

Baby You Can Drive My GOAT!

Last summer my husband Phil had the ambitious goal of riding in a wagon pulled by our two-year-old wethers in the 4th of July parade. He wasn't content to ride in the wagon with a handler leading the goats along the parade route--he wanted to *drive* those goats himself. This was a tall order because our goats were quite young, and due to last-minute harness problems could not be started until two weeks before the event. For those two weeks we took them out and practiced almost every day, and when 4th of July came they were ready. They stepped right out and walked the entire parade route without a single hesitation and I didn't once have to go to their heads and encourage them to keep going. Barking dogs, screaming kids, waving flags, blaring sirens, and honking horns did not faze them.



After the parade, loads of people came over to ask us how long it took to train our goats to drive. Well, that was a good question. It's true that we first hitched them to the wagon only two weeks before, but in reality we'd been working with our goats for two years--ever since they were born--so that when the time came to hitch them up and drive, they already knew what to do. Because we laid the groundwork, our goats had no problem understanding what was wanted when we first took the reins and said, "Walk on!"

There is a big difference between teaching a goat to pull and teaching him to drive. Any properly bonded goat can pull with very little training so long as someone is leading him. Teaching him to be driven from behind, on the other hand, takes preparation. A solid foundation must be laid, and your goat's ability to understand and willingness to cooperate depend a lot on *you*. Consistency, technique, good timing, and correct application of commands are vital to establishing communication and gaining respect.

When your well-bonded driving prospect is about six months old, fit him out with a halter and start using it to lead and tie in place of his collar. When he's little you can clamp his neck between your knees and force him to stand for haltering without becoming rough. Once the halter is in place, immediately feed a treat. Practice putting the halter on several times a week and reward every time. Your goat will soon put his nose eagerly into the halter and you'll never have to fight over it when he's big enough to win.

Leading and tying your goat with a halter gets him used to having his head controlled, preparing him for rein cues later on. Once he's about a year old, he can start learning the voice commands, "Walk on," "Whoa," and "Trot" when you lead him. A good foundation for driving begins by using the right leading technique. When you put your goat on a leash, he should be expected to walk beside you, not behind. You should be walking next to his shoulder with his head in front of your leg. If your goat is behind you being dragged by the halter he's learning the wrong lesson. One of the most difficult aspects of teaching a goat to drive is overcoming his natural instinct to follow. You don't want to inadvertently reinforce this by allowing him to trail along behind while he's on-leash.

To teach your goat to come up beside you and "drive" while leading, take the tail end of your leash and use it to pop him on the behind when you give the command to "Walk

on" or "Trot". Use a lightweight leash with a loop handle or leather popper on the end (no knots!) that slaps and maybe makes noise but doesn't hurt. Your goat should not feel like he's being beaten! You can also use a light riding whip to accomplish the same result. By tapping your goat on the hindquarters with a leash or whip, you teach him that "move forward" commands come from the back, not from the front. This keeps him slightly ahead of you and gets him accustomed to one day obeying whip cues. In the early stages, make sure to reward every effort at obedience.

When your goat is about 18 months old he may be big enough to start pulling light loads. However, if you're not sure he's big enough, strong enough, or mentally prepared, err on the side of caution and wait until he's two. He'll be three before he's big and strong enough to pull you all by himself, so there's no need to rush. If using a two-wheeled cart, make certain your goat is tall enough to keep the shafts from pointing downhill. Your goat may be nervous the first time you hitch him to a vehicle. Make sure to keep good hold on his leash and give plenty of treats to let him know he's doing well.

If you have not been using a whip while training your goat to lead, then introduce one now that he's hitched to a vehicle. Your goat does not know how wide he is with the shafts and you need to make sure he learns to give you a safety perimeter. A whip will help enlarge your personal space and prevent accidents involving your legs and the shafts. A dressage whip is about the right length. These usually have a 36" - 40" shaft with a 6" lash. Stand on the left side of the goat with his lead in your right hand and the whip in your left. The tip should point behind you toward the ground when not in use. This photo was taken at a somewhat awkward moment of leash/whip adjustment, but you can see that the goat is walking nicely a little ahead with his shoulder by my leg. The whip is near my left hip, away from the goat but where I can reach behind my leg and cue him at any time.



Your goat must learn to respect the whip but not fear it. Use it as lightly as possible but don't be afraid to give him a good solid thwack if he's disrespectfully standing on your toes or ramming you with the cart. Even if a goat is going perfectly off voice command, I will usually tap him gently with the whip as I say "Walk on" so that he learns not to be afraid of this cue. This is particularly important for desensitizing a goat that is nervous of every little whip movement.

Your goat should never fear that you will use the whip as a weapon. It is a communication tool to be used in conjunction with the voice. It can be used like a whisper or like a shout, but you should never hit a goat repeatedly with your whip, just as you should never lose your temper and scream at him. If a goat does not respond after three stout taps, go to his head and lead him. He's either frightened or he doesn't understand what you want, and neither of these issues will be solved by continuing to strike him. A goat that is testing your resolve by being lazy or stubborn will usually change his mind if you give him three sharp smacks, delivered in quick succession. If he doesn't move after that, go to his head and lead him on at a brisk trot so he learns that disobedience results in more work, not less.

Your reins should be held like an English horseback rider in two fists with the thumbs on top. The reins should come up between your ring and pinky fingers and out between your thumb and index finger with the excess rein (or bight) falling forward in front of your hands. If there is too much extra rein you can loop it over one arm. The whip should be held in your right hand along with the rein.



Correct



Correct rein hold with whip



Incorrect

Once your goat is quite comfortable pulling the cart while led and understands the concept of the whip, it's time to start driving him. Some people advocate ground driving without a vehicle at first, but I've not been successful at this. My goats are determined to face me, and then I waste a lot of time turning them back around, untangling reins, and restarting. This is confusing for your goat and frustrating for you. If the goat is hitched to a vehicle, the shafts prevent him from turning to face you and half your battle is won.

The first few times you drive, it's easiest if you lead your goat away from home and drive him back. Until he's old enough, you must walk beside the cart while driving. Practice commands as you drive toward home, paying special attention to "Whoa." Every time your goat stops on command, walk to his head and give him a treat. After giving the treat, hold him steady as you walk back to your position and make him stand until you tell him, "Walk on." You don't want him to bolt toward home on his first driving lesson!

When cueing your goat to move on, do not slap him with the reins. This is a lazy shortcut you may occasionally use when he's fully trained, but it is not appropriate for teaching a youngster. A rein slap is abrupt, inaccurate, and may send confusing signals to his head. The whip can be used far more subtly than a rein slap and it can be placed precisely where you want it--on one side of the hip or the other, on the hip strap to make a noise, squarely across the rump to make a firm statement, etc. You are not being "kind" by leaving your whip at home. If you have trouble handling the whip and reins together, then practice on a sawhorse before practicing on your goat.

I've read a few driving manuals that suggest having a partner lead the goat while you drive from behind. I don't advocate this except during brief periods when the goat needs extra help. I don't want anyone at my goat's head while I'm driving because I don't want him to divide his attention and become confused about which person he's supposed to listen to. I also don't want to reinforce his instinct to follow. Letting him walk toward home should give him all the motivation he needs to move out in front of you. Your partner should only go to his head if your goat gets "stuck".

Introduce turning with the reins by weaving back and forth on your way home. You can teach the commands "Gee" and "Haw" as you turn right and left. At this stage there is a very good chance your goat will only turn his head while his body continues in a beeline toward home. Your best tool to fix this is your whip. Tap him on the opposite hip from the direction you're turning. This will encourage him to move his body over. You may need to be

somewhat forceful at first until he understands what you want. Turning between the shafts is difficult because the goat can't arc his body. He has to learn how to cross his legs over and step his feet sideways while keeping his body in a straight line. Your patient, consistent, and well-timed use of the whip will help him learn how to do this.

After two or three sessions of driving toward home, your goat is ready for a change of scenery. He is not ready to be driven away from home and probably won't be for some time so don't even attempt it at this stage. You could end up frustrating yourself and your goat so badly that neither of you wants to see a cart and harness again! Instead, load your goat and cart up and take them to a quiet, level street or bike path at least a mile from home. For these first few outings, make sure to pick a place with little traffic and few barking dogs and pick a time of day when people are less likely to be on the road. You want your first experiences to be safe, pleasant, and uneventful.

From here on out you will simply be building on each previous success. With frequent rewards and consistent training your goat will become more confident and obedient each time you drive. For long-term success, make sure you have time to practice at least 2-3 times per week at the beginning. Don't train him one or two times and then get busy doing other things for a month. Once your goat has a good foundation he won't forget and you can space your driving sessions further apart. Until your goat is three years old, make sure to give him light loads on easy, level roads. A mature goat can pull 1 1/2 times his own weight, but a growing goat should not pull more than his own body weight at any time, and you must build his strength up to that level first. Make sure to include the weight of your vehicle when calculating how much he can pull. Your first goal is to have fun being with your goat and teaching him a new skill. End each and every lesson on a good note, and never be stingy with the treats.



Cuzco and Phil