

# THE ART & SCIENCE OF FREIGHTING

article & photos by Joe Henderson



Ben is a vocal and slobbery fella who has a heart of gold. He's around 140 lbs, heavily muscled from nose to tail, with a thick reddish coat. Even though he's strong as an ox, he reminds me of a big soft teddy bear.

If he was human, he would be the jolly-go-lucky football player who plows down a field of opposing team members in front of his teammate running with the football. Ben is a lovable dog, but deep down he thinks he's Hercules and his strength is invincible. Ben just doesn't know or recognize defeat. He's never experienced it. Inside Ben's giant cranium he is certain that when he pulls, the sleds will follow him, regardless of snow depth or the amount of weight in the sleds. In fact, it has never occurred to him that those sleds would not follow him. He would be shocked and confused if they didn't.

Ben is the product of my training philosophy that I crafted three decades ago that has enabled us to travel in the most inaccessible regions of Alaska's Arctic where snow depth ranges 2 ft - 5 ft deep and through

extremely steep and rugged terrain. My philosophy is simple: when a dog discovers that his strength has a limit he will accept this limit as the peak of his strength. But if he does not know his limit, and he has never discovered it, then he will reach deep within his soul and exhibit feats of strength beyond human comprehension. I'd like to add, it applies to us human beings as well. If we don't know our limits, and have ignored other's advice that our goals are impossible to reach, then we will not self-impede our efforts to accomplish those goals. Essentially, dogs can have the same mindset with the correct training.

I am sure you know how to extract and nurture a dog's natural desire to pull. But the following methods and strategies I am describing are methods that I have found to work well for freighters in steep and rugged terrain and deep snow. There is, however, certain aspects of these training methods that can be useful for race dogs as well.

In my previous article (in Sept/Oct 2015 issue of *Mushing*), I mentioned that I do not train my malamutes until they reach two and three years of age: "freighting is extremely hard work and if a dog is not physically mature and becomes sore or injured while sledding

**Ordinary dogs have accomplished extraordinary things because they didn't know they couldn't.**

he will blame himself for pulling too hard. So, the next time he's hitched in the team he will protect himself by holding back and not exerting 100% of his strength." That is just one of many reasons. But the most important reason for a freight dog to start his career at two to three years is for psychological health.

Let's say you have a young strapping fella named Fido. He's 10 months old and is exhibiting a feverish desire to pull. So you slip a harness over his broad and heavily muscled neck and shoulders, attach a tug-line from his harness to a small Toyota tire you had used to plant flowers in, and let him go. He excitedly drags the tire across the lawn and chases the kids until the tire lodges against the swing-set pole and stops Fido in his tracks. Fido lunges and pulls but the tire doesn't move. After several attempts he sits and waits for assistance from a child to dislodge the tire. Now, we have taught Fido that he has a limit to his strength. Fido will remember this experience. However, if Fido knew the verbal command to stop, and heard it at the exact moment the tire lodged against the swing-set pole, he would associate the stop command to the sudden resistance of the tire and not his failed strength. Basically, he would figure he had come to a halt because your command echoed inside his floppy ears. That way, you would have protected his confidence and his unrealistic belief that his strength is invincible and limitless.

In order for the dog to disassociate his failed strength to a difficult task he must be



## A freight team will put their heart into pulling all day.

"tricked" into thinking the reason the tire or a sled halts is because of your command. Now, if he has learned the command to stop he must learn the command to go. Otherwise, the entire strategy will be meaningless because the dog will learn his strength is limited while he is lunging and harness-banging as you hitch others in the team and the sleds do not move. So, he must be taught not to harness-bang or lunge.

A well-trained freight team can be harnessed and hitched to the sled without a snow-hook planted in the snow or ice. And

a freight team should be capable of stopping with a verbal command on glare ice without braking. These two commands are the foundation of building a team of powerful freighters and trail-breakers. When these two commands are mastered it's important to protect the dogs' confidence and trust. Let me explain: let's say Fido, who is two years now, is in wheel position and having the time of his life. His grey, bushy tail is curled sharp over his back and he's leaned into the freight harness with all his might. He and his teammates are pulling a heavily loaded sled up a steep mountain pass. The sled's progress is slow and steady but the terrain becomes rough with patches of grass protruding out of the windswept snow. Now, the sled drags pathetically slow and seemingly the team is almost coming to a stop.

Immediately, Fido and the others hear the command that they despise: "Whoa!" They reluctantly obey, turn their heads in your direction and glare at you with apprehension and curiosity. And probably questioning—*why is the fun being halted?* A few of the dogs take advantage of the stop to pee on tufts of grass and sniff their teammate's butts but they know the routine, and are poised to pull after 10-15 seconds. Then the golden command rings in their ears: "Okay!" Tails raise, curl and wave, sounds of gratified growls rumble from the large males, and tug-lines sing tight as the dogs simultaneously lunge into their



Ben, on the right, takes a break with his fellow wheel dogs.

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harnesses. The sled jolts ahead and begins to ascend the slope at a steady pace again. Eventually though, the pace slows to a crawl and once again the team is halted and given a 10-15 second rest. This routine is repeated several times until Fido and the team reach the summit. Then, it's time for pets and congratulations, especially for Fido who rolls on his back and awaits his tummy rub.

Depending on the length of the slope it's not uncommon for a freight team to stop a dozen times. This allows us to protect their confidence and their belief that their strength is limitless and the only reason they are forced to stop is because YOU told them so.

But in reality their strength would have failed them and their confidence would have been crushed.

There is one interesting note about Malamutes in particular that pertains to this stop-and-go routine that I have found; purebred Alaskan Malamutes actually use a natural tactic similar to the stop-and-go routine throughout the day sometimes. A freight team will put their heart into pulling all day. But there isn't an animal on earth who can work at such high intensity for long; otherwise they would give in to exhaustion and crash. To protect themselves from crashing, Malamutes have developed a strategy that sets them apart from other breeds, a strategy

that has evolved over thousands of years of hard work. Each dog hits their harness for a few minutes then relaxes for 5-10 seconds and hits their harness again. This tactic lets them recover their energy and regain their strength. Whether they are pulling up a steep slope or breaking trail through waist deep snow, they utilize this strength saving tactic. This doesn't mean however, while they are dragging a sled down a trail they will constantly stop and go. Because each dog will coordinate their "rest time" while others are pulling. That said, a very, very experienced team will exercise a stop-and-go routine while ascending a mountain slope or breaking trail through 3 ft - 4 ft snow by themselves, without the assistance of verbal commands.

Often while the team and I are traveling across the mountain regions, I snowshoe ahead of them a quarter mile or so. But I know they will not give up and will always follow me. The dogs have it ingrained in their psyche so deep that regardless of snow conditions and steep terrain their strength is limitless and they will never ever give up. No longer do I have to coordinate the pulling strategy up a steep slope or deep snow. They have learned after several decades of breaking

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trail and climbing mountain passes they can coordinate and accomplish it themselves. Even though the team may be behind me and out of sight, I can hear them as they conduct their stop-and-go routine because I maintain at least 3-4 vocal dogs hitched in strategic places in the team that I can hear from a distance. And big, lovable Ben is one of them. When the team comes to a stop, vocal dogs like Ben, whine like babies, which encourages the others. If Ben was human he would sound something like this: "C'mon you little wimps. Get off your butts so we can keep up with dad! Now, at the count of three, we're all going to hit the harnesses! One...two...three!" I have always been fascinated how they hit their harnesses simultaneously.

In my previous article, I mentioned observing dogs at weight pull competitions and how they exhibit amazing feats of strength beyond human comprehension. Basically this is what the entire team is doing. In their mind they are at a weight pull competition. They have learned that through coordinated effort and a never give up mind-set they will cross the finish line. In order to maintain this level of intense pulling however, the dogs have to be protected both psychologically and physically since their passion and enthusiasm can be harmful if they are allowed to overwork themselves. Protecting them from overworking is the secret in maintaining the longevity of a team. The team should be as excited and amped about being hitched-up on the last day of the season as they were on the first. This is where the musher's skill comes into play.

Actually though, I don't see myself as a musher, alpha, or master. I look at myself the same as the dogs view me and that is as a team member. Even though I lead the team wearing snow shoes or skis much of the time, and often I strap myself to the traces and pull alongside the wheel dogs, they view me as a teammate they admire and want to please, and trust. And trust is the single most important component in protecting their psychological health. The dogs must trust without a thread of doubt that they will never ever be overworked. I have found if you have solidified this trust in the dogs they are perfectly comfortable with pulling to their heart's content and will not hold-back since they believe they will not become



## Where I camp isn't important, as long as the dogs are healthy and happy.

fatigued, sore, or exhausted. Even though they are pulling a multi-thousand pound load and breaking trail, they actually feel they are playing rather than working. But it's a very, very fine line between working with contentment and overworking.

Most of you can easily read a dog's body language and adjust your runs accordingly. But freighting can be very complex in the sense that it requires an extreme amount of energy and causes stress, which is impossible to tell by a dog's body language alone. The dogs might seem fired up all day climbing mountain passes and breaking trail with waving brushy tails but we don't know how they will feel the following day. If they've been overworked you'll notice it when they are hitched to the sleds in the morning. When they are fresh and happy, Malamutes generally sit and howl when they're hitched-up. And husky mixes usually whine and carry on. But if they aren't exhibiting either of these behaviors, then they've lost their passion and it's time to analyze why. Maybe they were pulling too heavy of a load, worked too many hours, bad diet, low humidity?

Now, it's time to regain their trust by running on short duration runs for several consecutive days to a week until they trust you again. Usually a day of rest doesn't work because the damage is psychological with malamutes. Malamutes recover amazingly

fast from physical fatigue but mental stress brought on by physical fatigue resonates in their mind for a long time. In other words, they aren't going to give you 100% because they no longer trust you. They will conserve their strength because they were "punished" the day before for giving you 100%. But when you're in the middle of nowhere and there aren't any trails, except the one behind you, which has disappeared under three feet of snow, and the team needs to continue breaking trail forward, you can't afford to have a team that holds back and only gives you 90%.

There are many factors that causes dogs' physical fatigue but I have found low humidity plays a dominate role. Actually, air humidity is the determining factor of the amount of time we travel in a day, not the weight in the sleds. Air humidity constantly rises and falls throughout the day and so, friction on sled runners' increase and decrease coinciding with humidity rising and falling. This is an unseen component that causes additional stress to dogs.

Even though we can't see humidity it certainly can be heard. As air humidity decreases, grinding sounds of the runners dragging on the snow intensifies. Whereas in high humidity, the sounds of the runners

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decrease. These sounds of the sled runners are my primary gauges that allow me to plan the length of my day. I know exactly how much time the dogs can handle pulling by deciphering the tone of grinding sounds on the runners. Example: let's say there's been a windstorm and the temperature drops to -60°F ambient temperature. (I do not calculate wind-chill temperatures since it doesn't apply to humidity level.) The sky is crystal clear. So, obviously the humidity is at its lowest. But to make matters worse, the snow has been swept across the tundra by wind during the cold temperatures which changes its structural dynamics. Basically the snow is transformed into a dirty sandy texture which is extremely abrasive. Unless the sun has a chance to "glaze" this type of sandy snow, it's the worst and most despicable snow surface for sled runners on earth. It grinds and drags like you are traveling on a cold sandy beach and the sounds of runners dragging can be deafeningly loud. Unfortunately, this type of sandy snow predominantly covers the Arctic landscape January through February.

When we are traveling under these type of low humidity extremes and the runners are grinding very loudly, I never expect to travel much more than 4-5 hours a day (without stopping), but we are usually hauling a ton or more of weight and breaking trail. This calculation of time traveled however is at the lowest end of the spectrum and in the worst possible snow conditions. When humidity is high, the team can comfortably handle around 8 hours a day in the mountains and 12 hours a day on the sea ice - providing the temperatures are still relatively cold. Even though this is a wide range of traveling times, or miles, there's a very delicate balance in regards to the dogs working a comfortable amount or going too far. Nonetheless I never allow any dog in the team to become fatigued whatsoever. Each dog is very important to me and the team's dynamics. So, when I have reached my estimated time I set up camp. Where I camp isn't important, as long as the dogs are healthy and happy.

There are many other factors that freighters must learn to deal with that can be stressful, like breaking trail through waist deep snow, hurricane force wind blizzards, negotiating mountain crevasses and overflow, just to name a few. All require many years of training. But every year my ultimate goal is: at the end of the season of breaking trail and hauling freight for 120 solid days on an Arctic



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expedition that Ben is still whining like a baby with excitement. And every member in the team is healthy and fired-up like it's the first day of the expedition.

*Joe Henderson and his team of malamutes have spent 30 years traveling in the Arctic together, exploring the otherwise inaccessible regions of the far north and breaking trail where never in modern history a dog team has ever traveled. Joe is author of two books and is owner of Alaskan Arctic Expeditions which offers people opportunities to join him and his team on Arctic expeditions. For more info please check out his website: [www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com](http://www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com) or Facebook: Alaskan Arctic Expeditions*

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