

FIRST STEPS

GETTING STARTED IN MUSHING

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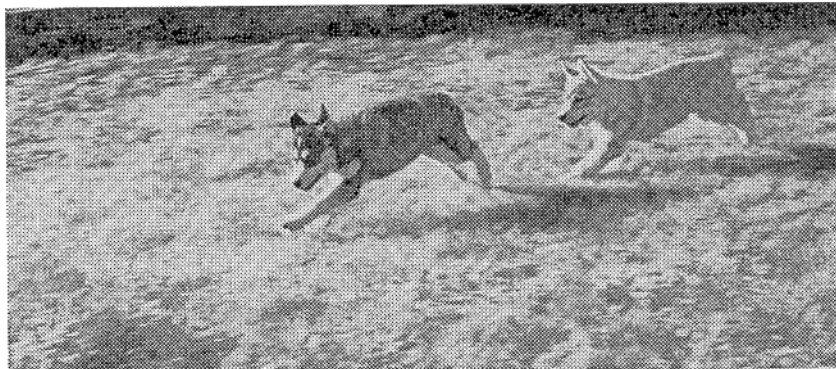
You've read *Call of the Wild*, watched *Iron Will* five times, and have a replica of the famous sled dog Balto on your desk at work. You're ready to take the plunge and get started in dog sledding. How do you begin?

The Dogs

Before you get on the runners, before you get a sled or even a dog it is important to consider what you want out of the sport and the dogs. Do you want one dog or several? Will your dogs live outdoors or will they sleep next to you on the bed? Do you want to race or have a small recreational team? Do you want to do anything else with your dogs such as obedience, competition or conformation (dog shows)? Answers to these questions will dictate what type and how many dogs you get.

Next do some homework. There are several books, a few listed at the end of this article, that offer detailed information for new mushers. In addition go to some races join a local sled dog organisation (see a recent Nov/Dec issue of *Mushing* for a list), meet and talk to some mushers. Find people whose ideas of owning and running dogs are similar to yours, and ask their advice. If you can find a mentor who will help you get started so much the better.

Once you have a dog (or dogs)- newly acquired or one(s) you already owned-how do you prepare it for sledding? If you are getting started with a young dog, don't overlook the importance of socialisation in turning it into a confident,



happy worker. Getting your dog used to people, loud noises and other dogs and walking on different surfaces will help in the training process. Even an older dog will benefit from this sort of education.

Equipment

Equipment for dog sledding can be expensive but you can start small. You will need a harness for each dog, but remember that your dog may not reach full size until it is a year or more old particularly if it is a larger breed. Be prepared to purchase additional harnesses or have the original harness adjusted to accommodate growth. An experienced musher or the staff at a sled dog equipment business can recommend an appropriate, good-fitting harness.

Sleds and carts are more substantial investments. A good cart or sled can easily cost over \$500. Even used equipment, if well kept, is expensive. Furthermore, there are so many variations in style, based on the musher's needs, that this is not a decision to be undertaken lightly. Ideally, a new musher would have the opportunity to try different types of sleds or

Don't overlook the importance of socialisation - whether for young pups or adults - in creating happy, confident sled dogs. Expose them to many different situations, people and dogs.

carts. Again, experienced mushers or the staff at sled dog equipment businesses are valuable resources for those who are just getting started - talk to several to get ideas about what may be right for you.

Foundation Training

Fortunately, you don't need to purchase a cart or sled right away to begin training. With a dog, a harness, a leash and a little ingenuity, you can begin the training process right away.

First, when do you start? Pups have soft bones and should not be asked or expected to pull heavy loads until they are mature. In the larger breeds, this may take as long as two years. But a young dog can still learn about life as a sled dog. Many mushers let their pups run loose beside a sled or cart, pulled by older dogs. If you don't already have a team of dogs, you may know of a fellow musher who would allow you to ride on the sled or

cart, accompanied by your pup running alongside.

This is invaluable experience, as the pup becomes conditioned, finds out about trails, gets accustomed to running with other dogs and learns to stay out of the way of the cart or sled. Stop the team and call the pup to you occasionally for a treat and praise. Puppies raised in this way grow up into dogs that are trustworthy off-leash, a handy trait if there is a tangle in the team or if the dog slips out of its harness.

If you don't have access to a trained team, you can still encourage your pup or dog to run on a trail by jogging or riding your bike and calling your pup to follow. There are many variations on this theme; letting the dog run loose, using a leash held in the hand, or using a device such as a Springer with a bike. Use your best judgment about your dog and your own ability!

When doing trail work, take the opportunity to teach your dog some commands as you run. Simple words for stopping, starting, right and left turns can be incorporated into a daily run without any attempt at formal training (commonly "whoa," "hike," "gee" and "haw," respectively).

When working with puppies, take care not to overdo it. Puppies tire easily. With any dog, make the experience a happy one, so it will get excited next time it goes out. Far better to cut the outing short while the dog is still enjoying itself than run the dog too far so it is leery next time.

Learning to Pull

When does your dog learn to

pull? Obviously, sled dogs do more than run; they must also pull. There are several schools of thought concerning how to teach a dog to pull. In some of the larger kennels, young dogs are harnessed between 9 months and a year of age, with no prior experience, and put in a team for a short run. Remarkably, in most cases, the young dog leaps forward with the rest of the team, running and pulling—a testament to the power of sled dog genetics. Further sled dog education is done in the team; there is no individualised teaching of how to pull from musher to dog.

However, not all dogs pull instinctively; not all mushers train their young dogs in this way; and not all of us have trained teams in which to run new dogs. Teaching a dog to pull is not difficult. Always use a harness when teaching a dog to pull; you don't want the dog pulling against its collar, and the feel of the harness also tells the dog that it is in "pull mode."

Once the harness is on and the dog is comfortable in it, attach a line with a weight, such as a piece of wood. Don't use a lot of weight, especially with a young dog the main idea is to get the dog used to pulling against resistance. Use a command you've picked for pulling ("let's go," "hike," etc.), and walk in front of your dog, encouraging it to follow. Continue to do this until the dog reliably pulls the weight.

It's a different situation, however, when a dog is asked to go in front of you, as it will be when pulling a sled. Some dogs, eager to, see new sights, do this naturally; others don't. If your dog balks, you may have to provide some

incentive. One way is to choose, a walk where your dog knows it will encounter something fun: a favourite spot where it is let off-leash, a lake to splash in or even your car if it likes to ride. Some dogs do better on the way back, so you might go on a short walk, turn around and encourage the dog to run back in front of you, perhaps to reach a reward of a treat back at the car. As the dog pulls forward, walk or run alongside, then drop back, and let it pull in front of you.

Once your dog knows the meaning of the pull word and is willing to pull in front of you while walking, you can vary the routine. Depending on your own athletic ability, you can use a bike with a Springer, you can jog with your dog in front of you, or you can even rig up a device to run your dog safely beside your car. A diversity of situations will help ensure a confident, willing dog that will have no problem adapting to running with a cart or a sled.

Further Reading

Some good how-to books include the following. Consult the reading lists in these books for even more titles.

Mush! A Beginner's Manual of Sled Dog Training.

Edited by Bella Levorsen. Arner Publications, 1976. Distributed by the Sierra Nevada Dog Drivers.

Mush with PRIDE Sled Dog Care Guidelines and Mush with PRIDE Equipment Safety Guidelines.

Mush with PRIDE, 1998 and 1996, respectively.

Dog Driver: A guide for the Serious Musher.

By Julie and Miki Collins. Alpine Publications, 1991.