

Mushing 101: A Primer for someone getting started in Sled Dog Racing

All dogs love this sport. Never underestimate your dogs ability to rip the sled out of your grasp and tear down the trail without you, no matter how well trained the dog is.

Mushing is not a one man sport.

When hooking up a team, you'll need at least three people. You'll need the dog's main line (gangline) attached to a brake line, which is attached to a tree (BIG TREE). Just in case the brake doesn't hold, or malfunctions, or other disastrous things happen, have someone stand on the sled's brake while the dogs are being attached to the gangline.

Attach lead dogs first. Their job is to keep the lines tight. If they don't know this yet, you will need another person to hold onto the lead dogs and keep them out front, keeping the line tight while the other dogs are getting attached. Get yourself ready as quickly as possible. Now is not the time to dawdle. Once the dogs get all hooked up, they want to GO! The longer you stand there, the more chance they have to get tangled, chew through lines, fight, or hurt themselves. As soon as all of the dogs are hooked up, relieve the brake person by stepping on the brake BEFORE that person steps off the brake. Grasp the driver's bow firmly. Check to make sure everyone's facing forward, and not tangled. Reach for the brake line. Pull the panic snap release. Grasp the driver's bow firmly with both hands. If there are no tangles or immediate concerns, signal the dog holders that you're ready, or do a 5 4 3 2 1 countdown, so they will know to let go and jump back at the same time that you take your foot off the brake, tell them "Let's GO!" and kick or run a few steps to get the sled moving and jump on the runners. It's important that the holders don't let go of the dogs until you're removing your foot from the brake. If they surge forward, and your foot is still on the brake, preventing the sled from moving, they will try a different direction. They'll start hopping over the gang line and seeing how many which ways from Sunday they can get the lines tangled. Spinning in place is always a popular choice with frustrated dogs, too. Not good. Then you have to stop.

So, let's review: Have enough helpers. Double check everything. Be ready to go as soon as the last dog is hooked up. Don't delay liftoff. Synchronize the start. Help get the sled moving, so the dogs' energy is not wasted, and they don't think they're stuck (have you gotten on the scales, lately?). Stop if there is a tangle, or a dog has got his leg over a line or through a neckline or anything else that would be harmful or dangerous for the dogs (or you).

Extra things to check. If you've had help, double check everything. If you are the helper, here are some tips for being a good helper: Get the harnesses on right. The dog isn't going to be very comfortable if both legs are through the same hole. Make sure the dog KEEPS it on right, until takeoff. Dogs squirm and get very excited. When snapping the tug line to the harness loop, be very careful that the snap snaps shut. Sometimes snaps freeze open or get jammed, with snow in them. When I'm assisting another driver, and I snap his or her dog in, I very obviously SHOW my hands, so that the driver can SEE that I have insured that the snap closed effectively, and that I double checked this. Make sure that the neck lines are not so long as to allow a dog to get a front leg over the neckline. This is a very uncomfortable predicament. Some dogs will figure it out, and get their own foot back over the right side of the gear, given a few seconds or minutes. IF the dog does not right him or herself, however, you will have to stop the sled, snub down, and fix the problem. That's right, MINUS all the great help you had at the starting chute. So it helps if you don't have to do this. There's not always enough of the right kind of snow that will hold a snow hook (I don't trust snow hooks), so good luck.

The best arrangement is to have a double lead (two dogs up front) with a double wheel dog arrangement. If you have just three dogs, people's opinions vary. I think dogs do better with two leaders. Ed thinks it's easier on the dogs with two wheel dogs and one leader. One leader can't very well tangle himself, unless he actually lets the wheel dogs pass him. Use your judgment and consider the experience of the dogs

you're using. Experienced dogs understand how not to cause debacles the result in the sled stopping. Experienced dogs are only concerned with going forward. New dogs may want to twist around and see where the owner is.

Remember to never let go of the sled. Dogs running loose with a sled is a very dangerous situation. They could all break their necks on the first corner, where the sled hits a tree and they come to an abrupt stop, from a speed of up to 30 miles per hour. You could also smash the sled to smithereens. You could also injure another musher or skier who is out on the trail and doesn't hear the dogs coming up behind him. No matter how long you are dragged, as long as you have life in your cold, white-knuckled hands, don't let go of the sled. On the other hand, DO NOT, under any circumstances tie yourself in any way whatsoever to the sled. You want being dragged to be a choice, not a requirement. You could get seriously hurt or dead by tying yourself to the sled.

Tips: To slow the sled (sissy!), keep your toes on the runners, and dig your heels into the snow on the insides of the runners. To slow the sled quickly, use one foot to step on the brake, lightly, or more heavily. The sled doesn't steer very well while the brakes are on, so I mostly don't touch the brake much. If you have a responsive sled, and know how to shift your weight and lean the sled into turns, you will be able to steer somewhat, and not just be at the mercy of where the dogs take you. If you have a person sitting in your basket, toss that info right out the window. It is almost impossible to steer a sled meaningfully with a person's weight in the basket.

To anchor the snow hook, stand on the brake, remove the snow hook from its holster. Jam it into the snow to the outside of the runner. Kick it in and forward with your heel to lock it in there. Slowly let the sled inch forward to make the anchor tight, before taking your foot completely off the brake. If the hook is seeming to hold, go do whatever you have to do, but make it snappy. The moment the dogs see your hand getting ready to grip the driver's bow again, they will be in a frenzy. I have a friend who was stuck on a stop sign for an hour one time. She pulled over to straighten out a line, and every time she got back to release the hook, the dogs started surging ahead so strongly, she couldn't get the hook OUT from behind the metal stop sign pole. She'd get them all calmed down, and on a stay, and she'd reach for that driver's bow, and they'd all go ape again.

A word to the wise: When you see a hairpin turn coming up, don't slow down, the dogs will just accelerate as soon as they make the turn, and you will be whip-lashed into the nearest tree. If you are concerned about making it around a corner, start leading the sled out to the opposite side of the trail so that you will have a wider turning radius. Dogs always like to cut to the inside of corners (taking the shortest distance between two points), and this could pull your sled dangerously close to a tree, snow bank or fencepost. If one of your runners goes into deep snow, you're usually going to be "toast." If you're able to jump off the runners and lift the sled with your hands a few steps into the direction away from the snow bank, that'll work. If you let the sled just follow the dogs, many times they'll pull you right around stuff you thought you'd hit, but if you apply the brake, you are not letting the dogs pull you around it, and you will wrap yourself right around that tree.

In sledding, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. SO, when you slow the team because of a dangerous spot, they catch their breath for a second or two, and the minute you let up off the break, they are sprinting like they did out of the starting chute. Sometimes this makes it even more dangerous than if you didn't brake. One time, I was in a race where there was a very treacherous spot right at the finish line. I tried to apply the brake, but I forgot the part about the brake not working when you're not in contact with the ground (airborne!). When the sled touched the earth again, we stopped for a moment. No broken bones or sled parts, so I gave them the "go-ahead." Well, they started running like bats out of hell down this vertical drop to the parking lot that was full of tree roots crossing the path, and the race marshal advised against using your brake in this area, lest you snag a tree root and come to a

sudden and unpleasant stop. YIPE! I would have been better to just holler, “Yee Haw!” as we went airborne, and let them keep going the pace they were before I tried to stop the sled. There were a lot of people who smashed their sleds that day...

Commands: There are several commands you’ll want your dog to learn to participate in sled dog racing. You’ll have to understand their use and meaning first!

Let’s Go! – start running

Gee – turn onto the trail on the right

Haw – turn onto the trail on the left

On By – Don’t turn onto the trail on your right or left and ignore the spectators, other team, photographer, wildlife, etc.

Hike, Hike, Hike! – means the same as Let’s go, but usually while you’re already moving. It means pick up the pace

Keep it Tight, or Get Out – (spoken to the lead dogs) keep the lead line tight, so that the rest of the team can’t tangle (it gives you goose bumps to see a lead dog who really knows how to keep his line tight).

Whoa! – this means stop, but nobody has told the dogs this, so you’re basically wasting your breath. My dogs stop quite well for a pathetic shriek of “wait!” though, because I usually scream that in panic right before I crash the sled into a tree, bringing the sled to a halt, with or without their cooperation in doing so.

Any other words or commands your dog knows from other sports, can be used in sledding, also. I’ve been known to be seen passing someone else’s tired dogs at the finish line by saying, “Ready,... Set....” or “GET YOUR BALL, Get your BALL!” (flyball terms). I’ve also gotten my own sluggish dogs up a steep hill by saying “Walk up!” (borrowed from agility). If your dogs don’t know “on by” (when you see a deer) you could use “leave-it,” instead... Whatever my dogs are DOING at the time, I try to name it, so they can learn the vocabulary. If they’re trotting, I say, “Good Trot” (you don’t always want them to run full speed). Also, when the trail curves to the right, I say Gee, even if there’s not an actual TURN (choice) they have to make, like at an intersection. The same goes for curves to the left. If they’re ever to master and pay attention to these terms, you have to start using them.

Lingo:

We are “**mushers,**” but we never use the word, “Mush.”

A **leader** is any dog that will run out front and keep the team moving forward, regardless if he knows gee/haw or squat.

A **wheel dog** is the dog or brace that runs immediately in front of the brush bow.

A **brush bow** is the thing that deflects your sled off of small trees or other obstacles (if you’re lucky).

The **driver’s bow** is what you hold onto and lean with, as the driver of the sled.

Gangline is what you hook the team to, to pull the sled.

Tugline is what gets hooked to each of the dog’s harnesses, near the butt.

Neckline is what hooks two dogs together on a team. For the leaders, it would be a loose, separate neck line. For the team dogs, it would be a neckline woven into the gangline. Necklines are often RED, or orange, or a different color from the rest of the gangline. This is so when you have nothing but a pile of spaghetti, with dogs all twisted up and so mangled, you can’t tell which line is which, and they’re cutting their own air off, you can reach for the red lines and unsnap them, allowing your dogs to regain consciousness.

Shock Absorber (actually, I’m not sure what this sled part is called, but DON’T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT). This is the piece of line between the sled and the gangline, that has give to it by virtue of having a bungee inside, or being made of bungees, or whatever. This makes it so that there is a “cushion” between hitting that tree with the sled, and breaking your dogs’ necks (cushion for the dogs, not you). Or, when they’re trying to move the sled with that 200 pound driver on it, it helps them ease into it, and not just feel dead weight. It also helps the dogs to not feel every bump in the trail, and every time you kick or

pedal the sled. I can't imagine that it would be much fun being a dog pulling a sled without one of these thingamajigs on it.

Snow is said to be "**Punchy**" when you've had a thaw, and it re-freezes on top. The top layer then has a "crust." When you or the dogs try to walk or run on it, the feet POP through and sink down, then you've kind of got to lift your feet straight back up through the hole you've made and do it again. It's horrible conditions, and not fun for man nor beast. The sled will ride right over snow like this, having the weight distributed over the length of the runners, but a human or animal will have a hard time punching through the snow.

Sprint races are short distance, fast speed races with few dogs (about as many dogs as the miles you race).

Distance races are run over sometimes hundreds of miles with an unlimited number of dogs. The Iditarod is one of these races.

"Trail" is something you shout to a team in front of you, so the driver will know that you're about to overtake him. If someone shouts trail at you, you should start to gradually slow your team, and aim the sled to one side. As the passing team's wheel dogs get beside you, you brake, to allow them to fly past. If you brake before then, you will spray the passing driver's dogs in the face, and he'll probably club you (just kidding). It's just trail etiquette. Use the brake only to SLOW the sled, not stop it. Dogs will turn around to find out why you stopped the sled, and will find a team of someone else's huskies in their face, which often leads to problems.

Trail Help is a person or persons stationed at tricky parts of a race, to help a musher make a particularly difficult, or easy to miss turn. Most dogs don't actually know Gee and Haw, and even if they do, they don't often turn on a dime. Many dogs will follow the path that they've observed (by scent) that the other dogs have taken, so it's a no-brainer for them, but some dogs just don't pay attention.

Drag or Ice Brake is a drag brake that is made of a piece of rubber or snowmobile tread. It rides along on or just above the ground, and when you need to slow or stop the sled, or stabilize it in icy conditions, you use this brake.

Some Do's: When you get back from your run, make sure a nice treat, and some fresh water is available for the dogs. If possible, someone should be there to take your sled, so that you can go up and personally thank your lead dog, and your team, and give them a good pat for bringing you back alive one more time. You want to run out there and encourage them to keep the line tight, even when you're finished (which means the sled has to be anchored, to pull against, and not hit them in the butt, which is why you want someone to take the sled). Whenever the dog is in harness, the line should be tight, so don't let bad habits develop by just letting go of the sled, or letting the dogs turn around and come see you after you're home. If no one is there to help you, snub down with the snow hook, and go see to it. Then, unhook the dogs and take them to their picket line or other cool-down area.

Do offer help to another musher when ever appropriate. Always ask first before TOUCHING that musher's dogs. Many times, the driver would be more comfortable with you running over and standing on the brake, while he straightens out the dogs himself. Musher's always lend a hand to another musher, even if it means sacrificing the race. Ed's team got away from him one time in a race and another musher tried to get the team and control them. In the melee, the helpful musher broke his leg somehow (you'll have to ask Ed to tell the story), but it just shows you the lengths mushers will go to, to help another musher. At dog sled races, there's always a sportsmanship award, because invariably, there's some poor dude that would have won the race, if he hadn't stopped to help untangle someone in a pickle. But he's just as much a winner, if not more so, than the person who came in first place.

Do try to get your dogs to go to the bathroom BEFORE you set out on a run. Some dogs will poo while running (try not to hit it with your runners), and others will need to come to a full and complete stop. The more often you come to a complete stop, the more chance you have for disaster, so, try to "get 'er done"

with just a slow-down, if possible. And don't forget the rule of never letting your sled hit your wheel dog(s) in the butt. Make sure that you slow the sled down the instant the dogs start to slow or stop.

Some no-no's: Don't let your dogs eat the lines. They can chew through ski rope in a nanosecond if they put their mind to it. Some will chew any time, just because, and others get frustrated if you have stopped to fix something, and you aren't paying attention, then Bang! Your gangline is in two pieces. You can't continue, once the gangline is severed. You will either have dogs being pulled apart (dogs in front applying pressure to the neck line of the chewing dog, while sled and driver are pulling him backwards, with no gangline connecting the two ends to protect the dog. OR, the dog will cut the line in two, severing the lead dogs, and they go Bye-bye. If you can make it in with the remaining dog(s), then fine, but this is a bad situation. Watch for chewers, especially any time you're stopped. The dogs want to GO GO GO!

Don't let the sled hit the dogs in the butt (or hind legs). You could seriously injure or kill a dog, if you fail to keep the sled's gangline tight from your end. When you are going down a steep hill, drag your heels or apply the brake, to keep the sled from overrunning the dogs. If your dogs stop suddenly and unexpectedly, due to ice balls in the feet, or a tangle, or a distraction, you must slow or stop the sled, accordingly, so as not to run into them. You must also slow or stop the sled in the event that the wheel dogs or point dogs are overtaking the leaders. This can't happen—it will pull the leaders off their feet, not to mention cause a tangle of asinine proportions! YOU have to be the one that insures the sled and entire team run at the pace of the leaders. If you can't do this, you have no business being on a dog sled.

Don't lose your temper. This sport is supposed to be fun. Granted, at times it can be very frustrating. Never take it out on your dogs. You are ultimately in control.