

**Chapter 2: Basic Equipment**

This chapter will introduce you to the basic equipment that will be used with your new guide dog. During the practical session, you will have an opportunity to become familiar with each piece of equipment as the instructors describe it and explain its use and function.

Additional or alternative equipment may be issued throughout the course of training depending on each team’s specific needs, but we’ll start with the basics:

***Half Check Collar:***

Also known as a martingale collar or limited-slip collar, the half check collar is constructed mostly of nylon, with a small loop of metal chain where the leash attaches. The collar may have a plastic pinch buckle to remove it, otherwise it will go on and off over the dog’s head. The collar has a slider adjustment, and will be adjusted to fit your dog so that when the collar is pulled taut, it is snug enough to prevent the dog slipping out of it, but not so tight as to be dangerous. Your dog can wear this collar at all times, even if it is not your working collar, or you can choose to switch back and forth when using a different working collar.

 There are two places on the collar where the leash or tie down can attach. You will be learning the difference between the “live” ring and the “dead” ring on each collar. Your leash will always be attached to the “live” ring, which will tighten the collar when tension is applied. The “dead” ring should be used any time the dog is tethered to a stationery object (tie down). Attaching to the “dead” ring prevents the collar from tightening around the dog’s neck, therefore minimizing any risk of the dog becoming tangled and choking himself. On the half-check collar, the live ring is a round ring located in the middle of the chain portion. The dead ring (there are actually two of them on a half-check collar) can be found where the chain portion attaches to the nylon.

***Slip Collar:***

Also known as a training collar, this collar consists of a length of metal chain with an “O” ring on each end.

The first step in using this collar is forming a loop by threading the entire chain through one of the rings. This can be done by starting at one ring, pushing a bit of chain through and pulling it out the other side, or by holding one ring horizontally and dropping the chain through it. Once this is accomplished, you should have a closed loop that can be slipped over the dog’s head. The second thing to learn about this collar is that it must be placed on the dog in a certain direction. Putting the collar on “backward” will prevent it from releasing properly after tension is applied.

Though it may seem simple, this collar is probably the most difficult piece of equipment to use properly, and even more difficult to master proper technique. It is very important to learn to use this collar correctly and effectively with good technique. You may have heard this type of collar referred to as a “choke chain”, and if used incorrectly it can cause damage to your dog’s neck and throat. However, when used correctly it is a safe and effective piece of training equipment.

(practical session) For this exercise, your left hand will simulate the dog's head, and your wrist will simulate the dog's neck. Stick your left hand, with palm facing down, straight out and parallel to the floor, and put the collar over your wrist. Next, you will need to identify the “live” ring. Grasp one of the rings and pull gently. If the collar tightens around your wrist, that is the “live” ring, which is where the leash will attach. Pulling on the other ring, known as the “dead” ring, will not cause the collar to tighten.

Now we must determine if the collar is on correctly. There are several ways to do this, but we will begin by getting a feel for the action of the collar. Start by aligning both rings with your thumb, so that you can grasp the live ring and snap it to the right. Try snapping the live ring to the right, then releasing it. If the collar snaps easily, and you can feel most of the pressure across the top of your wrist, it is on correctly. If the collar is difficult to snap or does not release once it has been snapped, or if you feel the majority of the pressure on the underside of your wrist, it is on backwards. When on correctly, the pressure should release easily when you let go of the live ring.

Another useful way of determining whether or not the collar is on correctly is by following the chain attached to the dead ring. Start by aligning the rings on the right side of your wrist, or behind the dog’s right ear. If the collar is on correctly, then when you follow the chain away from the dead ring it should trail down towards the ground and under the dog’s neck. The chain attached to the live ring should go through the dead ring and then up and over the dog’s neck. Try holding the live ring and folding the chain back over itself. It should fold up over the dog’s neck if the collar is on correctly.

Another method that works well for some people is to sit facing the dog; pull the chain through the O ring and hold it in the shape of the capital letter P. The long side of the P will be in your left hand, and you can slip the loop over the dog’s head and it will be in the right position.

You should never “practice” with the slip collar on a live dog as they can perceive any collar movement as a correction and may feel unwarranted stress. If you would like more practice with the slip collar before you get your dog, you may practice on one of the large stuffed toy dogs we have at Guiding Eyes. When you are checking the collar on a real dog (or stuffed dog), the rings should be lined up with the dog's right ear. If the rings slide out of position, it is harder to tell whether the collar is on correctly or not. Be very gentle when adjusting the rings and checking the collar on your dog. Try to do so as efficiently as possible.

If you find yourself having difficulty with this piece of equipment, don’t be alarmed! It can be quite tricky to master, and instructors are more than happy to offer extra practice and additional tips to help you.

***Leash****:*

The leash is a five-foot long piece of leather with a snap at each end. There is a small snap at one end, and a larger snap at the other. The large snap will always attach to the live ring of your dog's collar. Directly beneath the large snap, you will find a “triple thickness” of leather, where the leather has been folded over and riveted together to make the leash. This is a good way for you to remember which snap goes on the collar; always the one above the triple thickness.

The small snap is located at the other end of the leash. The small snap is never attached to the collar. This snap must be attached to one of the 2 O-rings located on the leash. the first O-ring is located at the end of the triple thickness section of the leash. When the small snap is attached to this O-ring, the leash forms a large loop. This is called the short leash or working leash. This is the position the leash should be in when you are working your dog in harness, or when walking from place to place with your dog on leash (heeling). When heeling your dog, you will typically hold the middle of the leash, between the O-rings, with two pieces of leather held together. The leash should be loose, not held taut, and your arm relaxed while heeling your dog.

A few inches down the leash from the small snap, you will find another O-ring. When small snap is attached to this O-ring, the leash will have a small loop handle that will fit in your hand. This is called the long leash or obedience leash. This leash is used when parking your dog and during formal obedience. It may also be used other situations when a bit of extra distance is needed.

Practice moving the small snap from one ring to the other several times until you are comfortable with the process. New leashes will be very stiff and difficult to manipulate. Our leashes and harnesses are produced from very high-quality leather with brass hardware and will soften quickly with use. You can expedite the process before receiving your dog by spending some time bending and folding the leash in your hands and moving the rings back and forth to loosen them up.

***Harness:***

Our standard harness is made of leather with a rigid, U-shaped handle. We have various components available to us, and we may switch our pieces of your harness throughout class, as needed, i.e.: different length handle, different shape handle, different attachments to the harness body. If your instructors chose to make changes, they will be discussed with you at that time.

***(practical session)*** Instructors will place the harness on your left knee. For the purposes of this exercise, your thigh will simulate the dog's back, your knee will represent the dog's neck, and your shin the dog's chest.

The body of the harness is made up of the back strap, the chest strap, and the belly strap. The back strap is that part of the harness that is resting on your thigh. It has the words "Guiding Eyes, Yorktown Heights, NY" embossed on it.

The chest strap is that part of the harness that passes in front of your shin. The dog leans into the chest strap in order to pull and provide pressure in the handle.

The belly strap is that part of the harness that is dangling to the left of your leg. It has a buckle on the left side so it can be adjusted to fit each individual dog; however, once it is adjusted for your particular dog, you should not need to touch the buckle again. Pass the belly strap under your thigh and find the end of it. You should find a snap that can be simply pushed against the D-ring located on the right side of the harness, and it will fasten. This is how the harness is held in place on the dog's body. When you are putting the harness on or taking it off of your dog, fold the belly strap over the back strap and hold them together as the harness passes over the dog's head, to prevent the dangling belly strap from hitting the dog in the face.

There is one more component of the harness body. Just above where the chest strap meets the back strap, on both sides of the harness, you will find two leather loops about three inches high, called the rabbit ears. The harness handle passes through the rabbit ears. The rabbit ears have two functions: one is to prevent the handle from tipping forward over the dog's head, and the other is to prevent the handle from sliding to the side when it is laid on the dog's back.

The handle is a rigid U-shaped steel rod that has been covered with leather. You hold the handle in your left hand when working your dog. You will feel tension in the handle when the dog is guiding; this is what allows you to follow the dog. The handle connects to the chest strap of the harness with metal fasteners on each side of the harness. There are different types of fasteners available to suit each team’s needs. Harness handles are designed to be able to be removed from the harness body, and instructors will be able to show how your particular fixtures work.

Strips of blue and silver reflective tape have been added to the harness for additional safety. This tape is sewn into the leather and is very durable. There are two pieces on the chest strap and two pieces on either side of the handle.

You should practice putting the harness on and taking it off of one of our large toy dogs as many times as necessary until you feel comfortable doing it.

It is very important that you always keep your leash and harness on the hook either in your closet or on the back of your park door. Dogs love to chew on leather, especially when it is new. If your dog chews your harness or leash, you will have to replace it, and equipment is expensive.

The harnesses and leashes are very stiff because they are new. The more use they get, the softer they will become. Between now and the time you get your dog, you should try to spend some time bending, folding, and twisting your leash so that it will become more flexible. Leashes and harnesses also darken as they age.

\**Later in class you will be introduced to the Ruffwear Unifly harness, which is an option that may be available to you once you have established some foundation skills. Guiding Eyes helped to develop this harness in conjunction with Ruffwear and MIT. It is a soft yoke-style harness with a removable single point handle. As with any equipment, there are pros and cons to using this harness, which will be discussed a bit later.*

***Treat Pouch:***

Each student will be issued a treat pouch. This is a nylon bag that can be clipped to your pants or belt or worn on its own nylon belt. You will use it to carry training treats or food kibbles. Our treat pouches are blue nylon and printed with the Guiding Eyes logo. They have a curved, magnetic opening at the top which allow quick access to treats. There is also a small pocket on the outside that can be used to store a clicker or a few pick-up bags. Food reward will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

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