dog focused and engaged. Along these early routes there will be limited descriptions of crossings and you will not be expected to assess traffic patterns, we would like the majority of your focus to be on feeling what is happening through the harness handle. *We will elaborate on street configurations, crossings, and traffic patterns in later lessons.*

**Listening to Your Instructor**

The dogs are patterned to work along the sidewalk bypassing obstacles and pedestrians and stopping for changes in elevations like curbs, ramps, and steps. As you move through the route, your instructor will be prompting you for commands, hand signals, the timing of verbal praise and behavior markers as well as giving instruction for following laterally. Some of the cues the instructor may give to you may be:

***“Do a Wait”*** Wait is a courtesy command letting the dog know we will be stopping in the next pace or two. You will need to release any pull in the harness as you say “Wait” and stop walking.

***“Pick up your feet”*** Of course you are probably aware of the uneven sidewalks in your home area. We don’t expect you to know the ups and downs of the sidewalks in White Plains. This is the prompt for you to step slightly higher than you normally would for a bit of uneven pavement that the dog wouldn’t normally stop at.

***“Praise”*** This is our cue to you to give your dog a little bit of verbal praise, *“Atta boy!” or “Good girl!”*. Often this is given when the team is in motion and we want you to keep moving i.e. you feel your dog pushing or pulling around an object or you’ve entered your street crossing and want to keep your dog motivated.

***“Follow laterally”*** This is a prompt from your instructor that your dog is trying to move over a little on the sidewalk and you should be feeling for which direction they are trying to get you to go. Think of it as changing lanes on the highway; you are moving in the same forward motion just sliding over a bit. We sometimes also refer to this as Side-stepping.

***“STOP!”*** This means STOP IMMEDIATELY, do not continue to move in the direction you are going. There is no verbal cue given to the dog. We try to only use this when there is a potentially dangerous error or situation that is about to occur. We will explain further when the situation is safe to do so.

These initial workouts will ideally help you build your understanding of how working with a guide dog can feel. As the program progresses, it will grow in complexity as you learn how to identify guide work errors, recognize when the dog loses focus on the work, and learn how to reconnect with your dog to get their mind back in the game.

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