

arctic traveler

with Joe Henderson



Henderson's Freight Hitches

When folks see 22 bushy-tailed malamutes crammed together into what looks like a tangled maze of lines and harnesses, they are usually scratching their heads, wondering what exactly I have going on there. Many people ask me if it's a fan hitch or a variation on the fan hitch.

I admit, it looks unconventional, but it's the most powerful freighting hitch I have ever designed. There is no official name for this style of hook-up, so for practical purposes I'll call it the Alaskan Arctic hitch.

I designed the hitch primarily for traveling on sea ice, but it also works on rivers where there are no obstacles. The dogs love pulling in the Alaska Arctic hitch formation. It gives them plenty of elbow room to spread out without being crowded by one another, which is important for a big, burly freight dog. My mals get cranky if they have to pull in too close a proximity.

That being said, the main principle of any freight hitch design is to get optimum efficiency out of every muscle fiber and every ounce of energy from each dog and apply it directly to pulling the sled. It seems that when the dogs are strung out on a long gangline much of their energy is absorbed in the line and not the sled. For example, as a large dog team takes a turn the only dogs that are truly pulling are the wheelers and the team dogs. The leaders and swing dogs are merely keeping the lines taught.

When the dogs are hitched close to the sled, their energy is not absorbed in a long gangline but rather into pulling the sled. With this principle in mind I designed the configuration of the Alaskan Arctic hitch many years ago, but only after I experimented with the Greenland Inuit fan hitch.

With the Greenland fan hitch, each dog is attached to the sled by a separate tugline so that they spread out in a fan, or half moon shape ahead of the sled. I have tried the fan hitch on the Arctic coast and found it inefficient. The reason that it doesn't work well for me is because Alaska's Arctic coastline has hundreds of peninsulas that reach out from land several miles into the Beaufort Sea, and instead of sledding around these peninsulas and adding several miles to my journey, it's easier for the team to cross the peninsulas, which means negotiating deep snow, tussocks, and holes in the tundra. When a dog falls between deep tussocks or in a hole, it might take a second for him to recover and get back on his feet. By using the Alaskan Arctic hitch, all the dogs are attached to each other by short lines to their collars or harnesses, so when a big brute falls into a hole or loses his footing he can spring back to action with the assistance of his comrades pulling on his harness or neck line. However, with the fan hitch, the fallen dog has no assistance getting back on his feet and as the team continues on their way, their fallen friend might get dragged or tangled in the lines if he doesn't regain his footing right away.

The drawback of the Alaskan Arctic hitch becomes evident when negotiating long distances of deep snow. This is where the dogs lose efficiency because their energy is spent breaking trail. While traveling in deep snow, I prefer to use what I call the Tri-hitch. This is where

the dogs are hitched to the gangline three abreast. Unfortunately, the team loses about a third of its pulling power compared to the Alaskan Arctic hitch, but nevertheless it's a much more efficient approach to deep snow trail-blazing.

Why the magic number three? My sleds are about three feet wide, so if I return on my trail for any reason, say, to retrieve a cache for instance, three medium sized dogs can run comfortably in the trail the sled had made. Another reason is that my snowshoes are 12 inches wide, so as I double back while breaking trail the dogs have a three to four foot wide trail to run on.

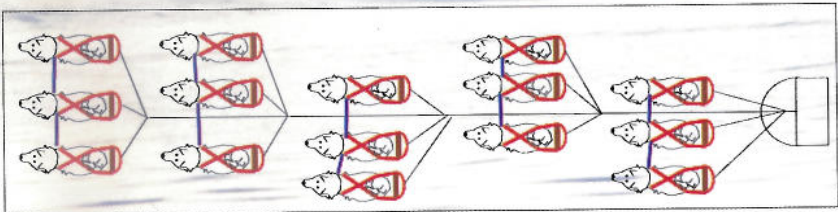
The diagrams show an overhead view of the Alaskan Arctic and Tri-hitches. For the gangline, I use a single piece of 3/16 cable with the tuglines attached. It's fastened directly to the sled without a spring or shock absorber. I have found that a shock absorber cushions the pull and a lot of efficiency is lost. I prefer to have a good solid pull when hauling a heavy load especially if the sled gets hung up on a rock, or broken sea ice.

Both the Alaskan Arctic hitch and Tri-hitch are great for hauling freight, but when a situation gets ugly and our backs are against the wall, I always resort to the Alaskan Arctic hitch.

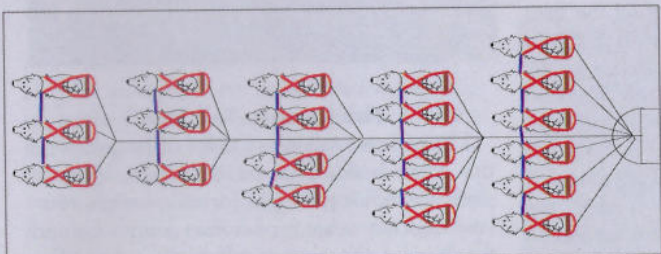
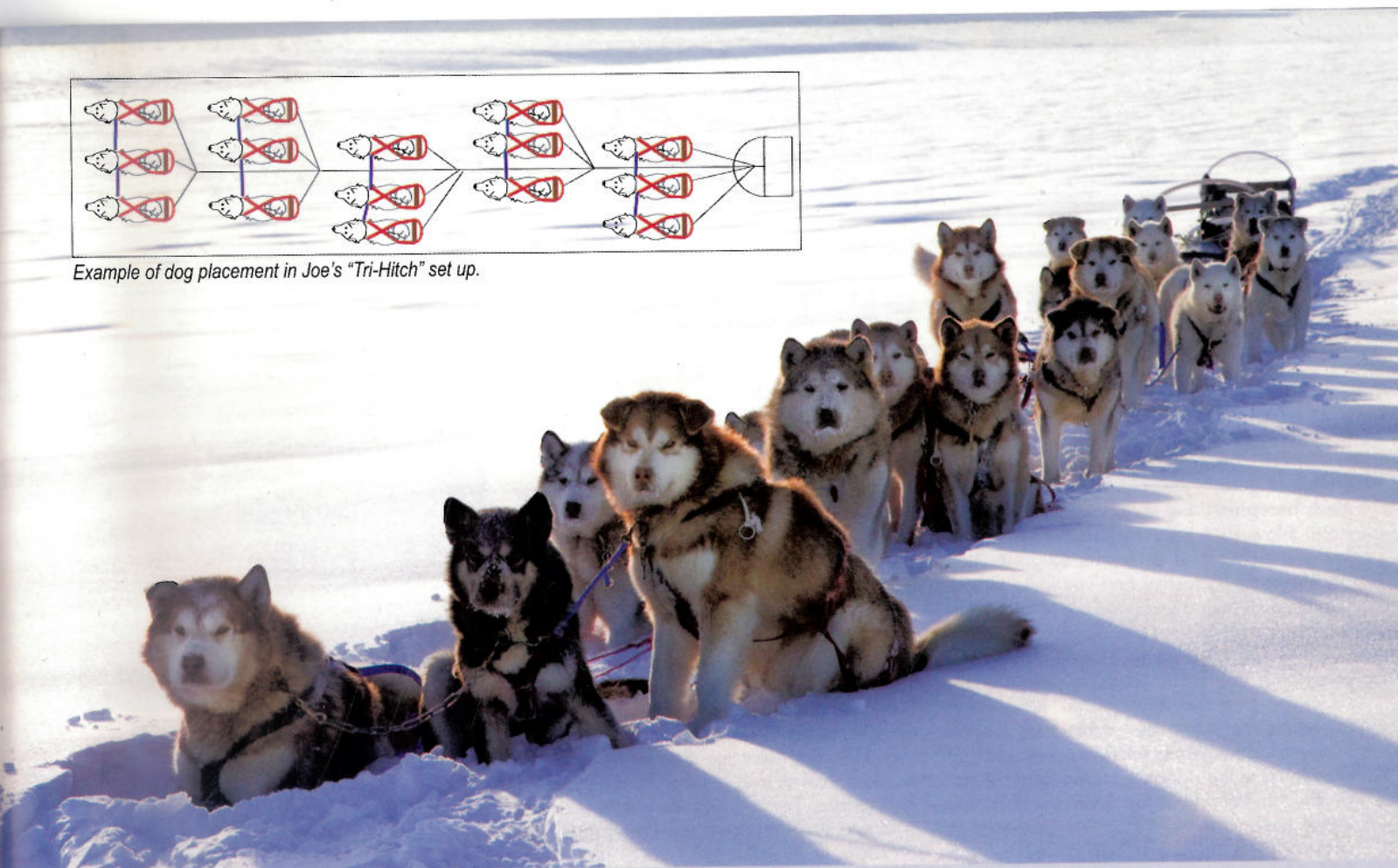
Here's an example how the Alaskan Arctic hitch got me out of a fix a few years back. My sleds became jammed against a high cut bank while we were climbing over a mountain pass. There was no way to turn around or back up, so I hitched a total of nine heavy dogs in wheel and gave the command to go. When those wheel dogs lunged in their harnesses they created so much force, I thought the lines were going to rip apart, but they held together and the sleds were practically catapulted up and over that cut bank.

Training dogs to run in these different formations can be interesting to say the least, especially if there are only narrow trails in your area. Should you decide to train your dogs to run in the Tri-hitch or Alaskan Arctic hitch, I recommend starting the guys and gals out on an open field or on a lake where they can get used to the configurations before they give it a whirl on the trail system. And when you finally get them on the trails, when another dog team sees you coming like a freight train, they won't know what to think or how to pass you. And I assure you that as the other mushers pass by, they will be scratching their heads. •

Joe Henderson and his team of Alaskan malamutes have spent nearly 30 years traveling in Alaska's arctic together exploring otherwise inaccessible areas of the far north. To learn more about Joe's multi-month expeditions please visit his website at www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com



Example of dog placement in Joe's "Tri-Hitch" set up.



"Alaskan Arctic" gangline set up.

