

Malamute Leaders

Lead dogs for an arctic expedition team have to be more than just physically buff and athletic.

They must also be intelligent, tough minded, and capable of negotiating miles of wind-ripped tundra in the black winter night with 20 other malamute brutes behind them breathing down their necks. Training these guys is like training a team within a team.

Much of the Arctic is desolate in its lack of trees, trails and landmarks. With 21 hours of darkness a day in mid-winter, time is measured in months. It's a challenge for the leaders to navigate this seemingly dead landscape, but there is one feature that comes alive in the Arctic - the weapon Mother Nature punishes her victims with, the one element that I believe cussing was invented for - the wind. However, this cursed component of the Arctic can also be considered the lead dogs' saving grace as it is the compass that leads them through the cruelest nights. I have to admit that it's fascinating to watch an experienced leader gather his or her navigational bearing simply by feeling the wind direction and/or watching the direction of the snow drifts as we pass over them.

Nevertheless, training these guys and gals in this age-old technique has to start sometime. I prefer to start their formal leader training when they are about two years of age. There are just a few attributes that I like to see in potential candidates. The first attribute is their size. The females are usually smaller, which helps them keep on top of crusted snow better than a heavy male. Because of this, many of my leaders are females. Two more traits that I look for are their physical and mental stamina. Some dogs just seem to be tougher than others, and toughness is an extremely important factor in a successful leader. Finally, the most necessary component in a good leader is smarts. The lead dogs have to exhibit that between their big ears there is real intelligent substance.

Let's take a look at my lead dog, Bear, for example. I call him the "insane genius." He's a small guy, athletic and he never gets intimidated by the bigger wheel dogs that could easily bite him in two. Raised in the house as a couch potato pup



(as are all my leaders, by the way), he developed loyalty, respect and a life long desire to please. He thrives on positive feedback and has good stamina. However, occasionally he convinces himself that he is the wisest amongst us, a typical malamute characteristic, and he will strike a perfectly straight course across the tundra in the wrong direction as if guided by his own GPS device. His own compass guides him, so to speak. He concentrates on the direction and angle of the drifts on the tundra or the wind direction and stays on that course. When it comes time to change our direction after a few days on a particular course, Bear becomes convinced that I have no clue where I am going and continues on our past course. This sort of situation is where using multiple leaders comes into play. A team within a team will keep this type of navigational malamute stubbornness in check.

I prefer to run three leaders side by side. Occasionally I'll use up to five leaders at a time, depending on snow conditions. This strategy helps relieve physical and mental stress and helps them run a straight course or change directions without stressing out an individual dog. However, even the leaders must have a boss, a dog with experience that knows thin ice, deep snow pockets, and is capable of turning the team easily on command. Despite Bear's periodic insane episodes of striking his own course across the tundra, he has gotten us through many jams. I'll never forget the time when the team and I were climbing a mountain pass in

the Brooks Range of Alaska. The winds picked up to about 50 miles per hour mid-way on our ascent up the pass. Rolling waves of dry sandy snow rushed down the mountain and enveloped us, lowering visibility to zero. It was like being blinded in blowing white sand. My fingertips froze from the extreme cold wind-chill that penetrated my mitts as I clutched tight onto the sled handlebars to keep my footing on the steep slope. Occasionally I would look ahead and catch a glimpse of the three leaders, Bear in the middle with Angel and Ginger on either side of him. Blinded completely by the stinging snow they had lowered their muzzles close to the ground and trudged on like soldiers in battle climbing to the summit.

To this day, I'll never know how we made it over the mountain pass in absolute blindness. I am sure Bear and the other two leaders were guided by instincts that our human senses are not acute to. However, having several leaders helps ease the stress on any one individual dog and helps gather the collective instincts and experience together, creating a team of leaders.

Training a dog to use his or her natural instincts to lead a team can be a challenge. Once I decide an individual has the qualities to become a leader, I place him or her beside one of my veteran lead dogs. In that position they will learn the basics, although malamutes by nature are a bit stubborn and a newbie will rebel at her new role, eventually they will ease into the position and will never want to run anywhere else in the team except lead.



Stubbornness is one of those mixed blessings. Actually, I prefer to see that trait in lead dogs. This behavior can be a real pain sometimes when the leader is convinced that they are right and you are wrong. Nevertheless, when we all agree, the entire team becomes a finely tuned machine tirelessly plugging along across the white arctic landscape, stubbornly busting through drifts and blizzards, never changing course, heads down and straight ahead.

During these first training runs for the rookie leaders, I have found it's best for them not to rely on following a trail or a river valley. There are no trails on an arctic expedition, and it's important to extract a dog's natural lead instinct and train them to use it. Teaching them to follow a trail comes later once they are comfortable running without the use of them for guidance.

After the new leaders have spent a good part of a season in lead position and have learned the basic commands for turning left and right, I like to start training them for navigating on the open tundra or sea ice. Some dogs pick it up right away, yet some never figure it out. The main thing is to start them out on wide-open flat tundra or sea ice where there are no distractions like stumps on the beach, brushy creeks, river valleys or previous campsites.

Malamutes seem to have a photographic memory, especially when it comes to our previous campsites. When I am training a new leader I try to stay far away from these sites if possible, but sometimes it's inevitable that we get within sight of one. At this point all leader schooling gets obliterated from the rookie selective memory. These new guys and gals will pull a three thousand pound load by themselves to get to an old campsite. I have no idea how they recognize these places. The beaches look the same to me: just windblown snow, exposed gravel, and maybe some driftwood washed up from the summer.

Last year, I unfortunately had to retire one of my main leaders, (she's officially the new couch potato) and my third main leader had maternity leave, which left me with only one main leader, Bear. Although he has a brilliant canine mind, he

could not devise a way to keep the new leaders from chasing every old campsite of ours along the Arctic coast. Poor old Bear was constantly being pushed and pulled in every direction by the three new leaders, like a mother in a toy store with toddlers.

Other distractions can also really upset a good training run. Heat sometimes is the determining factor of the pace a malamute will run, and training a new leader when it's 20 degrees plus can be a challenge. Mals have perfected marathon runs over the past four thousand years and they are not about to get themselves overheated. They will set a pace with which they are comfortable according to the outside temperature. In other words, warm means slow gear and warmer is granny gear. Therefore, I like to pick a day with a minimum temperature of -10 F or at least some wind blowing to keep the guys cooled down. It makes a much better training run and the pups are more eager to be attentive to their new jobs and responsibilities in the team.

A heavy load in the sleds will sometimes affect the new leaders, making it difficult for them to turn the team and too light of a load can stress them out. Young malamutes can't stand their counterparts running on their heels panting and drooling on their backs, they'll just turn around and snap at them. My main training tool at this time is the brake. Of course, a brake will hardly stop a malamute team but it does cause a slight drag, which the leaders can feel. I'll apply the brake when they are off course and release it when they have made the right corrections and are back on track.

Many other factors can disrupt a team of leaders. For example, some dogs may pull stronger right or left, and will veer slightly one way or the other, which isn't a problem except when I am trying to hit an exact waypoint 40 miles away. Nevertheless, these little quirks can be remedied by switching the dogs' positions around. Sometimes I'll place a "right handed" leader on the left side or a strong left handed puller on the right. Also, some males intimidate each other when running side by side and will pull away from each other, which results in a slight drift in direction. Again, switching them around a bit will take care of this problem. Once in a while I'll use this same leader position strategy in reverse, especially if we need to make a wide turn on the sea ice around a point of land or a peninsula. Holy smokes, by the end of a winter I feel like a dog psychologist!

At three years of age, the new leaders have settled down. They still have another year until they fully mature, but they're past their raging hormonal terrible twos and are ready for business. This is the time for their final exam, the final cut. Their first two seasons have been a fun time without any real pressure. Now they have to show their stuff and

show me what they have learned.

Usually I'll try out the new leaders after several days of traveling and camping on the sea ice or flat tundra. Malamutes have two goals in life; pulling everyday and camping every night. So, after the newbie leaders have settled into this pattern, it's test time! Preferably I'll start them on a relatively cool day, not any warmer than -10 F. The tundra and sea ice will have hard definitive oblique snowdrifts lying east to west. I like to view the drifts as an arrow in a clock, one arrow pointing east 12:00 and the other west 6:00. If I choose to go southeast, we should be traveling over the drifts at about a 2:00 position, northwest at around an 8:00 course. The leaders use these drifts to gather their directional bearings as well. The first thing I do when I test the newbie is remove all the main leaders and place them in team positions. Then I'll walk ahead of the new leaders 100 feet or so just to give them a trail to follow at first. This will give them some confidence to start the malamute freight machine. You can imagine the wheels turning in their young canine brains when they are leading a team of brutes alone for the first time. You can almost smell the pressure that's upon them. After "take off" some of the new leaders go right to work, yet others may look around as if they're lost, bewildered and alone on some desolate island in the Arctic Ocean. These guys will take some work. Most likely they are looking for a visual point to aim for, like familiar mountains, or other landmarks. Nevertheless, in the Arctic, where whiteouts are a constant and close companion, going by visuals is not a good idea.

Eventually the kids get the idea and lead the team. Sometimes I'll give them a few verbal right or left commands to give them confidence or correct their course. Once in a while the new leaders will pick up the scent of a seal or polar bear and run hell-bent towards the source of the smell. Overall, the first day is the beginning of a life long education for the new leaders.

Once they have established they can lead a team of mals, I'll place the main leaders back in position beside them. This allows them to further their experience without undue pressure. Of course, there's more involved in leading an expedition team than running over smooth ice or avoiding seals and bears. Soon, the youngsters gather the knowledge of what it really takes to navigate across the Arctic. They will learn how to use their God-given instincts and figure how to detect thin ice under their paws, head blindly into 60 mile per hour winds, experience deep snow and know how to avoid it. They will find the straight trail down the mountains and guide us safely over the passes. They will take the team and me across thousands of miles of arctic wilderness by the glow of the moon. They will be the team within the team.

Joe Henderson has been working with Alaskan malamutes for 25 years. He and his team spend most of the winter dogsledding alone in the arctic and end each season offering clients remote expeditions throughout Alaska.

For more information, please visit Joe's website at: alaskanarcticexpedition.com