

WORKING SIBERIAN HUSKIES



**A Guide to Running
Huskies in Harness**

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A GUIDE TO RUNNING HUSKIES IN HARNESS

Because this most beautiful of breeds attracts so many people who have no interest in its working abilities, Siberians are often confined to the pet home and show ring. This means that maintaining the Siberians' working characteristics and working attitudes, if they are not to be lost forever in the years to come, requires dedication by those who are committed to working their dogs.

Many people, however, having initially been drawn to the Siberian by its beauty, discover that they also enjoy the working aspects of the breed, whether they live in cold or in relatively Mediterranean climates.

YOUR WORKING ADVENTURE

Before you start off on your working adventure you should ask yourself some fundamental questions. What is your aim, what do you want to achieve, what is your goal?

Your goal could be just to exercise your Siberian on a regular basis while enjoying all the pleasures of being outdoors - fresh air, early morning mists, sunrises and sunsets.

At the other extreme your goal could be to establish a team of Siberians and race at the most competitive level possible at home or abroad.

In between these extremes is a full range of options and, indeed, your objectives may well change over time.

COLLECTING INFORMATION

Unless you understand those options and, perhaps, the commitment and rewards associated with them, you will be unable to make a decision.

So here is what you do. Contact a number of working kennels - the Kennel Club will be able to put you in touch with them either directly or through the Breed Club - and make arrangements to go and visit. At this stage you will be taking notes and hitching lifts behind large teams in training, to get a sense of what is involved in running Siberians in harness.

You will, consequently, have made your first contact with Dog Drivers, sometimes called Mushers (from the French 'march'), and these will be your source of learning how to, and in some cases how not to, work teams of Siberians.

This learning process, this acquisition of knowledge, is an ongoing, permanent feature of a driver's life.

MAKING COMPARISONS

It is important to visit a number of working owners. You need to view their different methods, their accommodation and their training venues, allowing you to make comparisons and build a picture of good practices, and establish exactly what will suit you as an individual.

Over the years we have found that advice, in the main, is freely acquired and freely given, openly, honestly and with a generosity of time, since drivers are proud of their Siberians, and what they have achieved. Most will give you ninety-eight per cent of what they have learnt over time. The additional two per cent is what they retain, that which, in competitive terms, gives them an advantage, or which will attract you back to learn that little bit more! It is that little bit extra, and you will learn it from your own experiences.

We are born with two ears and one mouth and the acquisition of knowledge is best pursued in using those senses in that proportion. Often, the best information is to be gleaned from the quietest individual. Watch and learn from the successful, bearing in mind that 'empty vessels can make the most noise'!

Another way in which to learn is to simply ask experienced drivers if you can help handle their dogs. By offering to help them, they will be keen to repay your kindness by giving freely of help and advice.

Your decision to work your Siberians, and the exposure you have to 'riding shotgun' on other driver's teams, will certainly help you understand the breed in the context of fit, form and function. The more years you ride behind working Siberians, the more you will understand structure and movement and, consequently, through this increased understanding, be able to breed better Siberians and build better sled dog teams.



RIDING SHOTGUN ON AN EXPERIENCED TEAM

Far too many drivers take the easy way out if a dog is not performing well and discard it in favour of a 'better' dog. It is much better to strive to realise each dog's full potential, both for their benefit and for you as the driver.

BASIC RULES

There are some facts we must remember, facts that are irrefutable and that you will do well not to forget.

- A good Siberian will not reach physical maturity as an adult until it is at least three years old.
- A Siberian can run in harness from puppy hood through to 12+ years old; the years between 3 and 6-7 being the best in terms of performance.
- Remember that a Siberian thinks within a relatively simple framework. It wishes to please, and will perform in a manner which it thinks is right. Therefore, like it or not, Siberians do not make mistakes - drivers do. If a Siberian does not do what you expect it to do, it is because it does not know any better. It has not been trained satisfactorily to do things differently.
- Siberians are very sensitive to human mood swings, they reflect their pack leader's mood in their performance. They know when they have done well and when things have not gone to plan. The performance of a team of Siberians will be positively or negatively influenced by the driver's mood. A feature of the most successful of teams is the wonderful close relationship between driver and dogs, with the driver being super-sensitive to the individual dog's needs.
- There is a myth we must lay to rest. Siberians, by definition, would, and indeed should, given the proper training and conditioning, be able to carry a light load at a moderate speed over great distance. However, conditioning is what is important here and you can train Siberians to participate in sprint racing and then, in a season or two, those same Siberians can be conditioned to participate in long distance races. These Siberians are not different - they are merely prepared and conditioned in a different way to achieve different objectives.

Each and every time you run your team of dogs, you will have a new learning experience, both you and your dogs. It is never the same experience and so it allows you to build up your knowledge base. As you leave the start, following 'hook-up', be ready and equipped for any eventuality - even after years of experience you will be faced with new situations on a regular basis!

FOUR FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTES

A good working Siberian must possess four fundamental attributes if it is to enjoy a long working life. We emphasise long, since these attributes are not only important in the context of the competitive aspect of today's working Siberian, but in good measure they will allow the Siberian to maximise working potential, since they describe the standard Siberian.

1. A Good 'Head'

This is not a cosmetic requirement alone, although physical features of the head are important to maintain breed type and to cope with adverse weather conditions. In this context we refer to the concept of working attitude, mental toughness, focus and concentration on the work in hand.

A Siberian who has not the desire to run is not a Siberian. Working attitude is a critically important feature of this wonderful breed, and dogs that lack this quality are better excluded from your breeding programme.

Siberians tend to possess working attitude in different measure; at one end of the scale there is a tendency towards some indifference; at the other end of the scale is total obsession.

Certain lines of dogs, and certain dogs within other lines, can be described as 'hyper' or verging on a state of mind which is almost out of control when it comes to 'hook-up'. At this extreme, it could be argued that this is not typically Siberian.

The ideal is the Siberian who clearly differentiates his work from his day-to-day routine, who is prepared to give his driver his full attention, concentration and hard physical effort throughout the work activity, and who, despite a myriad of counter attractions, will remain absolutely focused while in harness.

It is said that a Siberian will 'work till it drops'. That is not actually true of the purebred Siberian Husky, who will always keep a little in reserve, believing that he will have to provide the same effort the following day. That does not mean he is not working his heart out for you; it means he has the intelligence to balance his effort throughout the duration of the activity for which he has been conditioned, and can complete that task to the best of his ability, without actually doing himself any permanent physical damage.

Mental toughness is both real and observable. 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going' is an often-used expression. When driving dogs in adverse weather conditions; on tracks that become poor; when you have a distracting incident; when a dog takes a tumble; these are examples of situations when a tough dog will stand out within a team.

A mentally tough dog will cope with all sorts of adversity and will apparently work even harder for you. When you observe them from behind, while other dogs are showing signs of sensitivity or distraction, looking around and with a little inconsistency in the tug line, the tough dog will 'tuck and drive' with a tight tug line, head absolutely still, focused on the trail ahead, with a top line that could carry a glass of champagne without spilling a drop, driving, driving and listening to your words.

Working attitude combined with the mental toughness exhibited by exceptional Siberians will, when harnessed to the natural willingness to please, provide you with the 'good head' you seek.

2. Eating and Drinking Well!

There is nothing worse than a fussy eater! From puppy hood onwards you can tell the voracious eaters in your household, and a Siberian that has a healthy appetite and drinks well is a blessing.

Appreciation of the good eater only comes when faced with the alternative. Dogs that pick at their food, leave some, will not eat 'on the road', and will not drink either during water stops in training or in the run-up to competition, are quite a burden.

Accepting that you are providing a quality diet to fit the occasion, the timing of feeding and watering is an important factor in undertaking the conditioning process, and subsequently competing on the trail.

Water, as will be mentioned on more than one occasion, is critical to the overall well being of your Siberian, and a regular intake of good water will avoid dehydration and aid in recovery.

Eating and drinking 'on the road', or away from home, is something that may well have to be practised in the travelling vehicle at home, before away trips are undertaken. Rather like a puppy that will try and resist 'nature's call' when not on its home ground, travelling is, initially, more than likely going to affect the desire of youngsters to eat properly. So feeding your Siberians in your vehicle at home, which will at least give them the experience of some normality, may help counter the wide variety of different distractions on offer while they are away.

3. Athleticism

The Breed Standard refers to a smooth and effortless gait, "quick and light on feet", with "good reach and good drive". So it will come as no surprise that another key attribute is athleticism. To combine power, speed and endurance effectively you must have a Siberian with excellent balance throughout. There will be times during work when a Siberian will have to run at a constantly fast speed for a period of time, before breaking off into an extended trot as the team drives hard up a hill. Adjusting to these changing requirements with an economy of effort, while producing optimum performance, will require a first-class athletic performance. Any structural defects will become apparent over the conditioning for distance should the dog not possess all the necessary physical attributes.

4. Feet

The fourth important attribute for the top-class Siberian is good feet. So what do we mean by good feet? The key to this lies again in reference to the Standard. "Oval", rather than small and round in shape. A good size foot in proportion to the dog, in shape and appearance often referred to as a "modified hare-foot", with pads "tough and thickly cushioned" is vital.

You can have all the attributes of a perfect Siberian, but if it is cursed with poor feet, the dog and you are going to struggle through a working life of bootees, potions, ointments and some discomfort to the Siberian.

A well-cushioned, well knuckled-up foot, with tough pads is a work of art. Over the years, those Siberians with 'lemon' pads and with good strong nails, capable of taking plenty of wear, have proved to us to be even tougher than the black, fully pigmented pads. In any event, some dogs possess thinner pads than may be at first obvious. For this reason your dogs' feet should be checked each and every time they are in harness.

EATING AND DRINKING

Control over the quality and quantity of food is most important when working, and especially when racing your Siberian. If you do not know for sure how much or what you are feeding your dog, you are effectively in an out-of-control situation.

David Nicholson known as 'the Duke', one of the greatest steeplechase racehorse trainers, commented when asked about food that "a top quality food and plenty of hard work" is the key to success. In this day and age there is a temptation to play with additives to enhance performance in harness. But, by comparison to even ten years ago, the all-in-one foods have been developed to a level of sophistication that requires no addition. Indeed additives will tend to unbalance a balanced content.

If you feed meat, be sure that you know what is in it; be comfortable with the quality. Many people we know grind their own food to guarantee the content. The main point is that a Siberian is a relatively small dog and guessing, by handful, rather than specifically weighing, or using measures of some other type like cups, may result in over or under feeding.

Feeding twice rather than once a day will help the digestive process - little and often rather than in one lump. Prior to working it is important that the last meal has passed through the system, and, particularly on race day, try to make sure that the last meal was consumed around eighteen hours beforehand.

On normal training days adult dogs will not have been fed within the previous 12 hours. Puppies may well have been fed, but just a little and often, and anyway puppy training runs are somewhat different to hard conditioning activity on a partly full stomach.

Water, we have said, is most important and should be readily available. A 40lb dog requires two pints of water a day at least. Under the headings of training and racing we refer to the practice of watering during training, and watering prior to competition, both essential practices which are important preventatives against dehydration.



THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER CANNOT BE OVERSTRESSED

Following the training/conditioning activity it is good to have a special reward - a reward that the dogs relate to working hard in harness. We use liver, which can be frozen and given in a semi-frozen condition. Liver is the magic food and brings much to the diet of your Siberians. The dogs love it and two one-inch cubes will be much appreciated when they have had a drink and are cooling off following their exercise.

An alternative to liver cubes could be warm dog soup, which can be equally acceptable. Two cups of meat-based broth has the advantage of encouraging dogs to re-introduce fluids into their system during the recovery phase.

Once recovery has taken place the dogs may have one of their two daily meals around two hours after working. Ideally the second meal will be fed around six to eight hours after the first.

Feeding regimes for long distance conditioning and racing are somewhat different and rely on a steady work, rest and regular food intake over a period of days, with routine playing an important part.

After working, it is important to 'drop' your dogs to answer nature's call within one to two hours. If you have been watering during training and following a good take up of water at the end of exercise, the fluids will pass quickly through the system and the dogs will be anxious to relieve themselves.

Monitoring dogs' stools and urine is, of course, an excellent way to assess a dog's general health and level of hydration.

EQUIPMENT

The quality and condition of your equipment will have a significant impact on your working activity. The equipment falls broadly into the following areas: harnesses and lines, vehicles, and other items.

Harnesses

There are two types of harness style - cross back or H-back. Both have their supporters and both have been used for many years on the trail. With two such proven styles, then other aspects become important, in particular the fit of the harness.

The harness should be made of a soft, flexible webbing type of material, which is easily washable, but also retains its shape over time. Inflexible, rigid or stiff material, which can cut into the dog and quickly shrink or stretch out of shape, should be avoided at all costs. In recent years the leading equipment suppliers have adopted a parachute-type of webbing with a fleece around the shoulders to provide a comfortable pad against which the dogs can pull.

The important areas of fit for the harness are around the neck, rib cage and croup. The neck fitting should be fairly tight yet comfortable. When fitted you should be able just to insert two fingers between the dog's neck and the harness.

The major equipment suppliers colour-code harnesses according to the size of the dog and, therefore, it is likely with a standard-size Siberian, if you get the correct neck size, you will also have the appropriate overall body fitting. You will, however, have a choice of length for the tug loop running off the dog's croup.

The snap, usually made of a good quality brass, and the attachment between the tug line and harness, should hook to the harness loop about three inches behind the dog's croup. Adjusting the final length of the harness loop is best done when the lines are laid out on the ground; harnesses are attached to the snap, with measurements taken from the front of the harness to the neckline.

One of the most common errors made by new drivers is that, through incorrect measurements and poor fitting, the dog ends up not pulling on its tug line, but pulling on its neckline. This is usually because the neckline is positioned parallel to, or backward of, the dog's neck on the gangline, instead of slightly forward, and in line with the dog's muzzle.

Lines

Again these need to be light, flexible, easily washable and well maintained. If at any time there are signs of wear and tear, and this also applies to snaps and harnesses, they must be replaced. This is not an area in which to compromise and, ultimately, the safety of your dogs and you depends on your diligence.

Polypropylene is the most often used material in line making, and this is easily obtainable either locally in major cities, or it may be purchased in spools from major North American equipment suppliers, who will also export a wide range of other items on request.

The make-up and measurement of your lines is crucial. Not only must the line be strong, tough and flexible, but the measurement of gang, tug and neck lines must be accurate, and must fit with your harness, and the make-up should ensure that measurements are consistent

throughout, with no chance of line failure or separation. Connecting the lines to the harnesses will be normally some style of snap. Most commonly used is a high-quality brass trigger snap. Again, this should be regularly checked for signs of wear, and a regular wash or rinse of all lines and snaps will ensure that foreign matter will not foul the spring mechanism of the snap.

Some dogs, particularly youngsters, may resort to line biting, which is biting or chewing the line during hook-up. Teaching the dog that this is unacceptable behaviour is one way of resolving this problem, but inserting a cable, probably of coated wire, through your training lines will reduce the risk of your team separating, and consequential dog injury.

TRAINING AND RACING PLATFORMS

Sleds are of course the 'normal' platform for working, training and racing, where weather and conditions permit. Sleds are, in the main, made from wood, although other materials have been tested over time, from light metals to composites.

One of the most commonly used woods is white ash, which combines flexibility and toughness, and is relatively light. Other harder, heavier woods include hickory, which is often used for training sleds, and is well capable of taking the knocks associated with day-to-day use.

For the driver/musher a sled is a very personal thing, with the preference for style, and the 'feel' of it being developed over time. Drivers will take time to select a sled, but may then keep that sled for years, refurbishing components as wear take its toll.

Selecting and acquiring sleds is best done in a country where there is a variety available from well-established sled builders. Buying a sled at a distance can be fraught with difficulty. Since it could be a lifetime's investment, take the time and trouble to travel if necessary to make a good purchase.

ATVs

Today, most dirt training for larger groups of dogs is undertaken using 'Quads', also known as All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs). These are readily available new or second-hand, and provide ideal control of a team - provided, of course, you do not hook up too many dogs to too small an ATV!

Some choose to train their dogs using an ATV chassis frame, having removed the engine. This is an excellent chassis platform, and of course reduces the weight and removes any of the engine noise distraction.

Prior to the use of ATVs, all sorts of home made vehicles were put together to train dogs - everything from simple, chariot-type welded frames made from car or bicycle components, to car chassis. The problem facing these structures, as opposed to ATVs, was they frequently needed repairing after use over rough ground since they tended not to have suspension.

For smaller teams, or single dog training, the trainer can use bicycles, or, of course, skis on snow. While sounding straightforward, it requires no little skill to achieve!

DIRT TRAINING

Running on dirt, an activity which has become increasingly popular over the last twenty years in snowless terrain, has resulted in the development of highly sophisticated race rigs, originally based on bicycle components but now using more exotic materials and manufactured to bespoke designs, either by the driver for himself, or on a made-to-order basis. No little skill is involved in this activity, and potential buyers should spend time studying different styles.

It is difficult to generalise as to the weight and size of your dirt training platform. So much depends on the terrain on which you train. Is it flat or hilly; is the surface firm, soft or sandy? Do you want to carry passengers? How much do you want to invest? The advice would be to remain flexible. It may be necessary to have two, or even three, vehicles if you have a group of dogs in training.

LIGHTING

One other aspect that you should not forget is lighting. Depending on your commitments you may choose to train your dogs in the dark. In such circumstances it is most important that you have excellent lighting. Powerful halogen lamps can easily be run off long-life batteries. Dog teams get a thrill from running in the dark chasing shadows, and running speeds often seem, and in fact may actually be, faster. In those circumstances if you have any problems, such as a tangle, it is important that your lighting allows you to see it quickly.

OTHER ESSENTIAL ITEMS

There are other items which form an important part of the driver's equipment, each of which could be discussed in some detail but probably only warrant a line here.

- A shock-absorption system within the dog lines which allows the dogs to lunge forward without jarring their spinal column. Most often contained within the gang-line behind the wheel dogs, it can also be in the individual tug lines, or even as a part of the rear of the harness.
- A snow or dirt hook which will allow you to hold the team when you want to stop and attend to the dogs. In addition to this you need a snub line which attaches to the rearmost part of the team's gang lines and will allow you safe anchorage when you stop and attach the snub line to a post or tree. This is also the device you use, the quick release clip on the snub line, to release your team when you have completed hook-up at the start and are ready to go. It is important that the snub line is attached directly to the team.
- A dog-bag should be available to allow you to carry a tired dog back to the finish in comfort. This bag should be functional and ready for use, not merely a cosmetic item.
- Dog's bootees should always be available no matter how many dogs you are running. A range of things can cause a dog to bruise or have a sore foot. A comfortable fleece bootee

with a Velcro attachment will resolve the problem quickly, and may allow you to continue.

- We always carry a knife, and a double clip for emergencies. There are rare occurrences when you have a complex tangle which may result in half the team of dogs continuing to tug and pull on a tangled dog's neck or leg, and it proves quite impossible to release the dog. A knife can quickly cut a line to release the dog, thus preventing the risk of stress and serious injury. A double clip - a double brass trigger snap - has many uses. Most typically they can be used to quickly replace failed snaps, out on the trail. It is always handy to have one on your belt or in your pocket.
- Two final comments about lines. Typically these will be attached to your sled/rig/ATV by a karabiner, or looped directly into a suitable attachment point on the platform. It is critical that your lines are set at the right height in relation to the ground and the back of your team - neither too high, which could prevent a dog escaping a tangle, or too low to the ground which will result in dogs constantly crossing lines during running. Dogs should be able to pull on a level plane when leaning into the harness.
- Laying out your lines in front of your vehicle will allow you a final, not first, check that all is well prior to hook-up. Check each snap and each line joint for signs of wear. You cannot be too careful.

TRANSPORT

There seem to be as many types of vehicles and vehicle arrangements for transporting sled dogs as there are sled dogs running in harness.

You have a choice of either a bespoke vehicle, or a trailer, or some modification to your normal day-to-day vehicle. Focusing on trucks and vans and trailers, there are some quite simple rules.

- Dogs need to travel in comfort. The space provided must not be too much, nor too little, there must be room for movement but it must also be snug for comfort. Cleanliness is vital and there is also the matter of companionship with a travelling friend. Dogs like to travel with their particular friends. We all know that they develop preferences over time, and if they travel in comfort with a friend they will relax and stress will be minimal.
- Good ventilation is important.
- Quick and easy double access, from the front and the back of a transporter or cage, in the event of an automobile accident is also vital.
- The box or cage surface on which the dogs stand should be non-slip, the boxes themselves must be as quiet and noise-free as possible, and easy to clean out.
- Puppies may find initially that travelling induces motion sickness. Although there are many home remedies for this, the short answer is that 99 per cent will grow out of it.

- When travelling to a training site or a race, allow plenty of time, get there early, relax the dogs, stay over a night before a race if necessary, and, on the way, stop regularly to allow the dogs to meet the calls of nature.

TRAINING AND CONDITIONING

"We are going training." What does this statement mean?

Training is a process of education and learning. The majority of training, the critical base training, takes place in the formative years. But, as with humans, the learning or training process lasts, to some degree, for a lifetime.

Conditioning, however, is something different - it concerns fitness. While training, conditioning can also be achieved; while you learn, at the same time you can achieve a degree of conditioning. When you are training and educating your dogs you are also conditioning them. As your dogs grow old, so the emphasis moves towards conditioning, and conditioning yearlings is very different to conditioning older dogs.

A fundamental requirement of training your dogs is that you are able to exercise control at all times. This will create a bond of confidence between you and your dogs. The dogs will quickly learn that you are in control of the team, and you and your dogs will have the confidence to be able to manage any situation that may arise.

The critical aspects of control involve your ability to be able to brake, stop and hold the team at your command; this capability is, of course, greatly enhanced with fully operational equipment. To limit the potential for failure, checking and cleaning your equipment on a frequent basis is critical.



EXERCISING CONTROL OVER BIG TEAMS IS VITALLY IMPORTANT

One aspect that is frequently ignored is the ability to translate experience, skills and knowledge acquired from other situations, to help in the training of sled dogs. Therefore if you possess knowledge and skill from, say, performing at a top level in another sport, much of this can prove useful in training sled dogs.

While this is not always the case, training should be a fun, positive experience. Sled dogs with attitude love to run - they will enjoy it if you enjoy it. As mentioned earlier, sled dogs can

pick up your mood very quickly. If you are low or down, then your dogs will be the same; dogs can quickly pick up your disappointment, and will be negatively affected by it.

KEEPING RECORDS

To assist you in your overall management of training and conditioning it is important to keep accurate records. Venues, dates, temperatures, humidity, who runs where on the team, distances, training vehicles used, additional comments - which will include how certain dogs perform, bitches in season, and observations you may have. These will form a critical part of your knowledge database, as well as being interesting to look back on in years to come.

TRAINING PERIODS

There is no reason why, climate permitting, you cannot run your sled dogs all the year round. Much depends on your level of interest, and commitment. In the UK during the summer months, from four o'clock to six o'clock in the morning, when the temperatures are below 15°C, are great opportunities for hook-ups.

During those summer months, when you are engaged purely in fun runs eight to ten times a month, this will keep basic conditioning on your dogs. During the winter, up to 16 times a month will allow you to build that base into hard conditioning. We find fifteen to sixteen hook-ups per month are about right; more, and you will risk sourness after a period of time.

Top canine athletes are like top human athletes. They always like and need to undertake a level of exercise to retain fitness. If all activity ceases for a period of time, and consequently fitness is lost, there is a risk, certainly as dogs mature, that they may never regain the peak levels of fitness of which they are capable.

If we accept the premise that we gain reward and satisfaction from doing any activity well, so it is with sled dog training. Dogs will learn from positive experiences, quality training and conditioning. Negative experiences such as allowing dogs to take wrong turns, or putting them in a position where they cannot achieve that which you are asking of them due to lack of fitness, is the road to disaster.

PUPPY TRAINING

Pups can start training from as young as 18 weeks. Much depends on your level of knowledge and your preferences. Some will prefer not to start puppy training until six months or even older.

Remember puppies are physically very vulnerable at this age, and psychologically they are learning about the world around them. So there are both physical and mental aspects you have to manage for them through good decision making. Bad experiences, like a knock, or tumble, or a tangle, or being expected to run too fast, may be something a youngster will not forget easily. Thus control, absolute confidence in what you are doing, and, possibly, some

outside help are important. It is far better to wait until dogs are older and probably more able to cope, than to start too young.

New pups can first be walked in harness on their own to experience the new feel of the harness on the body. Then they can run with others in front of a rig or bicycle. Walking a puppy in harness, with the lead on the harness loop, is easily managed. When walking in harness, however, it is best that the puppy is discouraged from sniffing or loafing about. This can be achieved by following some bait - either an older dog or a partner or friend walking out in front at a distance. For pulling in harness there is always reward at the finish, some type of favourite treat.

It is important that huskies learn to pull. To most this will come naturally; to others they will need monitoring. If they do not learn to pull they may just learn to 'run along'. This is a habit that can be acquired when you run puppies too fast with adult dogs, that is, beyond the puppies' 'pulling speed'.

Puppies approaching six months of age can be attached in harness on lines in front of a bicycle. If a single puppy has a friend or companion, excitement and competition usually sweep away any doubt over pulling forward. If any hesitation exists, the bait of a family member running out of sight around a corner is usually more than enough to start the chase, combined with lots of encouragement and possibly a little help by pedalling or pushing the training vehicle.

This first experience is difficult for new Siberians and new owners alike. It is very delicate, in fact, since there is much that can go wrong.

These first outings must, of course, be taken on a good trail surface, and over a short distance - say half-a-mile. Introducing puppies to running with the help of other Siberian adults is, by comparison, easy. It is important to ensure that pups are run next to tolerant, but no-nonsense adults from whom they will learn good practices about pulling and working generally, and not bad habits like line biting.

A puppy's reaction to its first experience in harness will vary. Some will, from day one, run in a focused, head-down, fully concentrated manner. Others will be all over the place, looking at their surroundings, trying to play with their teammates, paying more attention to wildlife than the task in hand. Firmness matched with tolerance is important at this stage. In these early runs most of your comments will be directed towards encouraging the newcomer.

This new experience of work will be easy for the pups if they can be introduced to it via a team of oldies or veterans. Often kennels will allow you to introduce your Siberian to working in this way by running in a friend's team. But beware! The puppy may not know the other dogs, and may not recognise the driver's voice, so there are a lot of issues to consider.

Another important introduction for pups can be to take them along to watch teams of dogs in training. They can see dogs at hook-up and return. They can become acquainted with the noise and atmosphere.

Many books talk about puppies pulling tyres as an early learning experience. We have no real view on this technique, except to mention it here. It is something we have never had to use, and have not found it necessary in the training of our dogs.

BALANCING TEAMS

Selecting your teams for running is important. In the first instance the dogs should be rotated side to side, and from front to back, in order to develop a balanced physique and muscling from running in different positions. They should also learn to run with different partners, to give you that flexibility for team selection. In the same way as we are right or left handed, dogs inevitably will have a preference about which side they prefer to run.

They will also have, in some cases, greater aptitude to run in lead, swing/point, team or wheel. But you must develop the individual dogs' potential to the full and establish just what that dog's capability is.

Where possible the team should be of balanced or equal ability. High performers will be frustrated or blunted by low or non-performers. Remember, to achieve quality work for the youngest, or slowest, or oldest member of your selected team, you have to run at the speed of that dog. Faster dogs will be pulling even harder, but unable to go at the speed they want. If you run at their speed the slower dog will be run off its feet and not pulling.

Select your teams before training, then make out your written team sheet which should view your team from the driver's position, with the leaders at the top of the page and the wheelers at the bottom, or closest to you. Display the sheet in a prominent place during hook-up, usually on the side window of the truck. Plan your training meticulously before you set out. Know the trail, the distance, the temperature, the team, your training vehicle, and just exactly what it is you are setting out to achieve. Have a fallback position just in case. How many times have we all set off only to find we are unable to access our intended venue!

When selecting the size of your team for training, to repeat what we have stated earlier, control is everything. Therefore balancing the size of the team with the inclusion of veterans, young pups, and fast with slow dogs becomes a task in itself.

When you have dogs of different capabilities, it is well worthwhile running two groups, and is more considerate to the dogs.

CONDITIONING THE OLDER DOG

As dogs age they require a different level and type of conditioning. Accepting that optimum performance is from around two-and-a-half years old to six years old, conditioning the veteran (7+ years) is an art. Pups and yearlings require special attention but you can also have the wise or clever veteran who gives all the appearances of working and pulling hard, but is actually only keeping the tug line taught while putting limited weight on it.

Large dogs can require a different approach to training than light dogs. A 55lb male is somewhat different from a 35lb bitch. Awareness of these differences is so important. The training techniques do not change, but their application can vary from dog to dog.

TRAINING DISTANCE AND SPEED

Siberians like to lope when training. Some have the ability to perform an extended trot, and indeed this can be as fast as some Siberian's lope, but that is the exception. Therefore Siberians will lope as far as their fitness and the trail conditions allow. That is, of course, unless the team has been specifically trained for long distance races, where drivers frequently condition for fast trotting over great distances.

Siberians, therefore, will set off on their training run at a fast lope, settling into a comfortable rhythm after a mile or so. This then will be their pace for as long as fitness allows. When they come off the lope it is an opportunity for you to rest your team. Remember, we are looking for quality conditioning. The dogs want to lope, as much as you want them to, so by stopping on these occasions, they will realise the consequence of their ceasing to lope is that you will stop the team. Impact - they will in future lope even further, not wishing to stop. If you do not stop, the team will think trotting is acceptable and you will develop aspects of good and bad training in your hook-ups.

If you start at a level where your team can lope the full distance from say 2 miles for adults (half-a-mile upwards for pups) and steadily increase in increments of a half-a-mile every 7 to 10 outings, you will, with a limited size team of eight dogs or less, quickly develop a team that can run at a lope a distance which can be roughly calculated at up to a mile and a half per team member. So three miles for two dogs, eight to nine miles for six dogs. This is on flat trails and merely a guide. The regular repetition and incremental increases is, however, the important aspect in achieving fitness and hard conditioning.

There are differences between conditioning on snow and dirt. Variations in dirt conditions are arguably far more limited than in snow. Dirt is either wet or dry, or frozen, and the consequential rolling resistance, or drag, will be only marginally different.

Snow can be manicured to a slick, no-resistance surface, or, at the other extreme, can be wet, heavy and melting. In these circumstances the same conditioning distance will provide two entirely different results. Perhaps another way to make a comparison is fast, firm, rolled dirt and grass which is somewhat similar to snow, while a wheeled vehicle moving through sand is not unlike running a sled through heavy wet snow.



**SNOW OFFERS THE BEST CONDITIONS FROM THE DOGS
POINT OF VIEW**

The distances you train and condition will all be geared towards some goal you have. This may or may not be competitive races. If it is, the conditioning programme should be complete at least two weeks before the date concerned, so that the dogs can rest a little after this hard preparation. Believe it or not, rest has a very important part to play during the conditioning programme!

There are different types of conditioning and you will have to include all aspects during your team's build up. Heavy training is rather akin to the weight training an athlete does in the gym. It is most important to build the muscle base on which the race conditioning can be built. In a way it stretches the dog to the extremes of its potential. Pulling significant weights over medium distance will be the hardest you will ever require the dog to work.

Light, or speed, conditioning is in some way a simulation of competition where dogs are pulling lighter loads, and are encouraged to increase the average speed by 25 per cent.

Too much heavy training will result in muscle-bound dogs, too much speed will result in non-typical, overly light dogs whose structures lack the toughness to work hard over distance.

In both scenarios, you can undertake interval training. Human athletes will run around an athletic track, jogging 200 metres, sprinting 200 metres alternately. The same principle can be applied to Siberians, not by loping and trotting, but by use of the training vehicle brake and through voice commands.

Using half-mile intervals you can teach your Siberians to pick up on command, driving extra hard for periods, before resting them at the slower lope.

TRAINING PATTERNS

There are many patterns and preferences - day on day off, two on one off, three on two off etc. Again, there are so many influences that will determine the pattern. Remember though, in hard training 16 outings a month is as much as dogs need, and do mix serious work with the occasional purely fun outing. We would certainly suggest two days off following two days stressful competition, followed by a fun hook-up to get back into the work routine.

It is thought that a three-day gap will cost you a day's conditioning but this is doubtful, particularly if the three day gap is, say, once a month. Indeed a fit dog could probably miss a week without significant ill effects, and catch up in a run or two.

Measuring fitness levels is difficult, but one way, which is probably as good as any, is simply to observe the speed of recovery following a period of intense physical activity. We can all tell the difference between dogs that have found an activity relatively easy and those who have found it tough. Fit dogs will recover quickly and an hour or so after activity will show no apparent signs of strain or stress.

DEVELOPING A UNIT

It is a popular myth that you should run your lightweight bitches at the front of your team and your strong males on wheel.

Perhaps we should first identify the team's positions. Your lead dogs are at the front, and behind your leaders you have your 'point' or 'swing' dogs. Swing is the name given to this position in the team, and derives from Alaska. In the lower 48, a term which refers to the 48th Parallel - that is, South of Alaska - this position in the team is frequently referred to as point. All other dogs, apart from those immediately in front of your rig or sled which are referred to as wheel dogs, are known as team dogs.

The dog's athleticism, aptitude and your needs will ultimately determine where a dog runs in a team. Some of the larger male Siberians can also be the most athletic and possess the greatest drive and speed. Why would you not train these to run in front? Some of the lighter Siberians may not have the confidence to run in front, and will be happier at swing. It is dangerous to generalise.

However, it is true to say that your 'wheelers' will receive a fair amount of pushing about from the gangline when cornering and, of course, will have the close vicinity of the rig or sled to cope with.

It is important to give your dogs every opportunity to develop as a balanced animal and, as has been said before, through rotation try them in every position on the team. How often do we hear, "he always runs on the right wheel because he likes it"? Well, how do you know that if he has been developed as a one-sided sled dog, with no opportunity elsewhere in the team!

It is worth considering the issue of bitches in season at this point. Depending on the degree of sensitivity of your bitches to their season, you should consider your lead dog options. Bitches who follow a six-month cycle can be less than 100 per cent for 6 months of the year. That said, some exceptional bitches are not apparently affected by their seasons, and will drive your team hard all the year round. These bitches are super to have, particularly if they are of a good size and mentally tough.

When selecting your team, speed and athleticism will dictate your final decision, but, yes, you are likely to have some medium to large Siberians on wheel, and, yes, some fast, hard drivers in front. Apart from the enjoyment of the dogs and their wanting to run with their chosen partner, and some do enjoy particular teammates more than others, that is as much as you can say.

Once having identified a team for competitive purposes much can be gained from developing that team as a unit. One is always fascinated by the way some drivers chop and change their team. In the same way that you can optimise an individual dog's capabilities so too you can really develop teamwork. A really good team will always gain the upper hand on a group of talented but disparate individuals.

COMMAND TRAINING

Training dogs to run in front, assuming responsibility for both the speed of the team and the direction, is one of the most rewarding aspects of running sled dogs.

There are four fundamental commands, a right turn is "Gee", left turn is "Haw", "Go on" is to keep straight on at, say, a cross roads, or remain on a trail where a turn-off is an option, and "Wooah" for slow and stop. In addition you can call "Get up" to pick up the pace, and "Steady" for a downhill or breaking manoeuvre, where you want them to listen carefully and slow a little.

Drivers will have their own commands as variants, but the key is consistency of command and also consistency of voice. If dogs are trained by a whole variety of different people, who call commands differently, at different times relative to the turn for example, then confusion will occur. And remember, it is not the dog's fault!

A consistent voice command, and necessary encouragement, is all that is needed. If a dog needs a reprimand then a sharp call will suffice, but unnecessary chitchat for the length of the trail will only cause the dogs to switch off.

Training pups from the start is tough and requires understanding, care and patience. Nevertheless, take time, do not allow them to make mistakes and get away with it, since they will confuse commands with taking correct decisions.

Very simply, young pups will best learn on a simple trail with a few turns, through repetition and encouragement. So a trail of say two miles with five or six turns is ideal to practice commands. This trail should be run repeatedly until not only are the youngsters running the trail 'in their sleep' but, as they reach a turn they associate the directional change with a particular command. This reinforcement through repetition will result in the average puppies picking up commands quite quickly.

With your first run, and with all subsequent runs for training, when you come to a turn, call a command and if the leaders do not take it, you stop and hold the team until the leaders revise their selection and correct their mistake because, as we have said before, you do at all times retain control! A fundamental mistake many drivers make is to allow their 'front end' to make a mistake and get away with it without correction - you are doing yourself and the team a disservice.

Trained lead dogs do not have to receive further experience in training or during conditioning. Once trained, a Siberian will not forget how to run in front, or their commands. Training should be used to, as it implies, train other Siberians to run in lead.



A GOOD LEAD DOG CAN TEACH A YOUNGSTER TO KEEP OUT OF TROUBLE

If you have experienced lead dogs then they can act as perfect tutors to train youngsters to run in front. Some are better tutors than others; some have great confidence, but may not be able to take on the tutor role without making errors themselves.

Some Siberians have the potential to be natural leaders from the earliest age and will drive head down in a focused manner, constantly listening to the driver and responding to commands quickly and accurately. Other, slower learners may take months, even a year or so, to develop into reliable leaders. That said, these slow learners can also be the most reliable, and a greater long-term investment for you.

If you take the time and the trouble you can train 99 per cent of all Siberians to run lead. Whether or not you want them there, or they want to be there is a different matter. But remember - flexibility.

PASSING PRACTICE

A team that is capable of coping with unexpected events during work is far easier to control. 'Unexpected events' will include people, animals, fallen trees and a myriad of other possibilities. It may also include other teams, particularly if you train in an area with others. Training your team to pass others without interference will therefore assist you not only in competition but also in other situations.

The simplest training can be provided by working with friends with other teams. Starting off at intervals, the lead team will allow the following team to catch up by braking. When the follower is ready to overtake they will call 'trail', the leader moving to one side of the trail to allow clear passage. As the follower pulls parallel the leader will brake to allow the follower to accelerate through quickly.

The follower during this procedure will encourage the team to "get up", that is, to pick up the speed, and if any team members move towards the team being overtaken, a sharp

reprimand of "leave" should make for a clear passing movement.

This passing procedure may be practised several times during a training run to reinforce the experience. It should not be long before the team will pass with almost total disregard for others.

Head-on passing is best practised on a wide trail, using at least one experienced team. Two young puppy teams will quite often end up tied in a knot, which is a very negative experience. The oncoming, experienced team driving past a small team of youngsters, or preferably youngsters with experienced leaders, will quickly teach the youngsters good practice.

WATER ROUTINES

As has been mentioned elsewhere, water has a critical role to play in the maintenance of healthy active sled dogs. An important aspect of this is the use of water during training. It is good practice to always carry some water. This will not only allow you to provide a drink during a planned water stop during activity, but, should you have an unexpected stop, which results in you being unable to complete your training run, you will be able to look after a potentially stressed team while help arrives with the truck.

The use of water has two major functions during training. It prevents the risk of unnecessary dehydration or overheating, and in addition it ensures that, following the two or three-minute water break, the quality of the remainder of the training run is maintained following not only the rest, but also the intake of water.

A bucket with a lid acts as the best water carrier. You should visit each pair of dogs in turn, allowing the dog to dip its head in once for a long drink. Once they raise their head you move on. You should go up the line twice allowing two dips; this should provide the right intake without risking any excessive intake.

Folk should not concern themselves that watering, which you can do once or twice on a run, will raise the teams' expectation of water during competition. Our experience is that race day is so different in so many ways from a day's training, that never is there any hint that dogs expect a water stop during competition. That said, it is sensible practice to vary where you stop to water on the trail, since constantly stopping in the same place will inevitably heighten expectations.

AREAS OF RISK

Apart from souring your dogs, excessive or thoughtless training can result in stiffness and general discomfort, jarring through the skeletal structure, stress fractures, stone bruising of the pads, grazes and abrasions, excessive nail wear, sore pasterns, heat stress and dehydration etc.

All these conditions can be avoided through good planning and preparation in advance and thinking 'dog' all the time!

After any hard exercise should come a special reward and, as has been mentioned, nothing is more gratefully received than liver, lightly boiled in approximately two x one inch cubes. A dog biscuit in a hot dog's mouth could not be less appropriate - would you finish a five to ten mile run with a dog biscuit!

Following work, once they have been watered and rewarded, allow your dog to cool down. If you have a large fenced facility allow them to loosen-off by encouraging them to run around.

After your main winter season activity run your dogs down gradually, in the same way you built them up. You should gradually reduce both the number of outings back to say 8-10 a month, and reduce the period of running time. Nothing could be worse than to stop a dog from all activity when it is at peak fitness, both physically and psychologically.

Dogs, young and old, will sometimes have line tangles while running. This is inevitable. Useful time can be spent encouraging the Siberian to get out of the tangle unaided, where possible. Gentle braking of the rig or sled will aid the dog concerned, but, given encouragement, dogs will quickly discover escape techniques.

Despite all your efforts to encourage your dogs to respond to the call of nature prior to work, they will inevitably want to go during running. Again, encouragement by the driver, and a little use of the brake without stopping will teach them that if, in future, they need to go they can do so, without fear of injury.

A comment regarding eager helpers, friends who want to be part of your routine but only on an infrequent basis. Two points. Make sure the help received is beneficial to you and the dogs and does not result in you being thrown out of your routine and missing something and, secondly, make sure the dogs are comfortable with your helpers themselves, and are not just being thrown together with a non-doggy person!

TRAINING VENUES

An important factor in the training and conditioning of your team is your training area. It will also have a significant impact on the enjoyment your dogs have when working.

Variety is the spice of life they say, and this should be very much your goal when training dogs. While finding an area is sometimes tough, the ideal is to identify as many different trails and different hook-up points as possible. Different training areas, which present both hill training combined with training on the flat, is desirable.

Surface variation is also a factor. Fit feet are achieved not just by running on snow or grass or sand, but by running on a range of surfaces apart, of course, from concrete or asphalt. The number of teams we know who can run on softer, 'giving' trails but cannot perform on harder, faster, dirt trails, and vice versa, is always surprising. For those who do not have the benefit of good-quality year-round snow, and I guess that is the majority, your Siberians must develop feet that are tough enough to cope with a range of surfaces.

Teams that train constantly on flat trails lack the confidence to perform on hills; teams that only train on hills will lack the aptitude to work at a steady pace on flatter terrain.

Many drivers will limit themselves to working in daylight, but an all-too-familiar trail will look completely different in the dark, with rig lights casting shadows, and the dogs chasing imaginary images on the trail ahead.

A trail that offers winding tracks and plenty of turns is far more appealing than long grinding straights which can drive a dog to total boredom.

Variety will benefit your team, hills and flats, soft and hard, day and night, snow and dirt, wet and dry - these will all provide the appropriate experience for your team, and will involve you in even greater commitment if you are to provide this experience.

RACING

Ultimately, success on the race trail will depend on your ability to juggle the ingredients of successful sled dog racing - the breeding programme, the training and conditioning, nutrition, your equipment and your race strategy. Where competition is fierce all these must come together if you are to achieve success.

One of the great aspects of this sport is that it is like a game of chess, you are faced with a new experience on each occasion you compete, and you must be flexible, and be prepared to analyse past performance in detail if you are to be able to make improvements and move forward.

Never run a race trail unless you have familiarised yourself with it before hand. Arrive a day early and walk or drive the trail. In doing so you will also reduce the effect stress has on your dogs when travelling on the day of the race.

Prepare meticulously for the race. Check every detail of your race equipment. So often we have seen the best team of dogs fail not because of a dog issue but because of equipment failure.

Complete your hard training two weeks before racing, and keep your team 'peaked' in preparation. Rest your team a full two days after a hard race, and then pick up with a fun run. Analyse the whole team's performance and learn.



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