



Gods of Thunder Part II: Getting in Sync

When we last left our story, Thor was sorting out his team harnesses, getting them properly adjusted, and balancing his prancing pair in the hitch for best success at training. But now it's time to make those goats work together as a team!

Training a team of goats to pull is generally easier than training one goat by himself. Goats don't like to be alone, so it

makes sense that they go better in pairs. Two goats are bolder, less likely to stop, less likely to try to turn around and go home, and less likely to forget verbal commands. Most of the time, the things that make one goat nervous don't make the other nervous so they are able to be brave together. When one goat forgets a command or isn't paying attention, his buddy is on the ball and helps the forgetful one make the right choice. On the other hand, if both goats are nervous, forgetful, angry, or disobedient at the same time, you have double trouble on your hands! Thankfully these times are fairly infrequent and you'll find that your goats go better together than as individuals.

That said, you need to make sure you set yourself up for success by selecting two goat who basically get along with each other and are similarly matched in size and stride. An experienced teamster can usually overcome major discrepancies in personality and size, but this is a lot more difficult than starting out with a team that works well together. There will always be one goat that is more dominant than the other, one that walks a little faster, one that's a bit spookier, etc. These minor differences are enough to overcome without adding extra challenges for yourself!

When you first get started, it's advisable to have two people. One person handles the reins and whip while the other walks behind the wagon and assists if necessary. Usually assistance comes in the form of walking ahead of the goats to provide moral support when they get nervous--creating a physical barrier between the goats and whatever is scaring them. However, the walker should never get in the habit of leading the goats or staying out front. Once the goats find their courage, the walker should drop back and stay out of the way. The walker is also not to give vocal commands. This is the job of the driver.

When it comes to handling the reins and whip, driving two goats is not much different than driving one. One rein is held in each hand with the thumbs on top (see Winter 2016 issue of Goat Tracks). The whip is held alongside the rein in one hand and is used in conjunction with your voice to cue the goats to walk on.

One of the primary goals in training a team is to get them to pull together. When you first begin driving you'll notice that one goat generally prefers to walk ahead while the other lags behind. You'll also find that they often do not start and stop together, which makes their job more difficult and makes your ride bumpier. They get even more out-of-whack on turns, particularly if your faster goat is on the inside track. It is the driver's job to encourage the team to pull together by steadying them with voice and reins or applying extra motivation with the whip.

There should be a slight amount of tension on your reins so you can feel your goats' mouths and stay in constant communication with them. If one goat pulls ahead, put steady,

even pressure on both reins. Most drivers instinctively pull the rein on the same side as the goat pulling ahead, but this is incorrect. With coupling lines, the right rein works on the right side of both goats while the left rein works on the left side of both goats. If your right-hand goat is charging ahead and you only pull the right rein, it will turn the goats right, not slow the fast one down. If you pull both reins evenly, only the goat who is charging ahead will feel pressure on his mouth. Once he falls back in line with his partner, your reins will even out and both goats will feel equal pressure again.

Sometimes the problem is not that one goat is too fast, but the other is too slow. He may need a firm tap on the haunches with the whip to remind him to step up and do his share. I use the command "Step up" along with the goat's name just before using the whip. Most goats learn quickly that lagging does not pay. Slowing down a fast goat is usually more difficult than speeding up a slow one.

If you have one goat that is consistently chargey, you can rig up some stay chains. These are chains or ropes that attach from the front axle of your vehicle to either end of your doubletree. They prevent the doubletree from swinging too far off-center, so if one goat steps too far ahead he ends up pulling most of the load by himself. One or two drives like this and most goats will fall back in line voluntarily and allow their buddy to help share the load. This is better than hanging on the mouth of a goat that likes to lead.

The best way to train your goats to start and stop together is simply to practice, practice, practice. Use your voice every time you start and stop so your goats learn the commands "walk on" and "whoa". Set them up for success by evening them up before you give the "whoa" command. Squeeze your reins back evenly and keep your fingers supple so there is "feel" in the reins. Sometimes it helps to see-saw back and forth gently on the reins rather than pulling straight back. This helps keep the goats from locking their jaws against the pressure of the bit and getting into a tug-of-war. Make sure your goats come to a complete stop before moving on again.

When starting, use the voice command to "walk on". If one or both goats does not start promptly, tap with the whip. If you need to tap both goats, use your whip in a side-to-side flicking motion so they feel it almost exactly at once. The more you practice starting and stopping, the sooner your goats will figure out how to work together.

Turning is another area where your goats will need to learn how to move in sync. In a turn, the inside goat has to slow down while the outside goat speeds up a little. If the inside goat charges ahead, remember to pull *both* reins to slow him down. Practice large, sweeping turns and work up to tight ones. Eventually your goats will learn to step together around their turns rather than jostling and shoving. Remember that your goats also need to learn how to turn by crossing their front legs and stepping over since the pole prevents them from arcing their bodies. Often it is helpful to use your whip on the hip of the outside goat to tap his body over. It is usually easier to turn a goat by pushing it than by pulling on the reins. The outside goat will move away from the whip cue and push the inside goat over with him.



The goats demonstrate turning in sync by crossing their front legs over. Notice my use of the whip on the outside hip of the outside goat.

Sometimes if I need to use my whip more forcefully or reach it further over in a turn, I will bridge my reins in my left hand and hold the whip in my right. Bridge your reins by crossing them in one hand. If you need to drive one-handed in a turn, you'll need to pinch your reins off at the correct tension to maintain your arc. Learn to become comfortable with sliding your hands up and back on the reins to adjust their length as needed.

Sometimes you have one goat that insists on picking fights with his teammate. At this point, I usually take my team up to a trot and give them some work to do. This gets the rowdy one to settle down and teaches him that picking fights means extra work. It also gives the subordinate goat a break from his annoying buddy and gets both their minds off each other. With practice your team will learn to keep their minds on their job.

Go to your goats' heads frequently to reward them. If they are obedient, keep the lesson short. Always try to end on a good note. As they progress in their training you can take them more places and introduce them to new sights and sounds. Try not to over face them. If your goats start to panic, get out and help them past the challenge. It's better to reassure them than to get into a fight or into a situation where they might bolt or overturn the wagon. On the other hand, make sure you are firm in your commands so they don't learn to take advantage of "spookums" as a way to get out of work. This is where it's important to know your goats so you can strike the correct balance between challenging them to be brave and overwhelming them with things they're not ready to face. Trust is learned by gradually overcoming ever-increasing challenges and is not built in one day. Be a consistent and trust-worthy driver and soon your goats will be facing down all kinds of situations that would have terrified them in the beginning.



These goats have learned enough trust to cross water without being led.

Happy driving!

~ Nan Hassey and the Goat-O-Rama Goats
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