



## **MOTHERS DON'T LET YOUR CHILDREN GROW UP TO BE DOG MUSHERS**

**(A PERSONAL JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF DOG MUSHING)**

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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to all the loyal, faithful dogs that I have had the good fortune to know and share their lives with.

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## PROLOGUE

The sun is warm on my face; the waves are gently rolling against fine white sand beach. My surf board is next to me waiting for the higher, rolling breakers desired for surfing. I hear the sound of the wind blowing the branches of the Palm Trees that fringe the sapphire blue ocean.

Suddenly, my thoughts are disturbed by the sound of sirens and dogs barking!

I abruptly wake up to the reality of my kennel of Sled dogs howling and barking their wake up call.

I look out the window in my bed room see it is still dark outside. The clock reads 5.58 am. As I awake, I feel the cold on my face in stark contrast to my body warmth under the quilt comforter covering my bed. I spring from my bed and dress as quickly as possible, go to the main room and start the fire in the wood stove to warm up the chalet. I look out the window at my thermometer to see it is -35C outside. It makes the temperature in here at 10C seem quite warm.

I sit down to my first cup of hot coffee and wonder why I am here in the Northern Forest of Quebec living my life with 25 Sled Dogs. What ever prompted me to make this life changing journey from a comfortable life in Brampton, Ontario, a city around 30 minutes from the largest most populated city in



Canada, Toronto to a remote, solitary life in the wilderness?

Yes, it is a stark contrast of my past life with my family, friends and interaction with my clients that I worked with in my 30 years of working for Ford Motor Company, 20 years of which in their Sales Divisions travelling through out Ontario.

Although, I had run Sled Dogs for 20 years before the move, it was in an urban setting training the dogs using a Three Wheeled Rig on country dirt roads in the evening after work. Rarely did I get to run on snow with a sled until my first 50 mile race in late January. When you don't know better, this was satisfactory and I did enjoy the peace of running dogs even in this type of surrounding. To do a training run, I had to load the dogs into my specially equipped truck and travel 30-40 minutes to my training site. On training evenings, it would be around 11pm before I came back in my house, grab a bite to eat, see the news on TV and go to bed. At best, I would get in 4 training runs a week, but for the most part 3.

I always wanted to be able to train right from my house and live in the country to facilitate this. However, it was never going to happen in Southern Ontario. The problem there with training on country roads was of course other vehicular traffic. As most of my training was done at night, this also made the training more dangerous. I always required a handler to drive the truck and make sure intersections where clear for me to pass. There was an

old abandoned railway line that I used for training with the sled. But, even here I required a handler to drive the truck to meet the team where we crossed roads. This route could give around 50 miles round trip over some very interesting terrain. At one point, the team would have to cross a 4 lane highway and other times cross elevated railroad trestles spanning deep river gorges. These trestles had open sections between the ties and no protective sides to prevent falling off. When I look back at it, I did some pretty crazy things. Most of the areas where I trained were hilly and thus preparing a very strong tough team. Most of the races I raced in where in hilly/mountainous areas. Thus my team usually finished in a very respectable position. But, I knew I could do better with a better training area. After racing in Quebec, I met several mushers there and they invited me to come up there to train one winter. Since, I had just retired from Ford Motor Company; I took Pierre Messier up on his offer and discovered the beauty of Lac Charland. The following year, I went up the assist Pierre with the training of his dogs for the complete winter from November to March. The next year, I moved too Lac Charland and rented Pierre's chalet. I then bought my own chalet and settled into living in the bush with my dogs.

So, that is how a person born in Windsor, Ontario (the southern most place in Canada) and enjoying all the benefits of urban living

moved too the forest in Northern Quebec.

Did I mention the main language there is French and I was not bilingual? C'est la vie!

## INTRODUCTION

It is said "A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES STARTS WITH THE FIRST STEP!" (Mao).

The same can be said of all life experiences including the following writings and Dog Mushing. Everything has to start sometime. I decided to lay down on paper my thoughts, opinions and observations based on information gained and experience learned. These writings are aimed at those who are contemplating on entering the world of dog mushing. The professional musher has experienced and knows most of what will be discussed. The expert will get nothing out of these writings as they already know everything!

I consider myself a student of the sport / life style. By keeping an open mind, I am always learning something new and never get bored with the subject. Working with sled dogs can be as addictive as a powerful drug. The Mushing lifestyle its adventures, the trials, tribulations, the successes, the failures, along with the joy and the depression. All of these elements and much more make up the passion of immersing yourself in the world of Dog Mushing.

## THE BEGINNING

It's all about the dogs, their loyalty, their remarkable athletic ability and electrifying enthusiasm to run.

All good mushers that I know have developed an incredible bonding with their canine family. The dogs depend on the musher to properly condition / train them. To provide the best possible nutritional program to support their athletic requirements, optimum health and well being. A kennel environment that provides a healthy and comfortable setting. Proper veterinary care when required. A mental environment that lends to happy, trusting bonding that leads to that special connection the musher has with their canine family.

If the musher provides all requirements that have been described, the dogs will give you their unquestionable loyalty and provide you with unbelievable and life altering adventures.

You could enjoy the peace and serenity of silently gliding through a forest behind your team of enthusiastic / focused dogs. A cold, bright sunny day with the bluest skies, the pines: their bows loaded with virgin white snow, birch trees covered with ice glittering like jewels with the refraction of sunshine. You are enjoying the melodic, balletic rhythm of your team, when the leader's ears perk up, the team speeds up, you round a corner and there is a beautiful Red Fox and the game of chase is on!

The fox is flying down the trail, with the team and you in hot pursuit. You round another corner and the fox has disappeared. He has jumped off to the side and silently watches as you go flying by.

Eventually the team returns to its basic pace and you continue on with your silent adventure.

## THE FUTURE OF DISTANCE RACING

The future of mid distance and long distance racing is becoming increasingly more difficult.

There are many factors that are placing pressure on the continuance of this aspect of the sport. I am talking here about races that run from one day 60 mile events to multiple day 1200 mile adventures. Consequently, the size of the kennels can range from around 20 adult dogs to over 200 dogs in order to support teams of 8 to 16 dogs. In order to sustain this size of operation, participants have to move to remote relatively unpopulated areas.

Location is very important to have access to limitless miles of wilderness training trails.

Climatic conditions required supporting the start of fall training in August/September, early and sufficient snow falls, cold enough temperatures to freeze rivers and lakes to provide safe crossings.

If you are as fortunate as me to find such a place as I did 10 years ago, you will have a beautiful remote wilderness setting where you will enjoy the beauty of the northern woods and the peace and serenity of bush life. Slowly you will become comfortable with the silence and solitude as you unknowingly immerse into the rhythm of life in the woods. Quickly you will realize your existence and well being will depend on your ability

to adapt to your self-sufficiency. Most of the creature comforts your used too are gone.

My earliest form of communication to the outside world was through RADIO ALMA, a radio phone. In order to make a call, you contact an operator through the radio (much like a C. B.). You give her the number you wish to call and she will patch your call through. As only one person can speak at a time, the operator will switch the call from one speaker to the other. For example, after one speaker finishes speaking, they say OVER and the operator will switch the call to the other speaker and so forth for the balance of the call. This must sound very primitive; however, it was better than "smoke signals". Your antenna for this type of communication is a special wire strung horizontally between two trees.

As you can well imagine there is no privacy as anybody with a similar system are privy to the transmitted communication. You can imagine, this leads to some interesting and humorous entertainment (what is said in the north stays in the north). The reliability of such a system is subject to the elements of nature and therefore not available 100% of the time. A year & a half ago this system was canceled and replaced by the satellite phone at a call cost of \$2.00 to \$3.00 per minute. Since the start of this writing the communication system has changed to satellite



internet. Within a year & a half, communication has moved from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Purchases of supplies are done on a bulk bases in order to last for about a month. For example, my closest big bulk store (Costco) is a five hour round trip, meat for the dogs is a four round trip, and my closest veterinarian is an hour & a half away, hospital an hour & a half, doctor or dentist half an hour. (Only available a few days a week) All these travel times are based on good weather. As you can imagine, you have to be well organized to ensure you do not forget anything or you go without until next month.

Luckily where I live, there is electricity (most of the time). This affords me some luxuries like refrigeration, automatic pump for water, hot water heater, electric stove and entertainment through satellite T.V. When living alone like this, your closest companions and friends are your dogs. This leads to a very close bonding with your canine family.

Even though you move to a remote setting, it does not guarantee you ideal conditions to pursue your dreams for distance racing. Environmental irregularities caused by global warming, pollution and humanity have all had an impact. Dangerous situations have occurred by human incursion into your paradise by "civilized" humans traveling at increased speeds on snow machines without concern for the environment and wildlife; let alone, a dog

team and its musher. I can not minimize the danger caused by the self centered snowmobiler that has no respect for anybody or anything. Luckily these individuals are only a small percentage of snowmobile enthusiasts. However, their incursion into the wilderness is having a grave impact on nature and its inhabitants.

Then there is the impact of the commercial lumber industry with their clear cutting and destruction of our natural resources for short term profit.

Due to the remoteness of the location, it is difficult to attract handlers, sponsors and to market mushing related goods and services.

If you are the type of person that can handle all the inconveniences, the solitude and all the hard work; then maybe, distance racing/mushing is for you. Your reward will be the beauty, peace & serenity of the northern wilderness, as well as an extremely close bonding with your canine partners.

## **EARLY TRAINING / CONDITIONING / BONDING**

I believe that all interaction with my dogs is a form of training, conditioning, or bonding.

This interaction starts out at birth. When puppies are born, at my kennel, I pick up the pups' moments after birth, gently pet them, blow lightly on their face and then place them to their mother's breast. (This is after the mother has cleaned them). This action is the foundation of the bonding process. The pups first contact with me is a positive one. The puppy associates the scent, gentleness, warmth and nurture with their mother and me. This bonding is further cemented by daily interaction with the pups and their mother.

I highly recommend a puppy pen that Joe Runyan describes in his book (Winning Strategies for Distance Mushers). This pen has a large cabin with an easy access large door at one end and a smaller access opening at the other end. This small access opening leads to a wire cage. (Wire on all sides, bottom, top and ends) The wire mesh should be small enough that the puppies can not get their feet caught, approx. 1 inch square. The pen is elevated and completely off the ground.

This type of pen offers a private, comfortable den for the mother and her pups. The wire portion gives the mother an opportunity to get a break from her brood; as well as, a place to relieve herself. The wire pen also provides a safe, clean, healthy environment for the pup's first excursion outside the den. This type of pen lends to easy clean up and as mentioned above, a healthy habitat, as the stool and urine goes through the wire bottom. This also offers easy clean up.

The pups are always clean!

## GOOD EATERS

A number of mushers complain about their dogs being either slow eaters or finicky with respect to the type of food offered. I feel most of these problems can be eliminated at weaning. From the beginning, I feed the mother in the den, this way the pups start to see their mother feeding. As they get older and more mobile they will venture over to their mother's food dish and eventually taste what she is eating. Be very careful at this stage of how the mother handles this incursion. Once the pups have sampled the mother's food, then you start feeding her in the wire pen where the pups can not bother her. At the same time, you place a low flat dish of food in the den for the pups to sample. Shortly after the mother has finished eating allow her back in the den to finish up what remains in the puppy dish.

The pups quickly learn there is a sense of urgency to eating. The pups should be totally weaned from their mother between 6 & 8 weeks of age. When feeding the pups, only dish out enough food that will be quickly devoured. When you have a good idea what the pups will easily consume, dish out enough food for one less than the total number of pups in the litter. The most aggressive pups will eat the most and the less aggressive the least. After a couple of feedings all the pups will eagerly be attacking their food in order to get their share.

In order to handle the bully, I introduce a second dish of food. At first, the bully will spend most of their time running from one dish to the other to protect his / her dominance over the food and ending up getting little to eat. He quickly learns to share. Soon there will be a bunch of eager, enthusiastic eaters.

During this period, it is important to ensure all pups get enough to eat. There is only enough food to be easily consumed and if there is any food left after the pups have fed, immediately remove the balance. I never leave food in the pen after feeding! The same procedure is used for watering. (Add some food to flavor the water) During the summer months, there should always be fresh, clean water in the pen to prevent dehydration.

By follow this procedure; I have a kennel of dogs that are all enthusiastic eaters. As a musher, it is my responsibility to know how much food each dog requires and again let me emphasis, I never leave uneaten food. I always take their dishes away after feeding or watering. I usually start at one end of the kennel to feed and then I will go around and water (the water is flavored by the left over when I clean the feeding buckets) the dogs in the same order they are fed. If a dog has not eaten their food there is the first indication of a possible problem. I can then monitor the problem and take appropriate action if required.

After I have watered the dogs, I go around and clean

up the kennel. Spending time petting and have a positive interaction with each dog as I am cleaning their area. When cleaning the kennel taking time to observe any irregularities in the stool as this is good to highlight a possible problem with an individual dog and allows me time to take appropriate action.

All interaction with the dogs is bonding, conditioning or training. In a lot of cases these actions overlap, i.e.: when conditioning the dogs in a team situation, I am also training them to respond in a certain way. Examples could be to speed up (GET UP), gee (turn right), haw (turn left), a head (passing another team, obstacle or going straight).





## THE KENNEL

Setting up the kennel should be laid out to allow socialization, safety, easy access, privacy and a healthy environment. Joe Runyan in his book describes in detail how he feels a kennel should be laid out.

It is well worth the read. Each kennel arrangement will be affected by geographic surrounding, area available and personal preference. It is not my intention to say how to set up your kennel. But, by giving you a description of mine and the reason for its layout, will stimulate your thought process to develop a kennel arrangement that suits you.

The first thing you need to do is contact your local government agency to see if you can get a kennel license and if so, what their requirements are. Remember, you can not win a fight with the governing authority! If you have approval, document and date everything. This will give you legal leverage if you have any future problems.

As I live alone, it is important for me to arrange my kennel to be efficient as possible. In my area, I am allowed to have a maximum of 35 dogs. My personal preference is to have a maximum of 20 dogs. So in order to give me some flexibility, I have set up my kennel to handle 24 dogs. By giving myself a little extra space, I have spare homes. If for example, a dog breaks a

chain, I can safely place the dog in a spare spot while you repair the faulty equipment. In my kennel, I have a wide center isle so I can safely hook up my dogs in the middle of my facility. On either side of this isle, I laid out two rows of housing. My dogs are tethered on chains that mounted on metal pins that can swivel 360 degrees at the top. The pins are spaced close enough to allow socialization, however, far enough apart that the dogs can not be in physical contact with any part of their neighbors anatomy. This helps prevent injuries and an unwanted breeding. Pins that swivel at the top, allows for easy exercise and prevents the chain from being dragged through the stool and dirt.

As I prefer to harness my dogs and attach them directly to the gangline, it is important to have enough space between dogs in the first row to pass safely when bringing dogs out from the second row. I prefer to have my males on one side and the females on the other side. Again this helps prevent unwanted breeding.

Housing is a personal preference; however, it should be big enough to comfortably house the dog, but small enough to easily keep your dogs warm in the winter. I prefer some type of venting in the bottom to let the moisture out. It is important to construct your houses out of a non-toxic material - dogs love to chew!

Bedding is also personal preference. Some Mushers use straw, others wood chips. Here again remember dogs love to chew, so don't use cloth or other synthetic materials that a dog could ingest and get lodged in their internal organs. This could be the cause severe health problems or death. It is important to change wet bedding often, as wet bedding is worse than no bedding for the health and well being of your dogs.

Place your dogs next to compatible neighbors. Remember, each dog has a personality of their own. Tension between neighbors leads to an unhealthy mental atmosphere in your kennel.

As you can clearly see, you have to put some thought into your kennel layout.

Finally, your kennel base should be a material that allows good drainage so you can keep your dogs on dry ground as much as possible. It is important that it gets some sunlight as well as shade. My kennel is cut out of a pine forest; it allows sunshine on one side in the morning and shade in the afternoon. I am located on a lake, for privacy my kennel is hidden from view on the lake side as well as being hidden from view by the access road on the other side, by the forest.

Forbid anybody from entering your kennel without your permission and supervision!





## **CHOOSING THE TYPE OF DOGS THAT SUITS YOU BEST**

A good friend of mine has been mushing / racing dogs for well over 30 years. As you can well imagine he has a lot of knowledge and experience with sled dogs. His racing preference was with open class speed events. A couple of years ago , he had the opportunity to obtain a litter of pups from a top professional breeder in western Canada . These dogs were bred for high

attitude, durability and speed. My friend always enjoyed fast well disciplined teams. Well what a surprise this litter turned out to be. In the kennel or loose around the dog truck, they are the most pleasant, amicable animals you can find. They stay close to him and come when called. However, when you chain the dogs to the truck, bring out the sled and harnesses; they start to go into another dimension. When you start to hook them up, they go into orbit. Each dog is feeding off the frenzy of the others excitement. You better not have any weakness in the equipment or it will be surely broken. When he pulls the hook, he is catapulted off on a truly fast / exciting ride.

As I mentioned earlier, my friend likes easy handling controllable dogs at hook up. Although, he loves his dogs, enjoys their runs, he certainly does not look forward to hooking them up. These are not bad dogs; they are a perfect product of their breeding. As I mentioned earlier, they were bred for high attitude, durability and speed.

The reason for this example is to make you think about what type of team you want. The type of dogs you have should be breed to perform the type of mushing you wish to do; as well as, fit with your personality. Interaction with your dogs should be a pleasure not dreaded.

I am not going to spend a great deal of time on genetics of breeding ; but, refer you to read books written by Rick Swenson

( The Secrets of Long Distance Training & Racing ) , Jim Welch ( The Speed Mushing Manual ) , Joe Runyan ( Winning Strategies for Distance Mushers ) and George Attla ( Everything I Know About Training and Racing Sled Dogs ). These books contain a wealth of knowledge on the subject and much more. They are all well worth the read.

You can save yourself a lot of time and money by thoroughly researching the type of dogs you want before you start your kennel. Go visit other kennels, talk to other mushers, listen to what they have to say and observe their dogs. Read as many books on the subject as possible. Have a clear view of what you want to do before you jump into the abyss of dog mushing.

The romanticism and those perfect rides are only a small percentage of the time spent with your canine partners. Sled dogs are not like snow mobiles that you put away at the end of the season, they are a 365 day a year responsibility . Healthy, well cared for sled dogs can live for over 12 years. After reading everything you can find, if possible go out and work with an established musher and learn as much as you can.

Now it is time to start your own kennel.

Breeding should not be taken lightly; it is a big responsibility, as it is your desire alone to bring pups into this world. Far too many animals are destroyed due to irresponsible actions of humans.

My first suggestion is purchase a couple of good line breed dogs that suit your personality and needs. Line breeding are dogs that are related to each other (aunt/nephew, dogs related on one side of parents but unrelated on the other side), inbreeding are dogs that are closely related to each other (brother/sister, father/daughter, etc.) and out breeding (two totally unrelated dogs). The reasons for line breeding is ensure the continuance of certain desirable traits. The dangers of in breeding are that it magnifies the good traits as well as magnifying the bad traits. There is usually some good older line bred dogs available for a reasonable price. Your first purchase should be a good retired leader; this action will make your life so much easier. Be methodical and selective when building your team. Stay small until you gain experience and you are positive you desire to pursue mushing at the next level.

So now you have a kennel of dogs suited to you and your planned activities. Your first lesson in dog physiology is to understand a dogs thought process is relatively simple, they are pack animals and the first thing you have to do is install yourself as the leader of the pack. You have to gain their trust and respect.

A lot of this is developed by daily interaction with your canine comrades through feeding, cleaning and playing with them.



If you want to start training your dogs in the fall, I would suggest you round up your team in the spring for you to develop the pack order. Through observation you will discover the pack pecking order of your kennel. This is very important when you go to layout your team. For example, if you are training a young dog for lead, do not hook it up with a leader it is not compatible with. If its first experience is not a positive one that negative experience will be imprinted in the dog and may never be reversed.

Sometimes a negative experience can have a positive result. Where I used to live all my training was done on country roads a half hour trip from my house in Brampton a city close to Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I was working with a young female that I just acquired and I was trying her at lead. A little over half way through my run, a car ran a STOP SIGN on a snow covered road and hit a glancing blow off Toad. I quickly ran to the front of the team only to find her unconscious. I cradled her in my arms petted her and spoke softly to her. Shortly, she regained consciousness, looked me in the eyes and miraculously sprang to her feet and stretched out the team. After I thoroughly examined her and found no injuries, she eagerly led the team home. Toad ended up being my main leader until her racing retirement at the age of 11 years. She was totally dedicated to me and saved my life several times. One instance was on the last

leg of a 60 mile race, we were returning on an overcast night and my headlight failed (always carry a spare at the ready). I could not see a the trail markers or the trail; but, I did know that part of it traversed and ran along side a river that had some open water sections. Toad negotiated this dangerous section and leads us to the finish line without any problems. That is the type of trust and bonding that can take place -- Toad will always have a place in my heart.

However, all too often a bad experience to a young dog results in a negative imprint that can remain for life. You are going to make some mistakes, we all have. But, if you put some thought into your runs before, you can avoid most of them.

All dogs have a personality of their own even though they have a common desire to run. Some are shy, others are outgoing, overly friendly, stand offish, overly eager, domineering and so forth. As you can imagine some pairings would definitely be a mistake and need to be avoided especially early in the season and before a start of a training run. If a dog has a tendency to cause a problem, then hook it up last. Know your dogs and use your head and you can avoid most of silly mistakes we tend to make.

Your dogs are very sensitive to picking up on your various moods. If you had a bad day and you are angry or upset, do not go out and run your dogs. At least, not until you have settled down and returned to normal. If you are happy - they will be happy,

etc. In longer races mood changes are quite common, it is your responsibility to learn to mask your feelings and keep a positive upbeat attitude for your team. Try to remember that every experience with your dogs is a treasure and a privilege. How you handle your toughest experiences will reflect in the results in character development of your team and you.

If dog mushing was easy everybody could do it!



## **TRAINING / CONDITIONING / FEEDING**

Dogs do not make mistakes; they are a product of our training!

If a dog does not respond as I desire, then I have not communicated to him what it is I expected. They want to please you. Dogs thought process is not complicated; therefore keep the training simple. Starting with simple tasks I slowly build to the more complex.

I get very upset with people that blame their dogs for poor performance in races. At the same time, these people take all the glory for any success experienced. If you experience any problems with response of the team in training or racing, the person responsible is the person you see in the mirror!

We get the team we deserve!

Training dogs to perform a task, I break the task into several simple steps. Set the stage to ensure success and make the experience a fun / positive one for the dogs as well as myself.

I hope by now, you are getting to realize, you have to put thought into everything you do with your dogs before, during and after a training exercise.

For example when harness breaking pups, I had one that

did not understand what was expected. She just lay down and did not want to go. Instead of giving up on Star, since her siblings looked terrific, I calmly removed her from the team and then set up a one-on-one training program for her. I started off by walking her on a leash. At first she tugged against the leash and then eventually she started to follow me. Before long she graduated from walking along side me to in front and finally she started pulling forward. While I was going through this training process, I would stop, sit and contemplate the beauty of nature around me. By doing this, Star and I where starting to develop a special bonding. We progressed to walking on leash with a harness on her. When she got used to the harness, I introduced a second leash to the back of the harness. The first time I returned her to the team, her performance was medium (sometimes she would perform great and at times she would not pull). She was still unsure of what was expected and a little insecure with her role in the team. Next, I ran her with experienced dogs that were top performers. She got the message, now she is one of the best dogs on the team. I now train other young insecure dogs next to her and they are now excelling like her. It is my intention to introduce her to lead; she is now showing the ability and confidence to get a shot at that position.

By taking the time and having patience with Star, I have been rewarded with a well trained, confident dog that is devoted to me. She could be my next top leader.

When I harness break my pups, I go very slowly to not scare the pups. Also the pups get to watch the adults running all winter training out of the kennel. I prefer to start training my pups in the spring when I have more time to devote to them.

Aurora, my current leader (a Toad granddaughter) was just the opposite of Star. She is an alpha female, loaded with confidence, which at the age of 6 months was running lead (next to Toad) in training with her siblings. She is a natural born leader and has no desire to run anywhere but lead. However, in order for her to succeed in reaching her full potential, I had to spend a lot of time with her and kept the training simple, slowly building to the more complex. You have to be very careful with a dog like Aurora not to over tax her with demands too early. It is easier to ruin a great dog than an average dog. You have to be more patient with a dog like her and not expect too much of them too soon.

Before Aurora was a year old, I was taking her, an experienced leader and six of her siblings out on a short training run. The run was to take us across a snow covered lake to a loop on the other side and return. Around half way across the lake, the older leader decided to turn the team around and head back. Due to poor snow conditions on the lake (could not set a hook) and

too large a team for the conditions, I could not prevent the team from going back to the kennel. After unhooking the team, I was sitting in the tack room kicking myself in the ass for making the mistake of taking out too large a team to control for the conditions. An experienced musher was sitting in the room with me and all he had to say was "dog one: musher zero ". I then went back out, hooked up the older leader and Aurora to the sled and set out across the lake. At the same place the older leader started to turn the team around. This time, I was prepared, I grabbed the leaders neckline and on foot led them across the lake and then let them pull the sled and me back to the kennel.

Upon returning to the kennel, I made a big fuss over them to show my approval of their efforts.

I had to establish myself as the leader of the pack. This ended up being a positive experience for the leaders and re-established my control. Aurora has turned out to be my best gee / haw leader to date.

If I had not been patient and not gone out with a plan, Aurora would have been taught the wrong message and may not have turned out to be the great leader she became.

It is important to only take out a team the size you feel comfortable with and have control over. Fall training with an ATV (All Terrain Vehicle) offers me good control. With an ATV I can



control the speed of the team, as well as having good braking. By locking off the brakes, I can leave the machine to go up and interact with my dogs.

One of the biggest mistakes made in the fall is going too fast, too soon with too large a team. Dogs injured at the start of the season may never properly heel or will be behind in their training for the balance of the season. There is also the psychological impact of the injury. For example, if I was going down a hill too fast and a dog stumbles on uneven ground then gets injured, I can make a bet that dog is not going to give 100% the next time faced with the same situation. I would now have a big job to regain that dog's confidence in me. If that dog is reluctant to run down a hill, this attitude will spill over to its team mates. I "START SLOWLY ", there will be plenty of times later on in the season for fast, exciting runs.

Fall training is for conditioning the dogs, building up their muscles to protect their joints from injury. Jim Welsh in his book spends a lot of time explaining how to condition and train your dogs so they can reach their running potential. "THE SPEED MUSHING MANUAL "by Jim Welsh is a must read. I personally reread his book every season and use it for reference throughout the mushing year.

Where I live my first training loop gives me a four mile run. So in order to handle this length of run, I use the motor on the

ATV (through compression) to slow the dogs down with a consistent resistance. I run for two minutes and then stop the team and rest for two minutes. This schedule is followed for the balance of the run. As the teams conditioning improves, the length of time for the run increases (i.e., 3/2, 4/2, 6/2, etc.) as well as the miles covered on each run. By monitoring the attitude of my dogs (before, during and after) on each run, I decide when to go to the next level. I document each run highlighting the temperature (start & finish), miles covered, run/rest schedule and team layout (who ran where and with whom). Through a rotation program every dog gets the opportunity to run at each position in the team, right or left side and with different team mates. Through systematic planning and observation, I am better equipped to lay out my team to obtain the best performance out of my canine athletes.

One of the priorities of my breeding program is to produce leaders; therefore, in training I am running different leaders on each run. My runs are done without pressure making the experience fun and positive. By using this type of run / rest program, I calm the team down and get control. Calming the dogs down does not happen right away, it will take time and patience. When I stop my dogs, sometimes I will go up and pet the dogs too calm them. Other times, I will sit on the ATV and just wait until the team calms down before I continue the run. It is reassuring

and a pleasure to have a controllable team, when you are on the sled, you can go up and clear a trail if necessary without having to worry about the team popping a snow hook and then losing your team. I always carry two snow hooks and always set both hooks on one side of the sled. I use the other side of my team to do any work off the sled. This way I prevent the possibility of injury to myself if the hooks pop and I can concentrate on grabbing the sled as it approaches not having to worry about being gored by a bouncing snow hook.

Be careful not to over heat the dogs. I never train if the temperature is over 50 degrees Fahrenheit at the start of a training run. I carry water to cool the dogs down and provide ample rest time. In my case I usually train in early morning, as it is cooler in August and September.

On each run, I have an objective before I go out. It might be to try a different pair of dogs at lead etc.. I always keep flexibility in my schedule to handle unforeseen situations if they arise. The health and welfare of my team is always first, everything else is secondary.

Dogs learn through repetition, so it is important for me to be consistent when I am out training my dogs. For example; when I am training and they are going into a turn they do on every run, I will always call out the command to gee or haw whichever the case. The more time I spend behind my team in training, the more

I will learn about my dogs and the better a musher I will become. Eventually musher and dogs will become one unit -- a team.

If I am planning on running Mid to Long Distance Races , my goal is to get a 1,000 miles of training on my team by the end of December . This sounds like a big task, however, if I break it down to number of miles / month it becomes easier to fathom. Due to temperature fluctuations in August & September, I like to combine the two months together for my first objective of 100 miles. In October my objective is 200 miles, November 300 miles and December 400 miles. In the early stages, speed is not one of my priorities, it is conditioning and training the dogs to get used to the team concept and having fun. My training schedule provides ample rest days to provide recovery time. Conditioning tears muscles down and recovery time allows the muscles to rebuild stronger. I usually keep an eye on long term weather forecasts, so I can plan my scheduled training runs. I keep some flexibility in my training program to handle poor weather conditions.

As I said earlier, my objective is to have 1,000 training miles on my team by the end of December, that is my objective and I don't necessarily accomplish this due to unforeseen obstacles. But, if I follow a plan, I will come pretty close to hitting my objective.

Have fun on your training runs, your dogs will enjoy their

time on the trail with you. I have found that I am more relaxed and have observed my dogs don't go through a sour stage as accumulative mileage increases. By setting out a plan and following my schedule I place little pressure on my dogs and they look forward to their training time with me.

Jim Welsh, in his book, does a great job dealing with basic pace, interval training, negative split times and speed training. Please read his book, as it explains how to accomplish these different tasks expertly. If you are serious about producing the best team you can, then his book is a must read.

January and February, my training is to prepare me and my team for the upcoming races that I am planning to attend. My training runs include runs equal to the different stage lengths the team is going to encounter. If I am going to be camping on the trail, then do the same in training. I get my dogs used to snacking on the trail, working with booties, using my racing sled, in other words train my dogs and myself to handle the same situations I am going to experience at the race. The more comfortable my dogs and I are with the routines of a race, the more relaxed we will be. In January & February my runs will be longer and thus the frequency of the runs will be less. This gives me more time to play with my dogs and keep their attitude high.

## "HAPPY DOGS LOVE TO RUN "



I like to do my first worming in August and if possible get the required vaccinations out of the way in August as well. I usually like to worm again in December. Your worming schedule should be determined on exposure to contamination. I feel it is important to worm all my dogs at the same time. Also it is not a good practice to worm dogs before a race. I also worm the dogs again in the spring after the racing season.

My nutritional program will be based on what type of food is available in my area and what I can afford. If I were to have

too many dogs to feed properly - then I have too many dogs! I have to cut the size of my kennel. It is in the best interest of my dogs.

I am lucky in my area to have a steady supply of good, high quality meat as a base for my nutritional program. My supplier dedicates himself to producing meat mixes designed for sled dogs. In his "super mix ", it consists of beef, chicken, salmon, liver, tripe and eggs; all mixed to a specific percentage of each ingredient and with a high quality of consistency. I can also purchase salmon, tripe, chicken, beef and liver separately for my trail snacks. Everything is frozen in 40 pound blocks. I use a good quality dry food with a minimum of 30% protein and 20 % fat ratio. I also have beaver and mink available for special snacks. I also purchase lard so I can adjust the fat requirements of the team depending on workload and temperature. Dogs need good quality protein for muscles, liver for red blood cells and fat for energy. I mix my dry food, meat mix together with water for my daily feeding. If I use lard, I render it for easy mixing. I clean my feeding buckets with hot water and then use that mixture for watering my dogs -- nothing goes to waist.

I always reward my dogs with a snack at the end of each run. The team is still hooked up when snacked and this also gets them used to eating with their team mates. I then unharness my dogs, but still leave them hooked up in the gang line. Then they

are let loose and they run free back to the kennel. When I call the individual dogs, they come to me to hook them up to their respective cabins. If a dog doesn't come when called, he or she is returned directly to their house after the next run. Then the rest of the team is let free to run. The offender quickly learns to respond when called to earn back their privileges.

My team knows they are required to work when in harness knowing full well there are rewards at the end of the run. Snacking on the trail is also a reward and a break during the longer runs.

I find it is more difficult for me to keep motivated in January / February. The daylight hours are shorter. The weather is more adverse with temperatures in the minus twenties/ thirties, high winds and greater snow accumulation. I find it is very easy to find an excuse not to train. There are no personal sport psychologists to work with me to keep me motivated and on my schedule. Being alone, I am responsible for training, feeding and the health / well-being of my dogs. I am also responsible for up keep of my living quarters, laundry, getting supplies for the dogs and myself. For many years my main source of heating in the chalet was burning wood. If I want to eat, I have to prepare balanced, healthy meals for myself. I am not a believer in frozen dinners, although I have been known to eat a few.

It is very important for me not to break with my schedule,



so I usually set up the next run the day before. My sled will be lined up and packed ready to go. After feeding the dogs, I will if necessary prepare / groom the trail for the next days run. I will sit down and on paper layout my team for the next day as well as map out the trail to be covered. This way, the next morning I just have to take breakfast, a cup of coffee and head out to train. It is a real no brainier. This is one the times too much thinking can be a disadvantage.

One of the biggest problems of being able to train right out of your location is the dogs do not get used to traveling in the truck. This is one of my faults and I need to force myself to travel with the dogs before going to the races. This can be made easier if I keep the kennel size down to what can be carried in the truck.

If you want to live alone, isolated from the outside world, you had better be comfortable in your ability to handle the isolation. You have to be a self motivated person and totally dedicated to this type of lifestyle. It is worth noting to be cautious with your interactions with people from the outside. Although some profess to be your friend, they are jealous of your independence /lifestyle and subtly plant the seeds of doubt to through you off track, hoping you will get discouraged and ultimately have you fail in your pursuits.

Remember most of the time these people don't have a life

and can only justify their existence by destroying yours. Be strong and you will be rewarded with self-satisfaction.

If you are diligent, methodical and serious enough to follow out on your training / conditioning schedule and make it fun for both your dogs and you, you will be rewarded a good team and many miles of pleasure traveling with your dogs .

You don't have to go to a race to be a winner!

## RACING

Racing is not the end all / be all to me. The benefits of racing to me is the adventures experienced dealing with the unknown, interaction / comradely with other mushers, traveling with my dogs, meeting new people ( spectators, race volunteers / organizers, enthusiasts and host families that take you into their homes ). My biggest competition is myself. In a race I get the opportunity to evaluate myself and the effectiveness of my training, breeding and nutritional programs in a foreign environment. I measure myself on how I handle the unexpected challenges.

Racing is for the musher, the dogs don't give a rat's ass if it is racing or training, their enjoyment is in running and being with you on the trail. Dogs enjoy running on new trails, seeing other dogs, the electrifying atmosphere and the quality time spent traveling with you. They spend more time with you and have your undivided attention. I look at racing as a vacation from training.

If you are looking at racing sled dogs to provide you with fame and fortune, you are in it for the wrong reasons and you will more than likely have no longevity in the sport. In a race only one team can finish first! Don't get me wrong, if you enjoy the competition of racing and you enjoy the experience, the more

power to you. Just remember the results, in most cases, of your performance is a measure of your training / dedication in preparing your team. If your dogs give you their best, you have to go away satisfied.

It is my view that many racers are over estimating the importance of an individual dogs speed. Remember, a team can only go as fast as your slowest dog. If you have a team of dogs that are comfortable traveling at the same speed with a smooth gait, that team can beat teams with some faster individual dogs but they don't work together as a balanced unit. (musher error)

I am not against racing per say. What I am against is the totally performance minded individuals that value only dogs on winning teams in races. These narrow minded individuals don't take in account other factors that have a major influence on a teams finishing position. Let's take in consideration; the age and physical limitations of the musher, etc. The weakest link in a dog team is the musher, both physically and mentally. We as mushers have to be realistic in our expectations of ourselves and our influence on the team's performance. As an example in my sixties, I am not as physically capable as a person in their twenties, thirties, forties or fifties that are competing in the same race as me. The training of my team will be different, as I have to train my team to compensate for my short falls. That is just a fact of life!

The greatest thing about the sport of sled dog racing is there are no restrictions on age, gender, race and acceptance of most physical disabilities. The only prerequisite is the musher is capable of ensuring health and well being of his / her dogs.

I also know of and heard of mushers that do not race that produce some fabulous dogs and teams.

The unfortunate attitude of some individuals, that are "result oriented only", on their selection of dogs, is that a lot of good dogs and breeding go unrecognized. Usually these individuals are all talk and no action. They rarely produce or assist in producing good dogs or improvement in genetics of the dogs.

If they enter races, their teams are usually purchased from last years winners and on their own over several seasons have little success at the races. Their lack of success is blamed on the dogs and / or the musher that sold the dogs to them. It is interesting these same dogs were winning races before they purchased them. Is there a possibility that the performance results of these teams is not a dog problem?

The "coffee club mushers" have an opinion on everything. You know what is said "opinions are like assholes everybody has one ". Needless to say these individuals will never put in the work or dedication it takes to compete in the big races. Just

remember, for all their talk, you will never see them in the Starting Chute. Therefore when you are in the Starting Chute with your team and you hear the count down to start ----- YOU ARE A WINNER!

## PREPARATION FOR RACES --- BEFORE, DURING & AFTER

After I have done the conditioning, training and now I have to decide which races I want to attend. Now is the time to sit down and think of what I have to do to prepare myself to go to the race. I find advanced planning takes more of the pressure and anxiety off me for traveling with my dogs.

For example, when I stop and have to drop the dogs on my trip.

Other examples:

The first thing is your truck ready for the trip?

Is it mechanically ready?

Are the dogs quarters in place?

Is your stake out system adequate and installed?

Remember to make everything as simple as possible. Will this task be quick and efficient? ("DROP DOGS" is an expression meaning to let your dogs out of the truck to stretch and relieve themselves -- not to physically drop them) Do I have a "pooper scooper" and a bag to put the stool in?

It is essential for good public relations to leave the area where you do your dog drop, to be left clean as it was before you arrived. Remember you need to be a good ambassador of the sport.

Make a check list to cover everything required for your trip: required equipment for the race, vaccination certificates, food for your dogs, your harness, gang lines, snow hook, sled, etc. If you are going to have to cross a border to another country, what food is allowed and what are the vaccination requirements. Whatever can be pack ahead of time, I do so. I always put my vaccination certificates in the glove box of the truck when I get them. That way I never forget them.

In longer races there are going to be food / equipment drops at the different check points in the race. I prepare the drop bags with what ever I can before leaving the kennel. When traveling with meat, I have the proportions prepared before leaving.

With the use of a list and advanced planning, it will make the trip easier and more relaxing. I have known racers that have arrived at race sites and forgotten to load a dog or a sled. Don't laugh, it has happened.

I travel with a pick-up truck (4 x 4) with an eight foot box. I am using a contractors, insulated aluminum cap mounted on the pickup truck box. The cap gives me a seven foot head clearance from the truck box floor, over cab storage and double rear doors. My dog quarters are constructed of plywood. There is four sections 8 feet x 2 feet x 2 feet and each section has 4 compartments. Each compartment has a steel door with



horizontal bars spaced at 2 inch intervals. This type of door allows for easy loading and lots of ventilation for the dogs. The top and bottom sections are attached together after installing. This system leaves a center isle for passage and loading the dogs. The front overhang I use for storing my meat and dry food for the dogs. On one side of the box, I store my equipment and on the other side store my sled. This system keeps the dogs, sleds and equipment clean, dry and private. I don't have to worry about messy roads or bad weather. The box has overhead interior lighting for working at night. When at a race site, the dogs are able to rest. This is a great place for me to change into / out of my racing cloths; as well as, a place to escape the normal race pandemonium happening outside.

My travel bars are hinged at the ends to extend the bars 4 feet past the side of the truck when opened. These bars are attached to the frame of the truck at the front and the back. I find this type of system allows for easy extension of the bars and they don't freeze up (unlike the telescopic bars). When the bars are extended, I attach a main chain extending on the travel bars from the front to the back of the truck. On this main chain are attached dog drop chains on a swivel system. This system help prevent the side of the truck from getting scratched; as well as, keeping the dogs clean (having them away from the side of the truck).

When loading the dogs, there is no high lifting and this helps prevent injuries to dogs that jump out of their compartments, as can be experienced with outside doors on some dog boxes.

Another advantage of using contractor box system is its flexibility. In the summer, I remove the two sections on one side and this leaves me around 4 feet of load space and still leaving me room for carrying up to eight dogs if necessary in the off season.

It doesn't matter what type of dog carrying system you use, that is a personal preference. I have found this system works well for me and I have used all the other types with the exception of trailers.

So now your dogs, equipment, food are loaded, you're gassed up and ready to go to the race.

HAVE FUN!

## **EQUIPMENT**

There is a proliferation of equipment available today. From harnesses, collars, gang lines, booties, dog coats, shoulder warmers, wrist wraps, snow hooks, sleds, sled runner systems and clothing for mushers. A great number of these products are specially designed for different aspects of the sport, terrain, weather conditions etc...

Here again it is important to sit down and think, what equipment best suits the needs for my type of mushing and my finances. It is not my intention here to tell you what to buy. But to try to offer you information on the different types of product available and to encourage you to obtain more information on these products by contacting the manufactures and discuss how their products can best suit your needs. Luckily for the consumers today, the mushing products offered have been field tested and are of high quality.

### **COLLARS**

For sled dogs there are three main types of collars. All three should be made of nylon webbing as they don't stay wet and when dried don't crack like leather would. This type of material is durable and relatively inexpensive. All collars should be equipped

with a metal ring for hooking the dog to the neck line on the gangline and the stakeout chain. I like my rings to be one inch & a half in diameter and around 5/16 inch thick with a welded joint. I have found these rings to be strong and easy to be attach a snap even with an enthusiastic dog.

The first type of collar is buckle collar, it looks like a belt. It has a buckle at one end and the other end has punched eyelets for sizing.

The second type is a limited slip collar. This type has a limited slip / slide set up to allow the collar to easily slip over the dogs head when putting it on the dog. When the dog adds resistance to the collar it slides smaller to fit closer to the dogs neck to prevent the dog slipping out of the collar. It is important that the collar is not too tight to choke the dog when tightened, but not to big to let the dog back out of the collar.

The third type is the adjustable collar. This type has a metal slide built in to allow for adjusting the collar, on the dog, for a comfortable / secure fit.

The buckle and adjustable collars simplifies the sizing problem, as one size fits all. It also simplifies the purchasing knowing that one size collar will fit any dog in your kennel including puppies when you put them on the stakeout chains. (I NEVER PLACE COLLARS ON PUPPIES WHEN THEIR IN THE PUPPY PEN AS THEY COULD CHEW OR POSSIBLY EAT A

COLLAR OFF ANOTHER PUP) As the puppy grows, I can adjust the collar to fit.

My preference is the adjustable collar for its flexibility of sizing as well as security.

"I never use a choke collar on my sled dogs! "Choke collars are used only for obedience training and should never be left on an unattended dog to prevent strangulation.

I currently would not recommend using collars that use plastic instead of metal hardware as they can break a lot easier than metal.

So there are, in my estimation, the choices.

## **HARNESSES**

There is a wide choice of harnesses available today. All are made of nylon webbing and that is where the similarity ends. Harnesses today are designed for racing / pulling requirements, hitching style and weather conditions.

The most important aspect of any harness is how it fit's the dog. Like humans, dogs come in all different sizes, structures and shapes. It is worth noting that the harness is to fit the body of the dog when pulling. Therefore if I have a heavy coated dog, I make sure the harness fit's the body of the dog under his /her coat.

At the front of the harness, the collar area should fit on the back of the neck of the dog at the top the neck opening and just in front of breast bone at the bottom. The fit should be snug but not too tight to choke the dog along with not being too loose as to slide on the dogs shoulders. The length of the breast plate should be of sufficient size so the webbing, where it separates into the side straps, don't interfere with the rang of motion of the front legs. The side straps should not compress the ribs of the dog when pulling. The top and back of the harness should not cause undo pressure on the dog's spine nor the base of its hips

I feel the fitting of the harness is very important as to allow your dog to perform properly when pulling in harness. A poorly fitted harness is one of the most common problems hampering the performance of teams in races.

All harnesses come with a protective padding to add comfort and prevent injuries to the dog while pulling. The most common type of padding today is polar fleece.

The thickness of the padding can vary, too thin doesn't protect the dog from stress of the webbing and too thick restricts the dog's movement. If you are training in a more humid / wet climate, then the water resistant fleece would be worth the added expense.

Another type of padding is closed cell foam with a nylon rip stop covering. This type of material is the ultimate in water proof padding.

Fleece and foam /nylon padding have varying degrees of flexibility in extreme cold temperatures. It is your choice to pick a padding that best suits your climatic requirements. I have found that the fleece lasts longer, as the nylon covering tends to crack with age. Maybe with the advance in technology this problem has been rectified. It is a question worth asking when dealing with the harness supplier.

The length of the padding on the harness can be from just around the front opening to the separation of the side straps to the end of the harness. (X back & H back styles) The length of the padding required will depend on the length of time the dog is in harness, the distance of the run and the amount of pulling required. For example dogs in a sprint /speed race won't require as much padding as a dog in a longer race.

There are two commonly used harness styles in use today - the X back and the H back. Looking at these two harnesses from the top, paying attention to the back straps, the reason for the naming becomes obvious. The H back harness is more commonly used in longer distance racing where a faster trotting pace is more preferable. A trotting dog places less impact on the dogs shoulders than a loping dog and it is thus

believed a trotting dog is less prone to injuries. The main reason for the H back is the back stapes run along the side of the dogs spine and thus takes pressure of the dogs spine and back helping to prevent fatigue and injuries that could occur over longer distances traveled.

This style of harness requires a dog that pulls straight and doesn't crab to be the most effective. (Crabbing is when the dogs shoulder is closer to the gangline than the hips when pulling)

The X back harness was designed to utilize the energy in the power stroke of a loping dog. The theory is the energy developed from the back when the dog is loping is not lost, but transferred through the harness to the tugline. This style of harness is used in both speed and longer distance races. To minimize the problems of crabbing the X back is made with a slider in the center and thus allowing more lateral movement and minimizing the affects of the pull of crabbing on the tugline .

A dog that is crabbing is not as efficient as a dog that doesn't crab. This problem can sometimes be corrected by running the dog on the other side of the gangline. I also check to make sure the harness fits properly. Some dogs that crab only do it at certain speeds. Crabbing is not a desirable trait, but it is not a game breaker; it is important to evaluate the overall performance, reliability, durability and desire of the dog to perform. To date GOD has not developed the "perfect dog "!



Back to harnesses, whether the preference of X back or H back that is a personal preference; however, no matter what the size they should all measure 33 inches from the shoulder to the end of the tug loop. This is to facilitate a standard measurement in the gangline. As an example, a small harness will have a longer tug loop than a large harness. Later when we discuss the make up of the gangline, the reason for this measurement will become clear.

Now days, you have the choice of a regular front opening of the harness or a collar front opening. The principle reason for the collar harness is to place less stress on the breast bone and the shoulders of the dog thusly relieving fatigue. Here too, it is a personal preference.

There are new style harnesses being developed all the time i.e. the harnesses by Jeff King & Mitch Seavey (both of Iditarod fame).

## Seavey Harness



King Harness



Harness styles are constantly evolving to provide efficiency and comfort for the dog. However, one thing that is consistent, whether it is X back, H back or collar, all harnesses have to fit properly. Take time to discuss the fit with your harness supplier, your dogs will thank you for it.



Collared Neck X-Back

X-Back

H-Back



Padding:  
Neck + Breast bone + Side straps

Full

Neck + Breast bone

## GANGLINES

There are three main styles of ganglines: single file, fan hitch and tandem hitch. The first two style hitches were designed for specific needs / requirements.

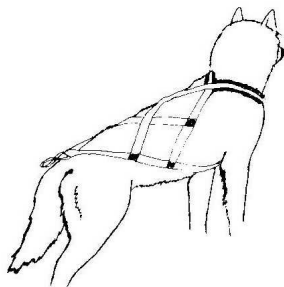
The fan hitch was the gangline of choice in the Arctic. Because most of the terrain was relatively flat and a good percentage of it was ice, this type of hitch was designed to spread the weight and lessen the impact on the team if a dog fell through the ice. There are no necklines with this type of hitch and all the lines run directly from the dogs to the sled (Komatic).

The single file hitch was the hitch of preference of the voyageur for hauling freight. By running dogs single file was easier to transverse any terrain from wide lakes, narrow bush trails and negotiating narrow mountain paths.

The tandem hitch is the most commonly used gangline today; recreation, speed and distance racing. With this type of hitch the dogs run in pairs. Each dog has a neckline securing it to the gangline, the tugline is attached to the rear tug loop of the harness and from there to the gangline.

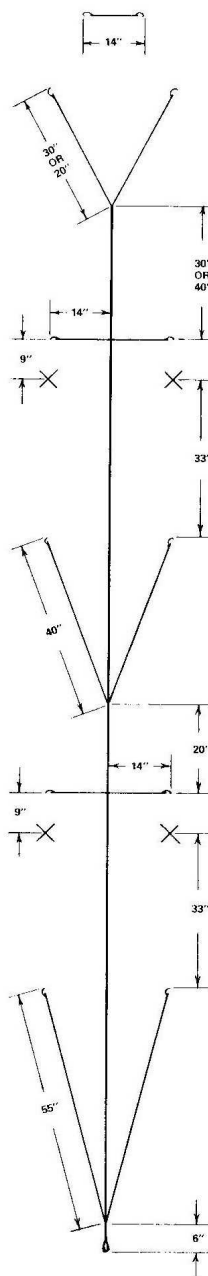
The illustration here shows how the tandem gangline should look; as well as, a good standard measurement for making up the lines. This illustration was originally printed in George Attla's book 'Everything I Know About Training And Racing Sled

Dogs".



FISHBACK HARNESS

DOUBLE NECKLINE



GEORGE'S TOWLINE



Notice the measurements are based on a standard harness length of 33 inches. These measurements are still commonly used today, although some mushers have slightly altered the lengths of the necklines and tuglines to suit their preferences. It is important to ensure that the altered measurements are not too tight to choke the dog nor too long to allow the dog to get tripped up in the neckline nor the tugline be too loose not to allow the dog to pull.

Ganglines today are made of polyethylene rope, Spectra rope or coated cable lines. Each type of material has its advantages and disadvantages. Starting with polyethylene rope: its main advantage is it is light, easy to work with when splicing and relatively inexpensive. With the use of fids (metal or plastic needles tapered at one end and hollow opening at the other end) one can quickly learn how to splice ganglines. With this knowledge, it is easy to repair chewed necklines and broken or worn tuglines. These lines don't retain moisture and therefore dry quickly when wet. The main disadvantage is its strength. To compensate for strength some gangline manufacturers run metal cable through the hollow poly rope.

Cable lines are stronger than polyethylene rope; but, require a crimping tool and plastic spacers to attach the necklines and tuglines to the gangline. These spacers are

designed to spin on the gangline to help prevent tangled neck & tug lines. With the use of metal cable for the necklines, this prevents the dog from chewing through the line. The tuglines are made of poly rope. To ensure the proper crimping and assembly, these lines should be made by professionals. There are several disadvantages of the metal cable lines: they are not easy to repair and if the neck lines start to fray, they leave sharp wires ends exposed. Wire fatigue at the crimping area can cause unexpected breaks. It is no fun to see a 10 dog team taking off and running free from the sled, as I have had happen. Luckily for me, my lead dog turned the team to return to me when I called her. These lines are less flexible and if a dog gets tangled in a cable line it can cause serious damage to the dog. It is important to always carry metal cable cutters when using this type of line for emergencies.

Lastly is Spectra rope or some times called iron rope. This type of rope is extremely strong, flexible and long lasting. When used on necklines, it takes a lot of chewing by a dog before it gives away.

It has all the good features of poly rope; however, it is very difficult to splice and therefore best left to a professional. This rope is a lot more expensive than both poly and cable lines. However, the security provided and the durability out weighs the added expense in my opinion. I prefer to use poly rope for the

tuglines; as I can easily replace worn / broken lines myself as well as easily cutting loose a dog with a tugline tangled to its leg in case of an emergency. I also use this type of rope on my snow hooks. I carry a very Sharpe knife to cut this type of rope in case of an emergency.

Lastly on ganglines; to attach the dogs to the neck & tug lines, Italian or Swedish brass snaps are most commonly used. These types of snaps are more durable in very cold temperatures. They conduct heat better than steel and therefore easier to defrost when frozen.



The other method used is the loop and toggle system. This system utilizes a wooden or plastic toggle which slides through the tug loop in the harness.

You prevent freezing problems with this system; however, I feel this system is not as secure as a snap.

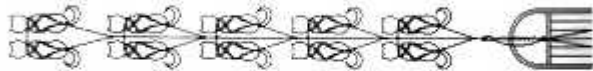
Here again with ganglines you have several options to choose from and to fit your personal preference. You can have ganglines made in one continuous section for the size of the team

you wish to run or to add more flexibility; you can have the lines made into two dog sections. This last option makes it easy to change from an eight dog hitch to a ten dog hitch for example.

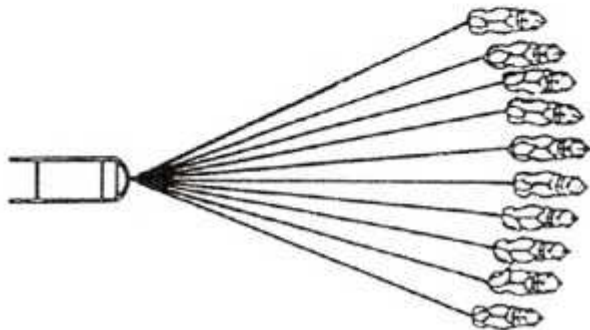
Single file



Tandem hitch



Fan hitch





## SNOWHOOKS AND SNUB ROPES

There have been a lot of advances in snow hooks over the years. The snow hook is the anchor that secures your team and allows you to leave your sled unattended so you can work with your dogs, clear the trail or just leave your team to perform other duties.

Snowhooks are made of metal, have two or more sickle style prongs that runs parallel to each other. At one end they are sharpened to a point and at the other end attached to a bar that separates them. It has a handle welded on the top close to the back. The new hooks have 5 sided rectangular metal plate separating the two prongs at the back of the hook. This piece is attached at the top so the triangular end can dig into the snow. This style is designed to right itself and will reset in the snow if it comes loose. The rectangular piece is designed to dig deeper into loose snow until the two prongs can secure into a hard packed bottom. These two prongs are very Sharpe at one end (sometimes carbon tipped) to set in ice.

Snowhooks are an essential piece of equipment and a must have when running with a sled. Caution has to be used when working with a snow hook as it can cause terrible damage to the musher if it comes loose and tears into flesh. I have a friend that almost lost the use of his leg when a snow hook came loose

and imbedded into his leg as his team broke loose dragging him down the trail. For security, I always carry two hooks and set them on the same side of the sled. When I leave the sled, I always walk or work on the opposite side of the team to prevent injury if the hooks come loose. This way I can concentrate on grabbing the sled as it approaches without worry of injury by the hooks. I cannot emphasize enough to be careful when using the snow hooks!

As I mentioned earlier, I use Spectra rope to secure the snow hook to the bridle at the front of the sled. I have broken poly rope on numerous occasions caused by a lunging team when the hook was set in a hard packed trail. I also carry a hatchet in the back pocket of my sled bag, within easy access if I have to chop the snow hook loose when well set in a hard packed trail or ice.

Snowhooks can be made out of steel, stainless steel or aluminum. I prefer stainless for its strength and they don't rust. I invested in a good snow hook as it is no fun losing the team due to a failure of a snowhook as I have had happen. To date I have not had a problem with the hook I have described.

The snub rope is a length of rope that attaches to the bridle at the front of the sled and can be attached to a pole or a tree at the other end. They are usually equipped with a quick release mechanism at the other end. I use a stainless steel

marine swivel quick release along with Spectra rope.

The snub rope is another tool for securing your team, giving you added security. I always carry two snow hooks and a snub rope.





## **SLEDS**

The evolution of the dogsled in the last twenty years is a staggering example of the technological advances occurring in the sport. Prior to the introduction of the Tim White toboggan sled, this piece of equipment had changed little since the early

Nineteen Hundreds.

The earliest sleds were designed to carry freight from one location to another through the seasonal migrations of native peoples of the northern regions of the world. Dogs were utilized by humans as companions, hunters, guardians of the camps and eventually as haulers of sleds. With the advent of dog power the sleds changed in design to carry larger loads and to adapt to the terrain to be transverse.

Dogs and sleds were the preferred method of transporting freight in the north during the Gold Rushes in the Yukon and Alaska. Racing with dogs and sleds was more likely born out of boredom, competitive interests of mushers and a way of parting miners/prospectors from their new found wealth through gambling. The sleds grew smaller and lighter as the sport grew in popularity and competitiveness.

The early racing sleds were made of hard wood for durability, with mortised and tenoned joints that were lashed together for flexibility and ease of steering. The wood was either steamed or soaked in water and then placed in jigs to shape the runners, brush bows and drive bows. In time those pieces were laminated to save time, ease of shaping and strength. Many of the wooden sleds used in the 1950s to the present were based on designs of Frank Hall and Ed Moody. Other craftsmen would design sleds with slight changes to the designs of these

early artists. These wooden sleds were labor intensive and a good sled could only be made by a sled craftsmen who had the knowledge to work with wood and the ability to properly lash a sled together .If a sled was lashed too tight , it would not steer. Conversely, if it was lashed too loose, the sled became uncontrollable. In eastern North America, the rivalry between Clyde Risdon and Doug McNeill took the wooden sled to its peak of performance.

The Iditarod Sled Dog Race that runs across Alaska spirited the interest in Mid & Long Distance racing of today. Due to varied terrain, trail conditions and the need to carry provisions a new type of racing sled was required. Along came Tim White a true innovator whose designs were to start the change to modernize the dogsled. His innovations include the racing toboggan sled, the Quick Change Runner system (Q C R) and the double claw bar brake. His new sleds were to utilize the use of wood, aircraft aluminum and plastics .The publicity and world awareness created by the Iditarod through the television media created many longer distance dog races throughout North America and Europe.

The European Dog Racing Scene stimulated the advent of the current line of high-tech sleds. The new sleds were designed to transverse the winding trails of the Alps with their switch back & hairpin turns located on the side of the mountains.

The early manufacturers of these sleds utilizing the knowledge of mountain skiing. Designing a sled that could be easily folded down for storage, light weight for easy transportation and sophisticated bridle system for excellent control. These sleds are mostly made of aluminum and carbon fiber composites utilizing a hinged system on the stanchions for responsive steering.

All dog sleds have certain common components.

### **Runners**

The runners are basically the skis the sled slides on. The width will vary based on the usage of the sled. With the narrow runners there is less friction and used on hard packed trails as in speed races are quicker than wide runners. The wider runners are used more for supporting heavier loads or on deeper snow where they float more than the narrow runners. The most common widths for racing today are one & a quarter inches and one & a half inches. At the rear of the runners are foot pads to stand on. They are usually a little wider than the runners and have grip surface to prevent the foot from sliding off the runners. Some runners are cambered like skis to allow the maximum slide when weight is placed on it.

Most runners today have some type of quick change

system to allow for ease of changing the plastic shoe attached to the bottom of the runner. There are three main quick change systems today the aluminum QCR rail that attaches to the bottom of wood or aluminum runners, the Matrix system which is an aluminum runner that if sectioned looks like an H that allows for sliding on the plastic shoe and attaching the upper structure of the sled, and the last system is the Rex runner which is also made of aluminum but has a different groove system to accommodate the plastic shoe. The European sleds incorporate a type of ski runner system with a P-Tex type base that needs to be waxed.

Here it is important to discuss the different types of systems with your sled manufacturer to discover which system suits your needs best.

There are different types of plastic used for shoes from P-TEX (commonly used on skis) to Ultra High-density Molecular Weight plastic (UHMW). Both types of plastic can be wax able; however not all UHMW plastic are. UHMW come in different degrees of density that can affect the slide of the sled depending on the different snow conditions / temperatures. This is a very complex subject and should be discussed with your sled or plastic shoe supplier for more details on the pros and cons of the different types of plastics.

### **Stanchions**

The stanchions are pieces that are mounted vertically on the runners. They are part of the frame work for attachment of the upper components of the sled.

### **Crossbars**

The crossbars are horizontal to the runners and attached to the stanchions. They are attached with some type of swivel action to allow for steering the sled. They are also one of the composites used in separating the runners and keeping them at their desired width apart.

### **Brush bow**

The brush bow is usually a rounded piece at the front of the sled. The purpose of the brush bow is to deflect the sled off brush, trees and other obstacles the sled might run into. It also helps prevent the sled from injuring the wheel dogs in case of an accident. The brush bow is basically a bumper. It is usually attached / runs horizontally to the runners and helps keep them separated.

## **Handlebar**

The handlebar is what the musher holds onto to steer the sled. The handlebar attaches to the rear stanchions.

## **Bed**

The bed of the sled is the load carrying area. Its height off the runners will vary depending on the application of the sled.

## **Brake**

The brake is attached behind the rear stanchions and before the foot pads. Most brakes today are the horizontal bar brake with two vertical metal claws that dig into the snow or ice when foot pressure is applied by the musher.

## **Drags**

The drag mats are attached behind the rear stanchions and when down drag on the snow between the runners. The drag mat is used to regulate the speed of the team by using foot pressure. This method of regulating the speed of the team causes less

damage to the trail as well giving the musher better balance when slowing a team on downhill sections of the trail.

## **TYPES OF SLEDS**

Due to the complexities of the new high-tech sleds, I have decided to ask two manufactures to give a description of their product and the reasons for its design. I feel this way you will be better informed and will help your decision process as to what type of sled will best suit your needs.



## *About Prairie Bilt Sleds*

By Jim & Mary Ann Miller

We assume that if you are reading this far you are seriously considering the sport of Mushing or are newly involved in the sport. Welcome to the "pack." We are here to inform you about our sleds and give you information that will help you when choosing equipment.

Using improper equipment will quickly take the joy out of running dogs. In order to enjoy this sport you need good quality equipment that is appropriate for your needs. It is our intention to inform mushers about our sled and share information that will give you the tools to make informed decisions in purchasing a sled.

Our goal is to have well designed, highly regarded equipment and satisfied customers. We are very passionate about our products; a little bit of us goes into each order. Before a sled is constructed, we work with the customer on all of the details such as weight and length of a sled, type of braking system, height of the handlebar, and everything down to the color of the sled bag. When a customer's equipment finally goes out the door, we will have fulfilled his or her specifications from the foot

boards to the brush bow.

## **DESIGN:**

As of this writing we have six different models of sleds in various sizes. Our designs are a result of years of testing in actual race conditions by professional dog drivers, recreational mushers, and by us. Feedback from others and personal results from testing with our own dog teams enable us to continually improve our products. All of the sleds we produce are tough, flexible, lightweight, easy to steer, and very comfortable to drive. These attributes allow you to have control of the sled.

## **MATERIALS:**

Dogsleds were traditionally made from many natural materials such as wood, rawhide and even whale-bones. Times have changed and now there are newer high-tech materials available. Presently, we are constructing sleds from aircraft grade aluminium, Ultra High Molecular Weight (UHMW) plastics, carbon fibre and lightweight metals. These newer materials have a better strength to weight ratio, are more flexible and will last much longer.

## **COMPONENTS:**

Some basic components on the dogsled include the following: runners, stanchions, foot boards, handlebar, brush bow, brake system, sled bag, etc. We manufacture all of these components on site in our own facility with our first-rate materials. A few of those components allow us to stand out in the Mushing world.

### **Runner and Plastic System**

The base of any sled is the runners. Here at Prairie Bilt we manufacture the *Rex*, *Rex LT™* runners and the Fast Trax plastic. This runner system is the base of all of our sleds, also you will find this system commonly used by many other sled builders as well. These 7075 T6511 aluminium runners are very flexible, strong and lightweight. We developed the Fast Trax plastic to easily slide into the bottom of the aluminium runner. With this system, a simple pull of a pin and the runner plastic can be replaced within moments.

### **Sled Bag**

We believe that no sled is complete without a sled bag. At Prairie Bilt Industries, we ensure proper fit of the bag by manufacturing the bags at our facility. Currently, our

sled bags are sewn with 500 d. or 1000 d. *Cordura®* nylon fabrics. Engineered for convenient storage and easy access, our sled bags are completely customizable from the color of the fabric to the amount and type of pockets you want. Not only does the color and style make it unique to you, but also the entire bag is designed for the type of mushing you do.

### **Handlebar**

Your handle bar is an important component on the sled; it is the "steering wheel" of your dogsled. With our sleds, mushers have the capability to rock the handlebar from one side to the other steering the sled. Our streamline design is customized to fit the musher's correct height, giving him or her good comfort and control. This design and angle also help resist catching and breaking if the sled were to tip over.

### **Foot boards**

The foot boards are where the musher stands on the sled. When on the trail, you want to stay on the sled and be as comfortable as possible; we had this in mind when we created the *Griptight* footboards. Made with a UHMW base and rubber surface, these footboards allow the

musher to get a proper grip and not allowing snow or ice to build up.

### **Brush bow**

Like all of our plastic parts, the brush bow is made out of UHMW plastic. The brush bow is designed to be the front "bumper" of the sled. It absorbs the shock and deflects the sled in a collision.

### **Drag Pad**

The means to slow down your team and keep control going down a hill is with the drag pad. The drag pad sits between the runners and allows the musher to put pressure on it with their foot. It is important for a drag pad to work in all sorts of conditions from deep snow to icy trails, and it must resist trail snags. We build two styles of drag pads; the beaver tail and flip up style. The beaver tail is a stationary pad that floats above the snow, and the flip up pad can be raised up allowing the musher to run freely between the runners.

## **SERVICEABILITY:**

Consider serviceability of equipment when purchasing a dog sled. Having the ability to obtain new components can be very important, because accidents do happen and components can break. We have given all sled components a part number so customers can order their replacements by a simple phone call or E-mail to us. The components are manufactured and are in stock at our facility.

Though not invincible, our sleds are capable of taking a beating from crashes, rollovers, and contacts with trees and boulders, yet will still function properly. One musher said of our sleds, "I had a bad crash and it didn't even hurt or scratch the sled." Not only have we minimized the effects of an accident, but we have also decreased the chance of crashing with the ability to steer the sled around obstacles and hazards. Another musher said, "With the slightest shift you can go from one side of the trail to the other. I can't imagine driving anything else... No longer do I have to manhandle sleds around corners."

## *Outlaw Ultra High Performance Dog Sleds*

Gar Morey established outlaw Sleds in 2001. As a mechanical engineer and second-generation Musher with 30 years of experience, he wanted to pursue a new level of performance for drivers in North America. With dog and driver safety the main concern, he hopes to see sled-dog sports grow to a new level of professionalism.

The SDR-SS open class sled built by Outlaw is the first of a series that has developed into an entire line of high performance sleds.

The sled's design has always started at the runners. This is the most important part of any sled and we worked for years developing a runner that involved ski technology and yet worked as a dog sled runner. The ski style runners on all Outlaw sleds are built for the drivers: weight, driving style, and racing class.

The chassis is designed to allow the runners to work under towing conditions while reducing stress and developing better glide. The development of the split handle bar system allows each ski independent, yet controlled, motion. This increase in motion also allows for better steering and control. The independent front

suspension eases the stress on wheel dogs and reduces driver fatigue. The adjustable twin stanchions allow for micro adjusting ski alignment and create precision control when turning.

There are a number of bag systems that were developed to work for different classes. The revolutionary open class hoop bag is designed for quick loading and easy access allows drivers to load dogs in seconds. The aerodynamic SDR-X bag allows wind to flow around and over the driver. Long distance drivers choose from a long list of options to customize for their special needs while the Drawdown system keeps gear secure while allowing for varying size loads between check points.

While the snow lasts long up North many teams in the lower 48 have had to consider a new side of the sled dogs sport. "Dry land" racing has always had its place for training and early season warm ups but now has turned to a new level of professional racing. The DSR-FS racing gig from Outlaw uses the best of mountain bike technology to create a full competition-racing machine. This gig can easily handle speeds well past what dogs can run and its air adjustable suspension takes the shock out of rough terrain and allows the driver total control. Look to dry land racing for fast paced excitement and early season racing for areas with little or no snow.



Over all the line of sleds from Outlaw draws from years of work and experience and uses technology to benefit mushers in many fields of racing.

I hope the information provided by these manufacturers help clarify the differences in sleds and make your decision process easier.

I am not endorsing one sled manufacturer over another and I am sure that other manufacturers would gladly supply you with information on their product.

To start you may wish to purchase a good used sled to reduce your cost outlay. Just remember a well designed sled will make your mushing experience a pleasure; a poor designed product will make it hellish. Good sleds also hold their value.

## **SLED BAGS**

The sled bag is the cargo carrying component that fits into the sled. The bottom of the bag rests on the bed of the sled, the front attaches close to the rear of the brush bow, at the rear it attaches to both the bottom and the top the rear stanchions. (Side profile of the bag is triangular in shape) The

opening at the top of the bag is either closed with a zipper or Velcro. I prefer the Velcro closure as this system doesn't freeze up. The bags are usually made of a durable, light weight, water proof material to keep the cargo safe and dry.

Bags are designed for different sleds depending on the sleds application. When purchasing your sled, discuss the type of bag required with the sled manufacturer. Most sled makers, today, supply bags that fit their sleds.

## **BRIDLE**

The bridle is the line at the front of the sled that steers the sled and attaches to the gangline.

## **SHOCK CORD**

Most sleds today come with a shock cord system or one should be added. The shock cord is used as a shock absorber to ease the variance of the tug transferred from the sled to the dogs caused by uneven terrain on the trails. This type of system aids in preventing injury to the dogs and helps in preventing disruption to their running rhythm. The shock cord system can be either built into the bridle or attached between the bridle and the gangline.

## **DOG CARE EQUIPMENT**

by Amy Duggan, Mountain Ridge Sled Dog Supplies

The joy of running dogs and keeping them free of injury is most every musher's dream but unfortunately not a reality. There are many ways to help prevent injuries from happening, some of which include several pieces of equipment used not only to prevent but also as an aid in recovery. The Wrist-wrap is an essential item that no musher should be without, whether it is a Wrist-wrap from an equipment dealer, vet wrap or an ace bandage. This is a tool that can be used to prevent sprains as well as to heal them. There are many Wrist-wraps on the market designed specifically to help aid in the recovery and or to maintain healthy wrists. The best size has been found to be approximately 7" X 9" tall made with a slightly stretchy fabric that has Velcro as a closure. They can be used to hold ice on the carpal joint as well as to wrap tightly after applying a warming liniment such as Algyval. Always be sure to wrap the dogs' foot along with the wrist to ensure that the foot doesn't swell from the circulation being cut off.

For the feet, Booties do the trick and can prevent a whole lot of injuries that can be very time consuming to heal. The best are the simplest, cloth boots with a stretch Velcro closure at the top stay on well and go on easily after some practice. Though many

dogs have "good feet", there are conditions that may warrant the use of booties, extreme cold temperatures is one, deep snow can be another. Making a habit of looking at your dogs feet is worth the time, pull the pads apart and look at the skin on the inside, this is where a dog can develop fissures that are very painful and then becomes necessary to use various ointments to get them healed. Booties are recommended in this situation to keep the wounds from getting worse and enhancing the effectiveness of the ointment.

Shoulders are another concern for possible injury. Sometimes they are severe and the dog will be out for possibly the entire season and other times the dog might just have minor soreness in the different muscle groups. A Therapeutic Shoulder Vest is a great way to expedite healing. They have pockets on the inside for either ice or heat packs and also enhance the beneficial aspects of liniments, many of which work better covered than not.

Dog Coats and Blankets are also important pieces of equipment for those doing distance racing, overnight camping or short coated hound type sled dogs. Most go on easily with Velcro closures at the neck and belly for a lot of adjustability . It is to know what your dog's needs are and to provide them with adequate care when conditions warrant it.

## CLOTHING FOR THE MUSER

To truly enjoy the Mushing experience I have to be dressed properly to stay warm and dry. Selecting the right clothing to suit my needs is very important. I don't scrimp on spending money for good equipment, only later to regret it and having to purchase better clothing later will cost me more money in the long run.

There are a lot of clothing manufactures that make clothing suitable for Mushing dogs. I feel it is important to look for clothing that is relatively light and with good moisture wicking capabilities. The outer fabrics need to be durable to withstand the abuse they will endure. They also should be moisture and wind resistant to keep the musher warm and dry. The best systems make use of layering. This allows me to take off or add clothing depending on the weather conditions and my activity level. I have found wearing fleece underclothing works best and then I add another layer of heavier fleece clothing. With the two layers of fleece, I have found the outer layer wicks away the moisture from the under layer and keeps my body dry.

I have found the boots supplied by Northern Outfitters have kept my feet warm and dry in temperatures below minus 40 degrees Celsius. In most cases I am relatively inactive just standing on the runners, but even if I am active and my feet

sweat the inner lining easily wicks away the moisture keeping my feet dry. I have also found their gauntlets keep my hands warm and dry. If I have to work without gloves on to change a dog or fix a snap, my hands will dry quickly when I put the mitts back on.

For head wear I prefer a musher's hat made of wind /moisture resistant outer fabric and a fleece liner. It should fit comfortably over the forehead and cover the lower neck area. The flaps should fit snugly over the ears and cover the cheek area when done up. The hat should fit comfortably and not be too tight or too loose. I have designed my own hats and have never had anybody complain about having a cold head. I also have designed an Anorak that comes in two models -lined and unlined. The unlined model has a double layer of wind and water resistant fabric. For added warmth I use the Northern Outfitter liners underneath the Anorak. I very seldom use zippers as they can freeze up, break and are hard to do up when it's cold and when in a hurry. I prefer Velcro closures on all my outer garments. They are easy to open or close even with mitts on and they make a tighter seal against the cold and wind.



## **MY EXPERIENCES. TAILS OF THE TRAIL**

### **MY EARLY EXPERIENCES**

Well where do I start, I have been driving / racing dogs for over 30 years. Like a lot of mushers I started with one dog and like the Lays Potato Chip advertisement says "you cant stop at just one ". I started off with Siberian Huskies and they taught me a great deal about running sled dogs. Their independent nature taught me patience, humility, the challenges and the love of running dogs. I started off running recreational and eventually attended a race held by the Siberian Husky Club of Southern Ontario at the Cold Creek Conservation Park. That started the down hill spiral into the abyss sled dog racing. As I lived in town I was limited to the number of dogs I could have, so I borrowed dogs from other husky owners who personally didn't want to run their dogs and thus built my early teams. I purchased my first harness from a local harness maker, Pearl French, through her I was introduced to her son Peter who had been running dogs for quite sometime. Peter taught me a lot about running dogs and really gave me a good start. I met another sled dog enthusiast, Brian Sheffield, who had one dog. Brian wasn't too interested in running himself, but wanted to work with me. This turn out to be a great friendship and Brian handled for me



for many years.

I started off in sprint racing in purebred events, first in 3 dog events and then to 5 dog races. Later I became the Race Marshal for the club and we changed the classes to 4 dog & 6 dog events. The Cold Creek Races were a great learning ground for beginners as it was at the time quite a challenging course with plenty of twist & turns, steep down hills, road crossings and obstacles. Many mushers learned how to handle a sled at Cold Creek. It was here that I met Doug McNeill when he was just getting started in racing dogs. Doug & I struck up a long friendship and shared many great experiences.

I heard about a relatively new form of racing at that time "Mid Distance ", these were races of 50 to 70 miles in length. The big race at that time was in Marmora, Ontario. The Iditarod was getting TV coverage at the time and this along with the challenge spurred me on to entering my first distance race. Little did I know at the time, the impact this would have on my future and the adventures that I would experience.

Little was known at that time (where I lived) about longer distance races, so as you can imagine there was a lot of trial & error in my training. Living just out side of Canada's largest city, Toronto was not the best area for training. But, ignorance is bliss, not knowing any better was a bonus as I was able to blunder along with my training. North of where I lived

there was an old abandoned railway line. For the most part the steel tracks were pulled up but the wooden ties were still in place. If there wasn't a lot of snow this made for a very bumpy ride. Over time I traveled this old line from Georgetown to Alliston, crossing many roads, including three major highways (one was Highway #10, a four lane road), old elevated railway trestles (with no sides & open spaces between the ties). Yes, training at that time was quite an adventure. The longest run was probably around 50 miles. That seemed like a long way for a person who never raced more than 6 miles. Well my training continued and I probably accumulated a total of 300 miles before the Marmora Race. Looking back I was at least 700 miles short on training, but at the time we didn't know any difference. This was only one of several mistakes made on that first venture into distance racing.

I specially made a sled for the race, it turned out to be one of the few things that I did right. My sleeping bag was a heavy duty winter bag design for the Canadian Army, my mukluks were also army issue and my head lamp was from RayOVac that was used by worm pickers (at night). I had a good beaver hat, polar fleece gloves & nylon water proof gauntlets, army surplus wool pants, wool shirt and a beautiful wool duffel parka made by Native Coop in the Yukon. This parka was made of heavy wool duffel and it had a nylon outer shell for a wind and water barrier.

I also had all the mandatory equipment that the race required me to carry(axe, one days supply of food for the dogs, snacks for me, snow shoes, sled bag, knife and spare batteries for the head lamp). When, I was ready to go, I looked like I was heading out on along adventure quest.

It turned out I was, but not as I had thought!

I knew little about the race and especially little about the area, that would change.

The race was advertised as a 60 miles (actually it was closer to 70 miles), 6 dog event with 4 checkpoints. The trail was marked with paper pie plates stapled to a stick. They were painted green and red; green for straight ahead and red to indicate a turn (red on the right - right turn etc.) and if there was a red markers on both side of the trail it indicated danger ahead. What else did you need to know? Oh, I forgot to mention there was no reflective tape on the markers at that time for night visibility.

The race started with dual starts, to add to the spectator excitement, the course then ran through a very narrow, winding trail, over exposed rocks (little snow cover) through a forest. This section was probably not more than a mile. However, the teams were going too fast for the conditions and the only safe way to slow them down was by dragging one of your feet (drags mats had not yet been invented). This section was a white knuckle ride, holding on to your handle bar so tight so not

to loose your team. When you came out of the forest you dropped down a steep hill and then passed through a narrow gate, across a road, then took a sharp right angle turn into an open field. The worst was now behind?

The course continued on along side a river (with some open sections), through some peoples property, past a barn, through another narrow gate with a sharp right hand turn on to a country road, across a highway and back into some bush area. Eventually the trail ended up on an old abandoned railway line that lead to the first checkpoint at Eldorado. Here the teams crossed Highway 62 and continued on the railway line to the half way checkpoint at Gilmore. This part of the trail runs parallel to Hwy 62 and there are many road crossings to maneuver. This route gives good spectator access to those who wish to follow the race. At the Gilmore checkpoint, the teams were turned around to head back to Marmora and the finish line. Most teams stopped at Gilmore to snack & water their dogs before continuing the race. This all seems pretty straight forward. However, the weather has to be factored in.

The race started at 11am and it was starting to snow, which changed to freezing rain and then rain. As the day progressed the rain turned back to freezing rain and as night fell the temperature dropped and the snow returned. For most of the teams it was turning dark when we departed from Gilmore.

Let the adventure begin!

Well as you can imagine, all the wool clothing I was wearing was getting rather wet and heavy. The parka felt like it weighed a ton and it placed extra downward pressure on my shoulders. However, during the day light hours this did not seem to bother me. But when it got dark, cold and when exhaustion started to settle in all these irritants started to magnify. About a couple of miles after leaving Gilmore the night had settled in and it was very dark, with overcast skies, snow and no moon light. It was pitch black out.

It was at this time, my head lamp failed!

I could not see anything!

I felt, for the first time in my life a sense of panic set in.

WHAT THE HELL WAS I DOING OUT HERE!

Through self talk I calmed myself down and assessed my situation. I could turn around and head back to the check point or trust in my leaders to follow the trail and see what would unfold.

I chose the later and continued down the trail. As luck would have it, about 5miles further down the trail I came to a road crossing and there were some handlers following one of their teams. Seeing my problem, they offered me one of their head lamps and took mine to repair and return it to me later in the race.

So my team and I continued the race.

Watching the snow come down through the narrow beam of the head lamp becomes hypnotic and I started to go into a trance, aware of everything around me, yet seeing virtually nothing. I became aware of the normal rhythmic pace of the team and allowed myself to close my eyes and give them a break from the sting of the falling snow / ice combination. The dogs pace changed, I immediately looked up to see a sled and team without a driver stopped on the side of the trail. As I approached, I called out to see if there was a musher around and the sled bag opened and the musher appeared. He explained that his team quit running and had no desire to continue. He told me to continue on and he would try to follow. This seemed to work for a while and then my team pulled away from him. Later, I found out he pulled off at one of the cross roads and ended up at a farmers house. The farmer and his wife got up, gave him something to eat, loaded his team & equipment into his pickup truck and drove him to Marmora.

That was the way it was.

People helping people!

I continued down the trail and arrived at the Eldorado check point, stopped briefly and continued on to the next check point of Zion Church. At about a mile out of the check point you leave the railway line and go through a windy bush trail to the

Zion Church check point. There was a large bonfire there and a crowd of people calling you in. The lights, the bonfire and the people were overwhelming. The little country church in the snow looked like something from a postcard, so beautiful. Here, I quickly turned the team around, went into the church to sign in & out, went back to my team and continued on my way to the finish at Marmora (less than 7 miles away). About a half a mile out the team decided they had enough, laid down and started to go to sleep. I decided to turn the team around and head back to the check point and rest the team there. While the team rested, I went into the church, had a coffee and a sandwich.

It was then I realized what a sight I was to everybody around me. I was covered in ice; my red parka was white with snow and ice. My beard was one continuous piece of ice, only broken at my mouth from eating. I sat in silence for about an hour and thawed out. I was very wet.

After about an hours rest, I returned to the team to continue my journey. The team sprang to life and we departed the check point for a second time. The team was running well and I was thinking about the arrival at the finish line when disaster struck. The team, upon approaching, the place where they had turned to return to the check point decided they had enough, turned on their own and started to head back to Zion Church. After several attempts to turn them and head to the finish line,

I realized my race was over. After about fifteen hours on the trail the team had enough and we went back to the check point. After some time and assessment of the team, I decided they had enough and I decided to scratch.

This was a great disappointment for me, but it was the right decision for the team.

This race instead of discouraging me on distance racing motivated me to be more devoted to this type of racing and led to many more great adventures.

The next year, I returned to Marmora and completed the race. I also competed in a 60 mile event in the mountains Pennsylvania at a race called Lewis Run. Over the next few years I competed in races in New York State, New Hampshire and Maine. The only other scratch, I had in a 60 mile race was at Marmora, many years later, and that was do to sick dogs. Many of the mistakes I made the first year were corrected in subsequent events. Mid distance racing became more popular and all of the mushers gained more experience. This added experience lead to more open dialogue between mushers and race organizers.

Every race run has its adventures or misadventures depending on how you look at it. Every adventure doesn't happen when your racing. One time Doug McNeill and I were testing one of Doug's newly designed training carts. We went out for a 3 or 4



mile run to see how it would handle on dirt trail. The trail went through some farm fields for about 2 miles then looped around and headed back. This was in late October the fields were cleared and, as it turned out the field where the loop was, had been freshly ploughed. Our 8 dog team was working real hard trying to pull us through the mud and with our assistance was able to negotiate the muddy field and we got back on the service trail around the edge. Well everything was fine with the cart so we headed home. The dogs were enthusiastic knowing they were heading back and with no restrictions from the mud they were really boogieing. As we were crossing from one field to the last field before reaching the dog yard, we flew over hump on the trail. When landing, the front of the training cart impaled itself into ground on the other side. Needless to say, the cart came to an abrupt halt. Both Doug and I were not quite so fortunate as both of us were airborne and came to a soft landing in the mud. When we recovered our senses, we discovered the front wheel of the cart was no longer attached and the wheel forks were dug into the dirt stopping our forward motion. It was dark now and we could see the lights of the dog yard.

So close, yet so far!

The cart was one of the 3 wheel styles and now only had 2, it had a T bar steering system, of which as inoperative. The dogs knew they were close to home and they were pounding the line in

desire to go. We had to react fast or the gangline would break and we would have another problem, a run away team. It was decided that we would both stand as far back on the cart as possible and all we had to do was ride it home. Well we did this and we were launched heading home on what was now a two wheel chariot. Splashing through two mud holes and around a couple of right hand turns (I still don't know how we did this) we arrived back in the dog yard.

Another successful run!

When the dogs were put away and after several beers, we had a good laugh about our adventure.

If you want to test the strength of something, just hook it up to a team of wild sled dogs and let a couple of crazy mushers on the back.

I remember my experiences at the inaugural Sandwich Notch 30. I was about 5 miles from the beginning of the race, with a team that was really running well. I had just passed a race official that told me I had the fastest time through his location. I knew the team was primed for this race and they were performing perfectly. I still can't remember how many teams I passed. I believe three, in a really tight, narrow bush trail before I reach this observer.

Everything was going as planned or so I thought.

I was now in an open hilly clear cut section (for hydro

lines). The trail had some very steep down hill sections that crested sharply. This made for little view of the steepness of the up coming down hill section. As I crested a hill, I placed my foot on the drag to control the speed of my descent. But low and behold at the bottom of the hill was another team, STOPPED in the center of the trail. I tried to slow my team down by applying both feet to the drag. This helped, but it created a problem with the steering as I had both feet off the runners slowing my decent. The dogs sharply veered to the right to avoid the stationary team. However my sled collided with the other musher. He ended up sitting in my sled and we came to an abrupt stop. After checking if the musher was okay, he got out of my sled and with the team going crazy, we continued on. At first I didn't notice how much damage had been done to my sled. But as I was experiencing steering difficulties, I observed that the brush bow, front and middle cross bars were also broken. The bridle was now only attached to the rear stanchion and made the steering very difficult, to say the least.

One minute everything was going great, the next all shit had broken loose.

That is racing!

The only option I had was to finish the race (only 25 miles to go) with a broken sled, holding it together as best I could with my feet. The sled was not repairable, so if I wanted to finish the

race I had no other option. I can say it was challenging going back through the narrow, winding, bush trail heading to the finish line. We ended up finishing second only a few minutes out of first. But, I was very proud of my team's performance and my ability to hold the sled together. Doug McNeill made one tough sled! I later repaired the sled and it is operational today.

Preparing for my first CAN AM 250 at Fort Kent, Maine was also an adventure of another sort. It was my first race longer than 70 miles and I was going to be doing it at 60 years old.

Some of us never grow up!

All my training had gone fairly well. This race has a lot of mountainous terrain and is the toughest race of its kind in Eastern North America. I felt to offset my inability to assist the team, like younger mushers, I would have to sacrifice speed for strength and endurance. Thus, I produced a very strong team. This was a 12 dog race and I had never, believe it or not, driven a team bigger than 8 dogs.

There is always a first time for everything.

In training, with the ATV, I had good control. However when I went to my lighter aluminum sled, I found out my control was an illusion. On my first run, with a passenger in the sled, at the half way point of a 40 mile run I hit a section of ploughed road. At the end of which, I had to make a U turn. I had help posted

there to assist in this operation. However, with two of us standing on the break and breaking a snub line holding one of my two snow hooks, we came to the realization I had created a monster.

It was like trying to walk an Elephant on a leash, as far as control.

Yes, I created a strong team!

We eventually got the team stopped and turned around (after unhooking the tug lines) and headed back to my camp. A friend of mine was making Iron Training Sleds that were hinged for steering and with great breaking ability, so I bought one. I also started training with a long section of skidoo track, as a drag mat for added control. This gave me the control I needed to re-establish my authority on the team. As I train by myself, this sled gave me the confidence to continue my pursuits.

Sometimes there is an omen of things to come, but we as humans fail to recognize them or chose to ignore them. For example:

The dry dog food that was suppose to arrive two weeks before my departure to the race, didn't arrive and the Saturday before leaving I had to make a 3 hour round trip to pick up food.

The Bunny Boots and the warm gauntlets I had ordered a month in advance didn't arrive.

The meat snacks I ordered, for the race, were to be

picked up at a friend's house on my way to the race. Wasn't ready and I had to go out of my way to the supplier to get the meat.

I was hoping for a handler to go with me; that didn't turn out.

On route to the race I stopped for some supper and the coffee that I ordered was tainted with cleaning solution when the restaurant staff was cleaning the coffee maker.

I missed my turn off to Fort Kent that caused me an extra hour's drive. This delayed my arrival to my host family's house until after 1 in the morning. Not wanting to awake them, I spent a cold night in trying to sleep in my truck.

Well race day finally arrived. On the way to the starting line I broke the bungee cord holding my brake up. It was made shift repaired at the starting line.

What else could go wrong?

I heard the count down: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 ... Go Driver!

I was off with my team catapulting me through a gauntlet of thousands of cheering spectators lining the downtown street of Fort Kent.

Soon I was out of town, I started to be relaxed and concentrate on the race ahead of me. I was finally on my way.

Everything was finally going well, on my way up the first serious incline we were overtaking and passing another team. After

negotiating the pass, I noticed the bungee on my brake had broken again. I stopped the team, set my snow hook reached down to attach a spare neck line to hold the break up. While still standing on the runners, I reached down with both hands to attach the two snaps together. At that instant the team with the sled lunged forward, the snow hook popped, I fell back on my ass and watched in horror as my team took off down the trail without me. I had never before lost my team in a race!

After hitching a ride with several mushers and eventually a skidoo driver, the team was recovered after at least two hours of agonizing search. All was okay and the loose hook finally stopped the team on a branch of the trail for the 30 mile race. My leader Aurora realized I wasn't on the sled and tried to turn the team around. This resulted in the biggest tangle I have ever seen. Luckily for me there was two other race officials there along with the skidoo driver and with them holding the sled and the lead dogs, I eventually untangled the mess and got the whole team headed in the right direction. After flipping the sled on a sharp left hand turn off a snow bank onto a ploughed road. I was dragged down the road a ways before I stopped the team and up righted the sled.

The rest of the trip to the first check point was uneventful.

After a 6hour stop to feed and rest the team, I got ready to depart. I had something to eat and drink as well as laid down for

a couple of hours to clear my mind. When I got up I had problems with my equilibrium and was unable to keep my balance. The paramedics on the scene checked my blood pressure and everything was okay. But I still had problems with my balance. So after considerable evaluation I came to the conclusion, if I couldn't keep my balance, it wasn't fair to my team (the risk of possibly falling off and putting them in danger), I decided to scratch.

I was lucky my team was all fine and really ready to go.

But for some reason this race was not meant to be.

That's life!

After analyzing my situation, I was probably suffering the effects of anxiety and severe dehydration. I had looked after my team, but not myself. Lesson learned. I will be back!

As the song says "You have to know when to hold them, when to fold them! "



## DEFI DU LAC TAUREAU, SAINT MICHEL DES SAINTS

The first race of the 2008 season was a 50 mile race starting and finishing in the village of Saint Michel Des Saints, Quebec. This was a first year race and the organization put on a FIRST CLASS EVENT. There were 4 races: 6 Dog Teams - 6 miles x 2 days, Unlimited Dog Teams ( Teams consisting of 10 Dogs up to 18 dogs) - 12.5 miles x 2 days, 10 Dog Teams - 25 Miles x1 day and 12 Dog Teams - 50 miles x 1 day. The 2 day races were sprint events where the total time for the two days determined the finishing positions of the teams.

This was our first test to see how our training this season was going to pay off. The longest runs the dogs have done so far this season was 36 miles and the longest time on the trail was 4 hours. The objective for this race was to give experience to the first year racing for 5 of the dogs. For both of the leaders. it was their first time racing. Therefore, 7 of the 12 dogs were experiencing their first exposure to racing, spectators and other dog teams. There were many questions to be answered and this race was a great opportunity to get the answers. My female leader Amorook is quite shy of strangers and my male leader Leo (Amorook's brother) is the dominate force for setting the speed of the team, but can be passive to Amorook in stressful situations.

## THE RACE

From the time we took the dogs out of the truck, you could see they were ready to run and couldn't wait to get away from all the commotion of the start.

The Timer counted down the start: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 GO! The team took off at, what seemed like full speed, and headed into a series of sharp turns. First a left and then a right and then another left I was trying to slow the team down enough to safely negotiate the turns using the drag mat on the sled. Shortly out of the start area, we had to negotiate a 60 foot bridge crossing a river and then a sharp left turn on a very slick trail. The trail then headed out of the village and onto Lac Taureau for 44 miles on the lake. The race runs along the shore line of the lake and at the half way has a big loop and then returns on the same trail to the finish. I kept checking my GPS to regulate the speed of the team and keep the early speed down to around 12-13 miles/ hour this required the use of the drag mat for a good 10- 12 miles. As this was their longest run, I didn't want to go out too fast and leave the team with nothing left to come back. This had to be a very positive experience for the Dogs.

Eventually the team set into a good pace and I just let them do what they were trained to do. The scenery along the lake was amazing: the openness of the big lake surrounded by the

mountains and the shore line dotted with spectacular homes (many costing in the millions of dollars). There was some head on passing of other teams at the turn around which were negotiated without too much trouble.

The return trip was peaceful with the dogs doing their thing. The stress of the start is gone and the quiet peace of being one with your dogs is too me now what this sport is all about. The last three miles into the village, we encountered a number of snow mobiles on a small section of trail that was common to both the teams and the snowmobilers. Most were polite and respectful of the dogs and enjoyed seeing the team. The dogs made the final turns and we entered the Start/ Finish Shoot, crossing the finish line with all dogs pulling. The race was over and the team leaders were greeted by Franziska and led back to the truck. Here they got placed back around the truck and got their Salmon treats as a reward for their performance along with some personal time with me.

I made a couple of mistakes one of the dogs is a little too young mentally, as he worked for 15 miles going out and 10 miles at the end, the balance his line was loose and not pulling. The other problem is that I placed one of my males in front of his girl friend (who is coming into heat). I placed her behind him as she is shy of people and ran her in the 4<sup>th</sup> pair back from the leaders so she couldn't interfere with their rhythm. As it turned out, she

wasn't a problem and if Clyde was behind her, he would have worked the whole way.

In summary it was a great day and I was very proud of my team with their performance. I was looking at completing the race in around 5 hours and they came in under that. My assistant/ handler said she felt Amorook would have no problem with the spectators at the start and she was correct. The leaders did a fantastic job and I am so proud of them.



Looking back at all the racing mishaps so far, I have had a run away team, caught a run away team, given rides to other mushers that have lost their teams, broken sleds, froze every finger on my hands, froze the cornea in my eyes, head light failures and countless other mishaps.

But the burning passion to run sled dogs still stirs in my soul!

## RESURRECTION



In February of 2008, I came to the realization that an old knee injury was going to end my endeavors with respect to Distance Racing. Due to this degenerating knee condition, I realized that I possibly would not be capable of looking after my dogs on a long race if I had an emergency.

So for the safety of the dogs, I decided that the longer races and training required were over for me. The decision I was now facing was what I would do with regards

to my future in Dog Mushing.

I still loved the sport, the daily interaction with my dogs and ofcourse the subsequent life style of living in the forest.

As fortune would have it, the following Winter I was offered two Sprint Dogs from a fellow musher, and subsequent friend, Rosaire Perron. Rosaire is well known on the Open Class Sprint Racing Circuit here in Quebec and has very good kennel of Sprint Dogs.

After some training with these dogs, along with my Distance Dogs, I started to really enjoy the speed running. I was also amazed that my Distance Dogs were capable of far more speed than I gave them credit for.

So for experience only, I entered my first Open Class Sprint Race here in Saint Michel Des Saints.

I was amazed that I didn't finish last!

This experience opened a new avenue for me in the mushing world and a renewed interest & challenge to learn about a different aspect of mushing. All this coming at 67 years of age! Who says: "You can't teach old dogs a new trick!"

## A NEW BEGINNING







Now, I was faced with the task of building a new kennel of dogs to support my activity in Open Class Racing. With the advice of Rosaire, I bred Blackie with Cannelle. These were the dogs Rosaire gave me in the winter. Both of these dogs have a very strong & sound genetic back ground. As both of theses dogs had some common heritage from the Egil Ellis lines in

Alaska, this made for a good line breeding.

The result was seven puppies, two males & five females. Along with the puppies, I also acquired two more adult males (Goliath and Cosmos), from Rosaire, whose father was Blackie. I now had a good start for my new kennel.

Other than seven of my Distance Dogs that stayed here with me, the rest of my Distance Dogs were adopted to good homes & this also helped a new musher get started with his adventures in the world of dog mushing.

The following fall, I added four new dogs from the kennel of Serge Pomerleau, two yearlings (Teal & Cobalt) & two 6 month old puppies (Blue & Indigo).

In January of 2011, I acquired Max (son of Captain, Eddy Streeper's Leader) an experienced four year old race leader from Rosaire.

Spring of 2011, Rosaire & I decided to a combined breeding with one of his males (Tony, a Mike son) with one of my females (Cobalt whose father was Brandy, Serge's leader). This breeding produced seven puppies (three females & four males). The litter was split with three puppies going to Rosaire & four staying here. Tony has ended up staying here with me & I added another five year old female Tanya (a Tony daughter) to round out my kennel conversion.

I now have kennel of Sprint dogs all genetically related

based on the Egil Ellis lines out of his famous leader Mike. This remarkable conversion all took place within three years.

## **BACK TO SCHOOL**

With the conversion to Sprint Mushing Dogs, I was faced with learning the new techniques required for the feeding, conditioning, training and the psychology of working with these dogs.

Sprint Dogs have a more high energy system and require special handling and feeding so they can maintain their endurance to perform at these high speed levels.

In Distance racing, it is ideal to maintain an average speed of 10/12 mph; where as Sprint Dogs require a speed of 18/20 mph average. This is a major difference with respect to feeding & training.

Again I referred back to Jim Welch's book "Speed Mushing Manual" for a starting base. I also asked many questions with fellow Sprint Mushers and also observed their methods of feeding & training.

I also did research on this new type of dog on the internet to learn about their attitude, housing & nutritional requirements. The one thing I enjoy about mushing is that it is not a static sport and it is constantly evolving. This keeps me sharp and always

learning new aspects related to mushing.

## FEEDING

The first thing I learned is that this type of dog burns a lot more calories just to keep warm. Their coats are not as dense as the Alaskan Huskies and thus, along with more warm bedding in their houses, require a denser, high calorie feed. With the increased speed they can quickly loose weight and it is much harder to put weight back on them.

Most of the sprint dogs I have in the kennel have a pointer cross background. These dogs have a much higher metabolism than the dogs I was used too. This also was the reason for an increase in volume & density of my feed. Sometimes in order to maintain their nutritional requirements, they have to be fed twice a day and very cold nights they have to be housed in the traveling quarters in the truck for warmth.

These dogs are definitely calorie burners!

I use Turkey, Chicken Skins & a good quality dry food as my base for feeding. I also like to feed my dogs a very wet mixture to ensure they are very well hydrated. My dogs are still taught to eat fast when fed. That way I eliminate the problem of the food freezing in their dishes on those below freezing days. I also supplement their food with Salmon & Liver.

The feeding has also be revised to the formula used by Valerie and Laurent Gonsolin. The revised formula is 75% beef and 25% chicken along with dry dog food. I will still use chicken skins for added calories on those frigid nights were the temperatures fall below -20 Celsius or when the dogs need to gain weight.

Valerie and Laurent are mushers from France, now living in Canada, that have become close friends and have assisted me with training, feeding and the addition of new dogs in my kennel. As I mentioned earlier, I am a student of the sport of Dog Mushing. Always willing and open minded to new methods of working with sled dogs.



## FALL CONDITIONING

Depending on the weather & temperatures, temperatures below 50F/10C, I like to start the running program in mid to late September. Using the formula that with every 100 miles of running the dogs can race 5 miles, therefore to run a 15 mile race the dogs need a minimum of 300 miles of conditioning.

This gives me far more flexibility than I had for Distance Races where the goal was to have 1000 miles of

conditioning/training on the team by the end of December.

With these Sprint Dogs, you have to be more careful of the temperature & humidity, as they can quickly overheat. This overheating can cause serious damage to the dog.

I start my Conditioning program the same as I have always done with 2 minute run/2minute rest cycle. I keep the speeds down to around 10/12 mph at the start and slowly increase the speed as the dogs get into better condition.

I feel it is important to have a minimum of 100 miles on the dogs during this conditioning phase. This is to ensure the dogs joints are well supported by strong muscles to prevent injury when the speed increases during the training program.

My first training loop is 4.5 miles, so it is very important that I take my time to condition the dogs.

As the dogs get in better condition, I increase the run time to 3 minute run/2 minute rest. I slowly increase the running time and reduce the rest time until the dogs can safely run the 4.5 miles without a stop. During this process, I gradually increase the running speed to 15 mph. I will allow the dogs to increase their speed on their own for a short distance as they get in condition.

All my fall conditioning is performed using an ATV with both a handler & myself on the machine. The motor is running with the ATV in 5<sup>th</sup> gear and the accelerator is only used to help maintain an acceptable speed as to not overly burden the dogs.

As the dogs get in better condition, they pull the ATV without the assist of the accelerator.

This is a slow methodical way of conditioning! However, since using this method, I have had no physical injuries with my dogs through the racing season.

I maintain running my dogs on this 4.5 mile trail until I switch to the sled on snow & then I am able to increase the distance to 10 miles.

Here again, I go back to interval training giving the dogs a rest on the run until they are capable of running the 10 miles without a break. I will repeat this procedure until they are capable of running 15 miles without a problem.

## **CONDITIONING FOR SPEED**

My dogs are tethered to stake out poles that have a spinner on the top. With this type of tethering the dogs get plenty of exercise in the kennel with the interaction with their neighbors. Due to this, they come into the season with some degree of conditioning already on them. I found that this season the dogs were in very good condition and they are pushing for increased speed earlier than I had expected.

By the time I had a 100 miles of conditioning on them, they were capable of doing the 4.5 miles with only a 2 minute break at



the half way point of the run. Along with the longer run intervals, I also started to increase the speed monitored to the dogs comfort level. At the end of the training runs, I would monitor how quickly they would resume to a normal breathing pattern. This way I could check their fitness level with the increased cardio conditioning.

By the time the dogs had 120 miles of conditioning on them, they were allowed to complete the 4.5 mile run without a rest. At this time, they were also allowed to run quicker averaging around 17 mph.

During this process, I never pushed the dogs for speed. I would on occasion whistle the dogs up and after a short distance of a sprint; slow them back down to a comfortable pace.

I was also training the dogs to sprint up hills when I called them up. I would make this sound encouraging & fun for them to sprint up hills. I started this at the beginning of the season and now they are naturally speeding up when they come to a hill. The other time I would speed up the dogs was on the home stretch. At the beginning this would be only the last 100 yards. Then the distance would increase. The objective here was for a strong finish at the end of a race.

When the dogs are finished their run, still hooked up in the team, they are given a snack as a treat. This treat is either a piece of frozen liver, frozen salmon or a dog biscuit.

The dogs know that when I call them up to "GO HOME!" they are going to get a treat as their reward for a good run. I will continue on the 4.5 mile runs until I can switch to the sled on snow. Then I will switch to 10 mile trail and return to interval training schedule with rest breaks until I feel they are ready to do the run without a stop.

This procedure will continue until I can run them 15 miles without a rest. My expected longest race of the season is 17 miles/day.

Normally, the races here are two day affairs with the exception being Laconia, NH which is three days @ 17 miles/day.

## **REVISED 2014**

Starting in 2013, I have been tutored by Valerie & Laurent Gonsolin and have made some adjustments to my training program.

At the start of the seasons training, I still run the 4.5 mile trail now with only one stop at the halfway. Currently, I keep the speed at 15 to 16 miles per hour. The speed will be increased to 18 MPH when the ground is snow covered and the dogs have over 100 miles of conditioning/training on them.

The dogs will run the 4.5 miles without a stop when I can see they can handle it.

After the first 100 miles of training the dogs will start to do 8 mile runs. At first once a week and then twice a week when they show they are ready for the increased mileage.

I will continue to increase the mileage up to 15 miles per run when the dogs are ready and we are always running on snow. Most of the Open Class Races that I will run are between 10 and 12 miles in length.

I am now training on the snow with a snow machine to give more control over the dogs and being able to regulate the running speed better. By using mechanical machines ( ATV & SNOWMACHINE), it makes it much easier to program the dogs to their Basic Pace.

I will at times use the racing sled, more for my benefit, to get used to the dogs pulling the sled before the racing season. One of the things I like about mushing is that it's never static.

It is constantly evolving with refining the training, nutrition and ofcourse the breeding programs (for example the Alaskan Husky/Pointer crosses).

## *Training*



During the conditioning phase of the season, some training is always taking place.

However, once the conditioning phase is accomplished, then I start to fine tune the dogs into forming a team.

During this phase, I run the dogs in different positions and with different partners looking for the best running combinations.

I am trying to determine which pairs are more comfortable with each other, which side of the gangline they prefer and also

what positions in the team suit them best. This takes considerable time experimenting to find the best possible combinations & positioning to fine tune the team enabling them to give their best possible performance.

At this time, I am also looking to develop new leaders. Every dog will get an opportunity to see if they have leader potential. I always start a new leader on the return part of the run. This way they know they are running home and are more motivated. I will normally try a dog the following season, which didn't show the aptitude the previous season, to see if it had matured enough to run lead.

Some dogs mature at different ages and a good leader could just take longer to mature. I have seen this most often with males maturing at a later age as compared to females. Usually if you are observant when running the dogs, you can see the dogs that have a desire to run lead.

It is very important not to place too much stress on young leaders.

Always watch your young leaders for any sign that they are getting stressed and if so take them off lead showing that you are happy with their previous performance. Return them to the lead position after several runs in another position. Here to restart them in the lead on the homeward bound part of the run. Even if it is for the last 100 yards. This will leave them with a

positive feeling of accomplishment.

It is also good to spell off your main race leaders at times in training to give them also a break.

Even though the leaders don't show signs of stress, the lead position is stressful and they need a break from time to time.

It is important to never ask more of your team than they are capable of delivering!

After every run show your dogs your appreciation for their efforts and they will always try to please you.



JFphoto





## *Housing*

The new style Dog Houses are made of plywood and have styro- foam insulated floors. With the off set door opening, the dogs can get away from the cold draft of the door and be warm and comfortable. The isolated floor adds to the warm and keeps the floor of the house dry. The removable roof makes for easy cleaning of the inside and removal and addition of fresh straw. These houses are warmer for the dogs and as a result they burn less calories trying to keep warm.





## SUMMARY

After reading this book you are probably asking yourself, "Is dog mushing really for me?" and that is very understandable. I tried to point out here both the pros & cons of the sport, so you can make a well thought out decision if this is the sport for you.

All too often books just show the enchanting side of the sport and not give the reader the other side so they can make an intelligent decision.

This sport is not for everybody.

That is okay, you may only want to have one or two dogs to do recreational sledding or to go skjoring. However, if you do decide you want to further explore the sport of Dog Mushing you will be better equipped to make decisions on how to pursue the sport to suit your needs and desires.

Sled dog sports can be a lot of fun and exciting and at this point in my life there is nothing more that I would rather do. I enjoy the thrill of running a well trained team of dogs that I have raised since birth, the beauty of the nature I travel through in all seasons (fall, winter and spring) along with the peace and harmony I have with the world around me. I am living the lifestyle I have chosen to live and I am happy with it.

Fall training started this week and I again feel the joy and enthusiasm of getting out running with my dogs.

Update on an earlier story.

I discussed the story of Star and her beginnings with the aspect to training. I mentioned that I wanted to give her an opportunity to run lead. Well she got that chance this week. Wow, what a dog, she took to lead as if this is where she was meant to be. I couldn't believe how well she did. She never looked back. She led with great enthusiasm and confidence. I believe with patience and the proper training, she is going to make a great lead dog. This is truly an example of being patient and taking my time to work with an individual dog, can be very rewarding.

If something is worth doing, do it well!

You only go through life once, live it to the fullest.

Thank you for taking the time to read this book. I hope you now have a better understanding of this sport.

Best of life to you in the future and if you decide to run Sled Dogs many Happy Trails.

## WHERE YOU CAN HEAR THE RAVEN FLY

Upon retuning to the camp (after being away a week), it felt so good going to bed and looking out the undraped window. The brilliant illumination of the stars on a velvety black sky, along with the silence and serenity of the cold winter night, gave me the feeling of being comforted in the arms of mother earth.

Yes it was good to be home, in the stillness of the forest where you can hear the Raven fly!

FIN

