



# Training Malamute Pups

Let's face it; puppies are great to have around. At six weeks of age, we are already trying to find the next leader, or sizing up a new wheel dog for a future team. Raising and training those youngsters can be a blast. The minute I pick up those fur balls, their eyes hardly open, and bring them in the house to show off to family and friends is when their education begins. The smells, sights, and sounds awaken their senses and help them become great family additions. Of course, they have a long way to go before they're tugging on their harnesses. Nonetheless, it's the start of their traditional careers as Alaskan malamute sled dogs.

Proper diet and nutrition for the little guys starts before they are born. I like to keep the mom nice and healthy, preferably a little on the heavy side. Once those pups are born, I keep a full dish of dog food in front of mom at all times and make sure she's getting plenty of water. From that point on mom's instinct takes over and keeps the furry little creatures well fed and fat.

As soon as the pups open their eyes at two weeks of age, they try out their stubby legs. What a great scene to watch; their pink fat bellies dragging on the floor as their legs

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shake and wobble, taking their first steps.

After about three weeks of age, they're in our house being petted and handled, which is important for them to start getting socialized. They are usually about 15 pounds at this age and resemble little polar bear cubs.

By four to five weeks, they're usually hitting the scales at around 20 pounds. They are gradually weaned off mom's milk, and don't resemble little polar bear cubs anymore, just BIG polar bear cubs. I like to wean the pups on Champaine brand beef and Caribou Creek Gold dog food and I give them all they can eat.

By four months old, the pups have really packed on the weight, tipping the scale at 60



pounds. By then they start getting adventurous and wandering off, so I'll put them with the adult dogs in the kennel close enough together so they can play with each other and with some of the adults.

After six months, the once fluffy butterballs have turned into rock solid adolescent dogs. They are still very playful and live an absolutely carefree life, but they are old enough to follow along behind the team for short distances. And they do that quite well, except

for an occasional brave soul who will try to join the big boys and get harmlessly tangled in some lines. This is their middle school education. Soon, they will advance to high school, right around 8-10 months of age.

It seems universal the words "high school" gets the same grim reaction amongst teenagers as well as dogs. A seven month old malamute has plenty of other interests on his or her mind besides sitting still and obeying commands, but there is one thing that captivates a pup's attention food. For a continually growing malamute, food is the driving force above all things. Although, I prefer to keep my pups on the heavy side, they always seem to have

room for another sweet morsel of beef. Using a nail pouch on my belt filled with these training enticers, I am able to have the morsels with me always. The pups' eyes are always focused on me and eventually they learn how to extract those tid-bits from me, simply by figuring out what I ask for, and obeying the commands. Once a pup has learned how to learn, it's a piece of cake. Finally, the pups will respond to a reward with just saying "good boy" and a pat on the head.

There is no better teacher than experience itself to get these kids accustomed to life on the trail. By the time the pups are ready for their first expedition they look big enough to fit into the team, no problem at all. Their paw prints in the snow resemble their 120 pound dad's footprint, their chests are deep, and the massive muscles on their shoulders makes the reddish-white hair stand on end like a lions mane. Regardless, they need to gain a world of knowledge before they can run beside their mom and dad.

When the winter cold falls on the arctic tundra and the sluggish sun struggles up over the horizon, the pups are ready to go on their last training run. It's the last semester of high school only the semester lasts five months.

The first day begins with the cracking sounds of the sled runners breaking free from their frozen beds when the malamutes hit their harnesses. As the team drags the loaded sleds across the tundra, the pups wrestle and play with each other. Being left behind, they sprint up to the team only to repeat the scene several times throughout the day. It doesn't take long for the rambunctious pups to realize the sleds are not stopping, no matter how far they get left behind. Sometimes I've seen them sitting on a hill far behind us watching, as if they stare long enough the team will come back. Finally, the little guys reside to the fact they must follow along. Sure enough, they catch up; pink tongues hanging out of their mouths, tails

between their legs, heads hung low, trotting single-file. Their first lesson learned energy conservation.

When the sun anxiously slides behind the mountains and the day ends, lesson number two for the pups begins. Camping is always a fun time for the entire team. Everyone looks forward to a good meal and a new place to burrow down to the soft tundra where they curl-up, muzzles tucked deep into their lush tails, and fall sound asleep. Not for the youngsters, oh, no. This is their time to raise pure havoc amongst the team members. What a better time to antagonize the tired and content bunch! It's a great time to pull tails, play a game of chase and keep everyone up all night. However, with experience comes a hard lesson.

As darkness deepens on the arctic tundra, the wind creeps over the hills stalking her prey. At first, she nibbles at the dogs to test the vulnerable and warn the wise. After the first few gusts the adult dogs dig through the snow to the soft moss, curl up tight, and brace themselves for the onslaught that will soon club them. Yet the gleeful little pups continue to play and tug tails. The night stalker dishes out a full force, merciless blast that would make the bravest malamute tremble. She pushes a wall of stinging snow that covers her victims, nearly suffocating and blinding them. Next she hits them hard on their backs, and their faces. It doesn't matter which way they turn, she gives the pups a good lashing. How they wished they had followed the adults example! After stumbling and searching in the darkness, they find cover next to the adults and dig down to their warm and dry companions, shivering in fear. The snow eventually covers their paws, legs, eyes, then ears as they fall fitfully asleep, dreaming about the "monster" that is waiting outside their beds.

The following morning brings a new day for the youngsters and with it another day of school! I prefer to have the pups run behind the sleds for several weeks at this impressionable age, until they get to know some of the adverse arctic conditions. Then I hook them up to the sides of the sled. I attach the necklines to the front of the sled and tie a tug line to the back stanchion, so they are pulling and running beside the sled uninfluenced by any of the adults in the team. This way, they learn the basic stop and go commands much easier and they have full view of the team to learn by example. Another reason I place the pups in that position is because at 10 months of age they lack the stamina of the adults. When they are pulling beside the sleds I can keep an eye on them and release them when they start to

tire, letting them run free behind the team and giving them a break from pulling. They'll run in that position next to the sled for a month before they're placed in the team, which is their last day of school! Their integration into



the team can be quite interesting to watch at times, since all the malamutes have their preferred positions and running mates. How dare a newbie be placed next to them! After all, they are the "elite club" and to have a young punk next to them is a bit degrading. So each pup, one at a time has to search for a place, and a running mate that will accept them.

Preferably, I start them out at wheel position and as they improve or are accepted farther up the line they will move ahead in rank. However, many pups aren't comfortable with an adult running behind them breathing down their neck. They'll refuse to pull in any position but wheel. After much juggling, I'll finally be able to fit the pups into the team and by now they aren't pups anymore. Many of them tower over the adults, whom kicked them out of their soft beds during blizzards, nipped them in the butt, and stole their precious bones. Well, now the boot's on the other foot, but because of the malamute hierarchical order they still will not push themselves on the others until they're about two years old when their hormones start raging.

This takes us off the subject of sledding and on to the subject of fighting. The malamute breed's reputation of fighting is interesting to say the least, but I have found that although malamutes are full-spirited, they do prefer to channel their energy toward something they really love, and that's to pull. Also, I have found when I keep them working, eating, sleeping, and living together it's the best cure for those socially uncomfortable times. That way, a bond is created amongst them and they learn to accept each other. By the time they are three to four years old they become mature both mentally and physically, losing all

interest in proving themselves.

Close to the winter's end the pups are not punks anymore. They have seen the worst of the worst; they've been dunked in overflow, beaten in blizzards, tangled in brush, have broken harnesses pulling with all their powerful might, and felt a cold so cold that every breath was as needles piercing their lungs. They have also experienced the best of the best; they've answered the wolves call, watched red northern lights shoot across the sky, and trotted through deep twisted canyons exploring some of God's greatest creative art. Through it all, they have grown to become amazing, graceful malamutes with thick deep chest, and eyes of wisdom.

Although, they have almost finished their schooling in the spring, there are still a few things I teach them before the season's end so the following winter they'll be up to speed to make room for the "newbies."

By April, a few of the pups will have settled into wheel, and maybe some in team, but there are always a few leader positions open. I like to run up to five leaders side-by-side and the pups' first season is a good time for them to be familiarized with the leader position. I have found malamutes do not "blossom" as leaders until about three to five years of age, so this will become the beginning of "leader school" for some of the guys and gals.

The smaller dogs that aren't quite ready for lead will find a job behind the leaders in swing position with their light and athletic build. The bigger malamutes end up in wheel, as their brute power is needed where it counts, close to the "action." I prefer to use seven to eight wheel dogs side-by-side, this strategy does not put stress on any single dog, and the team always stays fresh and strong.

Towards the end of April, the young pups, full of spark and life, have found themselves in respectable positions, accepted by their running mates as part of the "elite club."

In May, they trot in step like the members of a marching band with their brushy tails raised proudly, having the time of their lives doing what they were born to do. They have truly lived up to the Alaskan Malamute reputation and three thousand year tradition.

*Joe Henderson has been working with Alaskan Malamutes for 25 years. He and his team spend most of the winter dogsledding alone, ending each season offering clients remote expeditions throughout Alaska. For more information, please visit Joe's website at [www.alaskanarcticexpedition.com](http://www.alaskanarcticexpedition.com) or call (907) 590-4980.*