

# ABOUT SLED DOGS AND SLED DOG RACING

## FAQ

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### History

Prior to the Formation of sled dog racing as a Formal sport, sled dogs were bred and used by native peoples of the polar regions of the world in their everyday lives For survival in harsh climates. Two dogs commonly employed in sledding are Alaskan Malamutes and Siberian Huskies. These two breeds had quite different origins and uses. Alaskan Malamutes originated with a group of Eskimo people known as the Mahlemiut. The dogs of that time were very large freighting dogs capable of pulling heavy weight. The Mahlemint people inhabited the region in the upper part of the Anvik River in Alaska, and were spread out over a large area. The Mahlemiut people used these dogs For hauling Food back to the villages. The gold rush in 1896 created a high demand for these dogs. On the other hand, Siberian Huskies originated with the Chuckchi people of north eastern Siberia. These people had a Stone Age culture and used their dogs for a variety of things, like herding reindeer and pulling loads. These dogs were smaller and faster than their Mahlemiut counterparts. These dogs were exported to Alaska at around the time of the gold rush. Thus the gold rush played a very important role in the development of our modern day sled dog breeds.

Sled dog racing began as a formal sport with the first All- Alaska Sweepstakes race in 1908. Prior to this, Alaska's mushers had little opportunity for recreation and they used their teams primarily for work and transportation. Rules for the races were established, and they provided a good diversion to the difficult living conditions. In the 1920's, airplanes were gradually replacing sled dog teams for transportation, freight hauling, and mail delivery. In 1925, sled dogs proved that they were invaluable during the "Great Race of Mercy to Nome." In Nome, an outbreak of diphtheria threatened to become a fatal epidemic. A 201 b package of antitoxin serum needed to be relayed from Nenana to Nome. Twenty drivers and more than 100 dogs were recruited for the run. Planes were ruled out due to extreme cold (40F below and colder) and if the plane crashed, the serum would be lost. Serum was transported from Anchorage to Nenana by train. The drive was a success, the serum was delivered and lives were saved. The drive covered some 674 miles in less than five and a half days. This, along with the simple commemoration of the uses of the Iditarod trail, is the origin of the Iditarod sled dog race.

### Types of Sled Dogs

Naturally, most northern breeds were used as

sled dogs. Alaskan Malamutes, Siberian Huskies, Eskimo Dogs, Greenlands, Samoyeds, Norrbottenspets, and Hokkaidokens are all sled dogs. However, lots of different breeds of dogs have been and are used to drive sleds and carts. People use Irish Setters, Dalmatians, Golden Retrievers, etc., to enjoy mushing sports. In fact, most modern day speed and endurance mushers use mixed breeds (often Siberian crossed with Greyhound). So, if you do not have a "sled dog," but still want to enjoy the sport, fear not, for most any type of dog can be used. Mushing is fun, both to take part in and simply to watch.

### Mushing Terms

Contrary to common belief, the word "mush" is not used to drive sled dogs. Mush comes from the French word "marche" which is from the verb "marcher" which means to walk. Undoubtedly, the French used this during gold rush days. The word "mush" is felt to be too "soft" a sound to be used as a command. Below is a short list of common commands and terms associated with dog driving sports.

**Hike:** Get the dogs moving

**Gee:** Turn right

**Haw:** Turn left

**Easy:** Slow down

**Musher:** One that drives sled dogs

**Mushing:** The act of driving sled dogs

**Lead dog:** Dog that steers the sled dog team and regulates speed

**Wheel dog:** Dogs closest to the sled

**Sled:** Wooden rig the dogs pull in the snow and on which you stand

**Snowless rigs:** Also called training carts. Take the place of the sled when there is no snow.

### Mushing Equipment

The types of mushing equipment alone could cover many pages: only the main points are covered here. The references listed at the end of this section provide additional information.

There are two main types of sleds - basket sleds and toboggan sleds. Basket sleds (also called stanchion sleds) are popular among sprint racers and recreational mushers. They are fast on glare ice and hard pack trails, and are also good in high wind conditions. They are lightweight, and the basket is set high off the runners, which can keep gear dry. Toboggan sleds are more durable and stable than the basket sleds, and they are capable of carrying bigger loads. They are more rigid and generally less manoeuvrable than basket sleds.

The bed of the toboggan rides two inches above the snow. These sleds handle soft snow better than their basket counterparts. Both types of sleds are equipped with a brake, which is a vital item. The brake is very simple, consisting of a spring loaded wood plank attached to the sled bed at one end and a metal hook at the other. When riding the sled, standing on the runners, one simply pushes down on the brake, driving the hook into the snow. It is an effective method of slowing and stopping the sled.

So, which sled? It depends on what you want to do. Basket sleds are lighter and more suitable for racing. Racing trails are groomed and hard packed for speed. They can be used for longer trips and camping. However, to carry more gear and run in softer snow conditions, a toboggan sled would be better. For the novice and/or once-in-a-while musher, the basket sled is the best choice. They are generally cheaper and easier to learn on.

In order to have your dog pull the sled, it must have a proper harness. There are many, but two main types of harnesses are the x-back and the freighting, or weight pulling harness. For speed or recreational mushing, the x-back harness is the harness of choice. The harness is extremely important as it properly distributes the weight of the load across the dog's muscular-skeletal system. Of all the components of mushing, the harness is the most important. The x-back harness is sometimes referred to as a racing harness, but it is NOT strictly used for racing. As long as the load is not too heavy, the x-back is used for a wide variety of dog driving activities. The harness should be padded around the front and fit the dog very well. Unfortunately, a picture is not possible, and without that, it is a little difficult to visualise. See the references for additional details.

The weight pulling harness is used to haul heavier loads. Therefore, one would expect to see freighting harnesses used in conjunction with toboggan sleds. They are also used in competitive weight pulling. They are similar to the x-back harness, except that they are constructed to give the dog different freedom of movement and different distribution of the load. The freighting harness has one very important feature that the x-back harness does not. At the rear of the harness, there is a "spacer", usually a wooden rod that is about as long as the dog is wide. While pulling heavy loads, the rod is well away from the back of the dogs rear legs. For recreational mushers, this wooden rod can be somewhat irritating for the dog as it will hit the back of the dogs legs when not loaded. Consider what you are going to do with the dogs before purchasing or making a harness.

The line that runs from the sled to the dogs is

called a **gang line**. They are simple to construct yourself once you understand their function and geometry. The gang line consists of three components. The first is the **tow line**, which is typically 3/8 inch polyethylene rope. It connects to the sled and runs up "between" the dogs which are hitched side by side on either side of the towline. To this, the **tug lines** are attached. These lines are typically 1/4 inch poly rope and are "braided" into the tow line. The tug lines attach to the harnesses (which are on the dogs!). The final component is the **neck line**. The neck line is also 1/4 inch poly rope and is braided into the tow line. The end of the neck line attaches to the dog's collar. The dog does NOT pull from this under ANY circumstances. The function of the neck line is to keep the dogs close to the tow line, thereby maximising their pull strength. When out on the trail, you always want to have a spare gang line, as the dogs may break theirs, or a tangle may become so severe that the line must be cut to free the dogs!

The next component of mushing equipment is the snow hook. The snow hook is essentially an "emergency brake" for the sled. When you stop the sled, and must get off to untangle dogs or rest or something, you can set the snow hook in the snow and it will hold the dogs (and therefore the sled) in place. They are remarkably effective. They are simple: a large, heavy, metal hook, weighing a couple of pounds and about 12 inches in length. These can be purchased from a variety of places. It is very important to attach the hook to the rear of the gang line, not the sled. A strong team of dogs can very easily tear a sled to pieces if the sled is between the hook and the dogs.

The last pieces of equipment to mention are the sled bag and dog booties. The sled bag can be used to carry an injured dog or gear. In an ISDRA sanctioned sled dog race, sled bags are a required piece of equipment. They can be made or purchased. Dog booties are used to protect the dogs feet from injury, particularly on long journeys. They are typically used when mushing on rough ice, when mushing along roadways where chemicals from de-icing can be present, or when driving the dogs on a snowless rig on a hard surface. Booties can be made or purchased. How about the cost?

Well, it varies, of course. The numbers below are typical. Note the following prices are in US Dollars.

- Sled: \$300.00 - \$1500.00
- Harness: \$15.00 - \$20.00
- Ganglines: \$10.00 - \$20.00
- Sled Bags: \$40.00 - \$200.00
- Snow Hook: \$30.00 - \$70.00
- Booties: \$1.00 - \$2.00 (per paw)

The references section includes the names, addresses, and phone numbers of some outfitters that sell this type of equipment.

### **Skijoring Equipment**

Skijoring really only requires six simple components. A skier (you!), a dog (or dogs!), an x-back harness, a tow line, padded belt, and cross country skis. You **MUST** know how to cross country ski **VERY** well to do this. The harness has been discussed previously, there is no need to discuss the skis, and the tow line is just that - a line that connects you to the dog(s). This leaves the padded belt. These can be purchased or made. The idea is that you put the belt on, attach the tow line to it, attach the dogs to it, and go! Some people prefer to use a handle to hang on to rather than attach the dogs to them. The handle can then be dropped if the dogs pull you into trouble! Others feel that it is best to use a belt and execute a controlled fall in case of trouble rather than risk having the dogs injure themselves in a tangle when a handle is dropped.

### **Weight Pulling Equipment**

The name of the game here is truly the harness. As discussed above, the weight pulling harness is completely different from the x-back harness, and **THEY ARE NOT INTERCHANGEABLE!** The weight pulling harness has side lines that connect to a spreader bar at the hock, instead of continuing up to the hips. This is important, because a single dog weighing 60 lbs may pull 2000 lbs!

### **Other Equipment**

Many mushers have a wheeled cart for training in the fall prior to snow fall. In areas with insufficient snow, these carts are used in competition. These can be purchased or made by a good welder. Carts are a lot of fun, but are difficult to come by, they can be difficult to control, and they go "very" fast with enthusiastic dogs.

Some people use pulks in the snow and carts in the summer to work their dogs. Carts are small "wagons" that are used to haul small loads or children. Pulks are carts for the snow (they are like small sleds). They are used to carry equipment. Carts and pulks can be made or bought.

### **Training the Musher**

Dog driving is not merely riding on the back of the sled issuing commands to steer the dogs. It is work! If you start doing it in earnest, you will pull muscles, fall off the sled and have to pull yourself back on the runners with one hand, run yourself ragged chasing after the team (because you fell off of the sled), run into trees, and so on. In addition to these things, a musher must "peddle" the sled. This too can be tiring since it is repetitive. Peddling is pushing the sled forward

with one foot while riding the sled. This is helpful to the dogs, particularly when tired. You may also frequently get off to run alongside when the dogs are tired. Therefore, to successfully drive sled dogs, the musher must train his or her body as well. Conditioning of the musher is to a small extent a function of the type of mushing to be done. The key is endurance and flexibility over muscle bulk. Running, biking, cross country skiing and downhill skiing are all good ways to build strength. You must remember that at all times, you are alpha. If you are tired, hesitant, and uncertain, your team will pick this up and become confused and unresponsive. This can be particularly dangerous on longer journeys into the wilderness.

It should be clear from this that dogs in a sled dog team must be very well bonded to the driver. Not only does it make training much easier, but well socialised, well bonded dogs make a very good sled dog team. The dogs are looking to you as their undisputed leader, and you and they work together as a "team". If you are careful to bond to each of your dogs as individuals, and socialise them very well with each other, other dogs, and other humans, your dogs will be willing to do virtually anything for you.

### **Training Dogs to Pull**

There are many aspects to training dogs to pull. Probably the most fundamental is "start young". Get a puppy used to its harness, just as you would a collar and leash. Also let the puppy get used to pulling things. Start out with a small 2x4 (6 inches long) and let it drag the 2x4 around behind its harness for a while. The emphasis is **NOT** on weight, just on having fun dragging a **VERY LIGHT** weight behind it. It is important to realise that one can injure a puppy's bones, structure, and spirit by doing too much!

To train adult dogs, or continue the puppy training as an adult, is relatively simple. Some dogs are natural pullers, others are not. Some dogs take right to the harness the first time, and other dogs, even ones from reputable breeders, may take extensive training. You just never know.

It is vital to get the dog to lean out and keep the line between it and you taut. Some dogs have a real problem with this, others do not. For problem dogs, the cause usually is due to the dog not liking you to be behind it. If you do have trouble, there are a variety of methods you can use. As long as you make training a fun game, and you make the dog understand what you want it to do, training will progress quickly, even for stubborn dogs, like Siberians. Fortunately, they like to pull, so their stubbornness is not a problem here. Sometimes getting them to **STOP** pulling is! Some mushers feel that it is best to train dogs to pull lots of weight, then speed comes naturally in

a race without the weight. Others feel that speed and endurance training is best. Still others feel that a combination works best, similar to the combination training for the musher. Training for speed and endurance by mushing shorter distances (under 10 miles, sometimes even 3 or 4 miles) at top speed and up hills is beneficial. Loping along at 3 or 4 miles an hour for 15 or 20 miles is also beneficial. Both of these build strength and endurance. Pulling heavy weight for short distances is also quite good, particularly for wheel dogs (the ones hitched closest to the sled). For this, try a plastic tub to which you can add plastic weights (the ones from barbell sets will have the weights printed on them).

Whichever method you use, remember to take it easy with your dogs and not push them to hard, and never, NEVER, lose your temper with your dogs. Remember that this is supposed to be fun for both you and the dogs. George Attla, a famous musher once said, *"If the dogs make a mistake while out on the trail remember that it is not the dogs that have made the mistake. It is you."* For additional training information (with much more detail than is practical to provide here), see the references.

### **Training Lead Dogs**

To successfully mush, one must have a good lead dog (or dogs). This dog will take your commands for regulating speed and direction for the entire team. Naturally, if you are driving only one dog, that will be your lead dog.

Training lead dogs is too complex to really do it justice here. The basics are you want the dog to learn to turn right, left, speed up, and slow down on voice command. You also want the dog to bypass interesting detours and distractions. In addition to the basic commands already introduced (see section 3), the dog must also be taught the commands below:

Kissing Sound: Speed up (or other appropriate sound)

On-By: Go by a fork in the trail, other dogs, or other distractions without detour

All commands are spoken in a firm, calm, not too loud voice.

During training, you must be certain to use varied turns and trails to be sure that the dog is really executing the commands rather than following a well worn path. You must also anticipate the turn and issue the command at the correct time from the "dog's" perspective. Finally, some people get confused when issuing the right/left commands, particularly in the excitement of a race. Some mushers tape the commands on the front of their sleds, on the right and left sides. You may want to do this while beginning on the sled.

To train a dog to execute these commands with regularity is not too difficult. To train a dog to do this during the excitement of a race with lots of distractions is more difficult. One possible way to approach training is to start out on foot when the dog is a puppy. Keep the lessons varied, quick, and fun. Be certain to do the lessons in a variety of environments, with and without distractions. When the dog is old enough to pull weight (about one year to 18 months, get advice from your veterinarian), you may wish to graduate to cross country skis. The dog will learn to execute commands in snowy conditions, and at higher speeds. Once you have your lead dog well trained and pulling your sled, you will find that other untrained, young, dogs can be very easily added to your team as your lead dog will "correct" the new dog's mistakes, usually faster and better than you can.

This is one way in which lead dogs can be trained. Consult the references and experienced mushers (if you can find any) for additional information.

### **Training for Weight Pulling**

Here emphasis is on strength and pulling straight no matter how difficult. Most of the mushing books in the references discuss weight pulling training.

### **Training for Skijoring**

Skijoring is you on cross country skis and the dogs pulling you. YOU MUST BE A VERY GOOD CROSS COUNTRY SKIER. This is a must. Before attaching dogs, cross country ski all over the place, on a wide variety of terrain. Learn to fall in a controlled way. You will eventually need to do this when skijoring. You will need to learn to turn quickly and ski in control at high speeds. Skiing downhill in cross country skis is a good way to simulate skijoring speeds.

The dogs must be well trained as well. Train all of them as lead dogs. They need to know and obey all of the commands very well (especially whoa!). The references all include information about this fast growing sport.

### **Health, Diet, and Care -Sled Dog Specifics (briefly)**

Sled dogs are athletes. They are also remarkably healthy. It is important to realise that because sled dogs are athletes, they require special attention in at least two specific areas.

Probably one of the most important aspects for caring for sled dogs is the foot. You should inspect your dog's feet regularly. The skin of the pad should feel tough, but pliable, be resistant to abrasions and lacerations, and be free from cracks, dryness, or scarring. Also inspect the nails of the foot carefully. Nails can help the dog grip ice, but if too long, they can cause serious

foot injury. According to Miki Collins in *Dog Driver*, "if the nails are long enough to force the toes upward when the dog is standing on a hard, level surface, clip them". Nails that are too long can get caught and ripped out on the trail, or they can cause toes to break. Both of these injuries can be quite serious, and they are certainly painful.

The subject of diet should also be touched on here. Most mushers feed a high stress, high energy diet during mushing season, and switch to a "maintenance" diet during the "off" season. For example, one experienced musher mixes performance dry with canned during mushing season. This is a high fat, high protein food. Some mushers even mix food in with lots of water hours before a race to encourage drinking. Dogs must be very well hydrated. During the off season, the musher in this example feeds maintenance canned mixed with a maintenance dry. During the mushing season, the dogs are using all components of the food that is fed. During the off season, there is no need for such high energy food, and in fact, high protein foods can cause kidney trouble later in life when not fed in moderation.

### Final Remarks

Hopefully, this brief summary has been helpful to you. Even if you do not want to get involved in mushing yourself, try and find mushing events in your area. It is wonderful to see the handsome dogs enjoying doing what they were bred for.



## 15. Recommended References

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*Skijor with Your Dog.*  
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- Kaynor, Carol and Hoe-Raitto, Mari.  
*Skijoring: An Introduction to the Sport.*  
OK Publishing.

### 15.2. Breed Books

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- Riddle, Maxwell and Beth J. Harris.  
*The New Complete Alaskan Malamute.*  
Howell Book House, 1990. ISBN 0-87605-008-9.

### 15.3. Racing, History, and Exporation

- Sherwonit, Bill.  
*Iditarod, The Great Race to Nome.*  
Alaska Northwest Books, 1991. ISBN 0-88240-411-3 •
- Fishback, Lee.  
*Training Lead Dogs.*  
Tun-Dra.
- Steger, Will and Jon Bowermaster.  
*Crossing Antarctica.*  
Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991. ISBN 0-394-58714-6.

### 15.4. Sled Dog and Mushing Periodicals

- *The Siberian Quarterly*  
4401 Zephyr Street, Wheat Ridge, CO 80033-3299
- *The Malamute Quarterly*  
4401 Zephyr Street, Wheat Ridge, CO 80033-3299
- *Mushing*  
P.O. Box 149 Ester, AK 99725
- *Team & Trail*  
PO Box 128, Center Harbor, NH 03226-0128.
- *ISDRA Info*  
PO Box 446, Nordman, Idaho 83848-00446.