

# Review **Freighting Harnesses**

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## About

Freighting harnesses are a rather old concept and much more efficient when pulling heavy loads. In particular during Gold Rush times they were used in heaps. But they are more and more used even in racing, as the famous Seavey harness is showing. The main idea is to eliminate the pressure on the hips due to a downward pull on a regular x-back, for example. And also to centre the dogs and not pulling sideways, thus making the pull more efficient. In addition some use a spreader bar for their tug lines as well, in particular for the wheel dogs. The full combination is worth a look at. In particular if you have rather big dogs. (I don't use it, since I have 45+kg males and 30kg females making the pull uneven for a tug line spreader bar.)

## Where to buy

[nordkyn.com](http://nordkyn.com)  
[mushingsupplies.com](http://mushingsupplies.com)  
[hundekjorerbutikken.no](http://hundekjorerbutikken.no)  
[non-stopdogwear.com](http://non-stopdogwear.com)  
[seleverkstedet.no](http://seleverkstedet.no)  
[sledwork.de](http://sledwork.de)



## The Story

I am running Alaskan Malamutes... And as such I believe those guys need to pull heavy loads and I can see that they love it. Not in a crawl speed, but in a moderate speed over long days at a time. And with a small team it is amazing how much you are able to accomplish.

I got into freighting harnesses pretty much early on with my first rescues, since I was following Joe Henderson, and naturally I looked into what he is using. 7 years ago I ordered myself a couple Nordkyn freighting harnesses, mixed them up with some X-backs and even adapted my X-backs to freighting harnesses. I added a Seavey harness to the mix lately, since i have seen it working before, and one of my girls is running in it now. Here are the details...

## In detail

There are opinions on gear as many as there are mushers! A lot about gear is subjective and depends vastly on how the individuals used or not used it. Me included. The only thing I can add to the discussion is, that I use my stuff and quite often overuse it.

The way I am running with my dogs changed a bit over the years. When Nipituruq, my now 6 year old lead dog was about 1 year old, he was, for some time, my only dog. So I went out on bike, kick bike, sled runs in a team and pulka tours with him. That required both X-back and freighting harness, at least that's how I felt like doing it. With some adjustments with additional rings, he was running the freighting harness primarily with the pulka setup, as well as when I let him pull heavy stuff, such as a heavy tire, or the Troll Cart.

With the additional 5 dogs, I do run most dogs in freighting harnesses and just let the leaders run an X-back. The leaders tend to have less pull in the tug lines (other than uphill and heavier work, of course), so I prefer X-backs, so the spreader bar doesn't flop around too much and may hit the



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## About Me

I grew up as an ordinary Berlin city boy with no intention living in the outdoors. A decent education, a study. After that, working as an event lighting technician - that was the plan. But about 10 years ago, it all changed when I got my first sled dog out of a dog shelter. Since then it was a constant improvement from city life, to a cabin in the woods of Germany, to 4 years of guiding people in northern Sweden. And finally, coming up to Svalbard with 5 of my own bred dogs. During all this time I learned a lot from different people/musher and I did read all I could. The rest of the time I have spend on multiple week hikes, during summer, and multiple day/week tours on sled and next to it on skis, during winter time.



ankles, when the pull isn't that hard and steady.



The Nordkyn Freighting harness is the arch typical freighting harness. Heavy, simple and durable. It only comes with a padding around the chest and neck area. More than enough in my opinion. However, even though the neoprene padding is soft and flexible, it does wear out after many kilometers of heavy use. A closed cell foam provides more stability to the fit, doesn't twist and therefor keeps the shape, can be potentially less comfortable though. Padding on the flank of the dog is really not necessary, other than to keep a better shape for the harness. Function wise it doesn't add to any benefit. You will get flank rubbing regardless of padding or not. That is one of the downsides of it, though. So if you are a show person, don't use it, if you dont want your dog to lose hair on its flanks!

The clue on those harnesses is the adjustability of the back. One metal buckle on each side of the harness can be adjusted on how high you want the pulling point by adjusting the X-back-straps. On the above dog, Nipituruq (he's running in lead and I want the spreader bar higher, so it doesn't flop around as much. Also the tug line angle is different), you can see a higher pulling point. The picture below shows Igniq in team. He's a hard worker and I want the angle low to maximize his pulling effort in relation to the gang and main line. You can see that the harness angle, I call it Y-point, when the shoulder and chest strap meet and then move to the back, changes according to the hight adjustment done.





**Above:** Seavey harness detail, with the mentioned additional black webbing stitched to support the pulling point with rope

**Below:** The Nordkyn back detail. You can see the metal buckles for adjusting the height and the O-ring in a loose fit, so it follows the pulling angle of the tug line a bit more. I use plastic "eskimo hooks". The spreader bar is a broom stick, pretty much.



The disadvantage is, that you will, in the end, have a slight pressure on the back when adjusting the X-webbing over the back. The higher the pulling point, the more pressure you will have.

The fitting is pretty good, although the neck webbing can roll and slide due to the loser padding. But I have never had a dog with shoulder problems, as well as rubbing points. Neither after an 8 Day haul, nor after a 130km run. And when you look at the pictures you can see a nice fit, including the Y-point, which sits close to the back part of the rib cage, but is not pressing in due to the spreader bar. Thick durable webbing in many colors is used and even the pulling attachment comes with an O-ring. Rope on webbing wears out much quicker. The pulling attachment point is moving a bit, allowing better pulling angle adjustment.

The Seavey harness has a more racing oriented solution to offer. Taiga harnesses counts on lightweight webbing, padding and a racing fit. Those harnesses are designed for Alaskan Huskies and as such they are rather narrow in fit and designed for long bodies. However, if you have a slender build female it might do you good to put this harness on, rather than using a heavy freighting harness.

Although this particular one on Galena is actually too long for her, since the Y-point sits behind her rib cage over her hips already. It still does work quite well. I will get a new, longer spreader bar for it, to fix the minor issues with it.

The pulling point is by design centered to the body and kept in place by the 2 black 1" rubber straps over the dogs' back. Those also prevent the spreader bar, made out of lightweight wood and covered by tape, on bumping into your dogs' ankle. By design I mean the Y-point. The lower chest strap when meeting the upper shoulder strap, is moving towards the back with a 45ish degree angle. Making the harness centered and balanced to the dogs body. On a regular freighting harness you will notice that the lower chest strap follows a straight line to the pulling point, unless adjusted by the X-back-straps. The Seavey harness fits great around the neck and due to the padding it feels good on the dog and stays well in shape, as well as stays dry. The webbing however, in particular in the back, is too weak and I right away reinforced it with additional black webbing before even using it.

It comes in different colors, but it seems like in Scandinavia red is the preferred colour.



It needs to be mentioned that Nonstop will launch a Seavey harness replica some time soon, which might be worth a look, since it will be easier available and most likely comes in more durable webbing. Fitting wise it will most likely be the same, since it was field tested on long distance races as well.



**Above:** Different designs for freighting harnesses without additional adjustments



**Above:** Seleverkstedet freighting model. The company has a long norwegian history for amazing dog backpacks. Unfortunately they miss the mark here, by using rope for the back, which is stitched to the webbing (see the white line after the spreader bar). I know a musher who does that stuff by himself and prides himself that his dogs are so strong that they destroy the harnesses when pulling in. **WRONG.** It is a false construction. The back adjustment looks nice though, since it is a mix of adjustment and flex.

**Below:** Nordkyn harness with additional padding



Mitch Seavey tested out a titanium strip in the webbing instead of a spreader bar, which is a great idea for long distance mushing. But on heavy pulls the titanium will bend inwards and squeeze the hips/thighs, so I assume he went away from it, cause I haven't seen anything about it ever since.

### Conclusion

This time a conclusion feels rather wrong placed. But I will say this:

**Never be shy on trying out.** See what works for you and your dogs, but mix it up, improve and don't just stick with the same harnesses, you used for years, cause they might not fit that well on some of your dogs. Even summer and winter fit makes a difference. Some run better in X-back, H-back, Half-harness or freighting harness. It all depends on traveling style, preferences of the musher, but most of all, on the dog, its body and its gait.

And you shouldn't stop on just the harnesses, but all used gear, as well as training methods.

Some people say freighting harnesses make the dogs slower, but unless you are using a weight pull harness, I disagree. It adds other difficulties, or thought processes as well as advantages. So it depends on what you make out of it.

Last winter I was running a small Greenlander. A happy worker, young and under developed in his muscles, as well as a bit weird build in the front. The combination out of X-back and his sideways pull, caused him left shoulder issues. So I ran him in the Seavey harness. Worked like a charm. Simple fix, if you have the option.



**Above: Beware!** The ManMat freight harness is NOT a freighting harness. Just a too long X-back and will squeeze the thighs of the dogs when pulling and rubbing. Very stupid idea, unfortunately I have



The padding on the Nordkyn harness. Very simple. As mentioned in the description, it has a tendency to roll or twist, since the neoprene is very loose. Essentially it is just a mild padding for the dogs. For Malamutes it is enough and when you look at Greenland, they even run the dogs without padding. The chest part is rather short, but seems to do enough. The webbing straps are crossing and additionally stitched below. But that part has a lot of tension and even after using dental floss to fix it, it opened up again. It seems like it doesn't matter, though. Good fit regardless. Here seen open.