

What in the World is a Whiffletree and Why Would I Worry About It?

by Nan Hassey

It has recently come to my attention that many goat owners have grand ambitions of hitching up their pet wether and driving off into the sunset, but when it comes to the nuts and bolts of actually harnessing, hitching, and training they are at a complete loss.

There's nothing cuter than a goat pulling a wagonload of kids in a local parade, and nothing could seem easier until you open up that box with your new harness only to feel as though you're looking at a pile of spaghetti and wondering not only how you're going to put that tangled mess of who-knows-what onto the goat, but how you're ever going to hitch it to your kids' Radio Flyer!

In the last few years I have officiated several harness goat competitions and clinics and have seen quite a lot of confusion about how a harness works, how it should be adjusted, and where to hitch it on the vehicle. My first suggestion to those who wish to drive goats but have no prior driving experience is to find someone in your area who drives horses and take a few lessons. It will be worth every penny! There is absolutely nothing to compare with hands-on experience. If taking lessons is out of the question, please read a few books on driving, study harness diagrams, and watch some videos on the internet. You owe it to your goat to thoroughly educate yourself before trying to educate him!



One of the more common problems with goat hitches is a poorly constructed or ill-fitting harness. I've seen a few inexpensive goat harnesses for sale on the internet that seem to

have been made by people with an incomplete knowledge of how harnesses work. I've also seen some truly cringe-worthy homemade jobs, including my first attempt pictured at left using a horse halter and some dowel rods. Speaking from experience, I strongly urge people not to make their own harness unless they have a solid driving background and thoroughly understand how a harness works and how it should fit. Before going further, skip to the end of this article and read the harness diagram and parts descriptions.

The first thing to look for in a harness is a wide, sturdy, padded saddle. If the saddle has no pad then you need to buy or make one. A fleece lining on a piece of nylon does not constitute a pad. A thick pad is essential if the saddle is made from floppy material that doesn't maintain its shape. A narrow strap of limp nylon will concentrate pressure on the goat's spine. Quality, inexpensive harness pads can be found in many online miniature horse shops.

One harness type to avoid has the breastcollar sewn to the saddle (pictured below). This is a simple design and you can get away with it if you never pull a heavy load, and if you use exactly the right-sized goat, but it is not versatile and it could easily cause your goat to become sore. The breastcollar and traces should be separate from the saddle to allow free shoulder movement when the goat is in draft, and also to prevent any weight from being pulled by the saddle. The saddle should do no more than hold up the weight of the shafts. If the goat is pulling by the saddle he will tire quickly and you could even injure his spine. Many harnesses of this design actually have rings or snaps in the saddle which you are expected to clip to a ring on the end of your shafts. This is completely incorrect. The shafts are for turning and stopping, not pulling. If the goat is pulling by the shafts it means he is pulling from the saddle or from a breastcollar that allows no shoulder freedom. This design will sour your goat to pulling very quickly!



Harnesses that are designed to pull by the saddle are often made to stop the vehicle by the same means. These either have no britchen or the britchen is ineffective. Not only should your goat not pull with the saddle, he also should not have to use it for stopping unless the load is very light and the ground is level. If the saddle is used as brakes, a heavy load or a downhill slope will cause the saddle and girth to push forward into the goat's withers and elbows, causing him discomfort. Keep in mind that a goat does not have the strength or mass of a horse, so the weight of a child driving on a mild slope can constitute a big load. If you expect your goat to pull something as heavy as a child, he needs a complete harness with a proper breastcollar and britchen to be safe and comfortable.

One of the most common problems I see with goat hitches is the lack of a whiffletree. Many aspiring goat drivers don't even know what one is, just as I didn't when I first started



driving my goat. In this photo, my goat's traces are hooked directly to the sled. Thank goodness I did not drive him like this for long! Unfortunately, even some goat equipment suppliers don't seem interested in whiffletrees. I recently purchased pre-made shafts from a popular goat supply company so I could convert my garden cart into a goat-mobile. When the shafts arrived I was shocked to see that they had no whiffletree. Apparently I was supposed to attach the traces to hooks welded directly to the shafts. In the years after this photo I learned to drive

horses and even operated a commercial carriage business so I came to realize the importance of whiffletrees. I called the Amish manufacturer that made the shafts for the goat supply company and they told me that since goats can't pull heavy loads, they didn't think a whiffletree was necessary. I beg to differ! Not only are goats capable of pulling quite a lot of weight if harnessed properly, but they are as entitled to being comfortable in their work as any other animal!

So what is a whiffletree? A whiffletree is a swinging arm attached to the vehicle or the back of the shafts. The traces, which run from the breastcollar, are hooked to each end of the whiffletree. As the goat walks, the whiffletree swings back and forth to accommodate his shoulder movement. Without a whiffletree, the breastcollar will remain static and chafe the goat as he walks, essentially punishing him for leaning into his load and pulling properly. There is no better way to make your goat balky and sullen than to ask him to pull against a static breastcollar. The other problem of driving without a whiffletree is that it can cause your vehicle to bump side-to-side every time your goat takes a step. This will make the ride jerky and uncomfortable for you as well as the goat, and it will be hard on your tires.



The good thing about whiffletrees is that they are easy to make. If your vehicle doesn't have one, you can make one from a dowel rod and some screw eyes. Look at pictures to familiarize yourself with the design and figure out how best to install one on your shafts or vehicle. The whiffletree should ideally be attached at approximately the same height as the breastcollar, but you may have to attach it lower depending on your vehicle design. Make sure it never attaches higher than the breastcollar.

I've had quite a few people ask me where they can find a properly made goat harness, and in my experience miniature horse harnesses are best. Harnesses made for goats can be



too small for large pack wethers, and some are poorly constructed. If there is a choice of sizes, "Mini A" is usually a better fit for goats. Your goat will probably exceed the "Mini A" height chart, but keep in mind that goats are much slimmer than miniature horses. If you plan to drive a doe or a miniature breed, you will need to buy a goat harness. Look at photos before you buy so you know it is properly constructed with all the right parts. When it arrives, lay each piece out separately and figure out what goes where, then harness up a sawhorse before you try putting it on a live animal. If you go so far as

to harness your sawhorse to a vehicle, you will be able to see exactly how each part of the harness functions. You'll discover that harnesses are actually quite simple once you are familiar with them. Done properly, driving is a fun, rewarding experience for you and your goat.