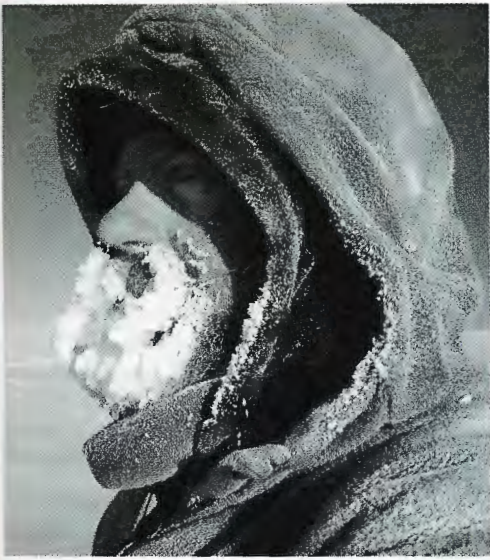


# FREIGHT DOG 101

article and photos by Joe Henderson

*When I built my first dog harnesses thirty-two years ago I didn't realize that it would lead me to a lifelong career in freighting and arctic exploration.*





After keeping a low profile in the last few years, we are excited to have "Arctic Traveler" Joe Henderson back on board with us at *Mushing*. Joe's accessible writing style makes his knowledge and experiences easy to understand. We are glad to have him back!

-JW

The harnesses were very crude with the straps cut from moose hide which I dried, stretched and de-haired. The chest padding came from a bear who unsuccessfully attempted to have me for his dinner. And the harness's spreader bar was carved from a dry spruce pole. I still use this same design today, except the material is synthetic rather than leather. My harness's design is similar from the old freight harness, or "single tree harness", which have been around for over a hundred years.

### ***My philosophy is simple: every member has his or her place in the team.***

My first dog team who wore those crudely built harnesses were a mixed-matched mob of Alaskan huskies and Alaskan malamutes. Basically, I formed the team of freighters from dogs that were given to me by old gold miners and trappers. I had acquired many different sized dogs, from 60 to 140 lbs, and discovered quickly that there is not one specific ideal-sized dog for freighting like I had read in the AKC Alaskan malamute standards. I rarely travel on trails except the ones I've made. And since snow conditions widely vary in the Arctic, it's necessary to have a wide range of sized dogs. Essentially the light dogs perform well on snow with punchy, or icy surfaces, while the large brutes struggle because they punch through. But the heavy-weight dogs do well in waist deep powder while the smaller guys and gals don't have the strength and weight to plow through like the large brutes.

My philosophy is simple: every member has his or her place in the team. Some dogs are small, maybe too small at times, and some are too large for certain types snow conditions but they are part of the team that is strategically woven together to create an impenetrable strong cohesive unit. No one is removed from the team for being too large, small, fast or too slow. If we are patient they will find their niche. But if we treat them like gears of a machine we overlook their talents. It's up to us to find their strength and nourish it. And with patience it will grow.

Alaskan malamutes however, have all the important characteristics that is required to thrive and work as freighters in the Arctic. They have thick double coats: the undercoat is similar to wool and the outer coat is longer and oily which repels blowing snow. Malamutes have thick bones for enduring heavy freighting and their large paws provide them with proficient tools for breaking trail. Their legs are heavily muscled but not too long. I have found long-legged dogs have a tough time breaking trail in very deep snow. Breaking trail for dogs is performed like a swimming action, so dogs with unproportioned long legs seem to get tangled in deep snow.

But the two most important traits for Arctic freighters are intelligence and efficient metabolisms. These traits are top priorities when I select a breeding couple. In fact, I would not be able to conduct multi-month, unassisted (without resupply) expeditions unless the dogs did not have efficient metabolisms.

Genetically, Alaskan malamutes require relatively few calories to stay healthy and happy. Their super-efficient metabolism is the result of living on lean rations of food in a bitterly cold environment for thousands of years. Many of the pure Arctic dog breeds possess this gene. Unfortunately many breeders ignore this valuable characteristic. It's interesting to note: their remarkably efficient metabolisms was one of the reasons why malamutes were highly valued during the gold rush in the late 1800's and early 1900's. To offer you a perspective: my "old-time Alaskan husky", Bear, who weighs around 60 lbs, consumes more calories to stay healthy than Farmer who is almost twice his weight, and is a purebred Alaskan malamute.

I have tried many northern dog breeds but I have found that in regards to the Alaskan Arctic, particularly in the mountain regions, the Alaskan malamute has been more suitable than other breeds. Besides, Alaskan malamutes originated in Alaska's Arctic and are believed to be a stand-alone breed and one of the most ancient domesticated

*Arctic Traveler continued next page*

Twenty-two dogs pulling two freight sleds tied in tandem on Alaska's North Slope during our return from a 68-day solo unsupported expedition. The sleds are 3 ft wide and 12 ft long.



Smiling leaders, North Slope 2014. There are 22 dogs in the team most of which are pulling three abreast in a hitch system that I designed over 15 years ago. You can read about it in *Mushing Magazine* archives: "Arctic Traveler: Henderson's Hitches".

dog breeds in the world. So, they have an inherent natural tendency to be well-suited for the extreme elements of Alaska's Arctic.

Another strong trait that Alaskan malamutes possess is they are the definition of cheerful warriors. That's what makes them very special. They are tough! They always seem to be wearing smiles regardless of traveling conditions or brutally cold temperatures. I've always thought if I could mimic their cheerful hardiness and endure struggles like them we could travel anywhere in the Arctic despite deep snow and rugged terrain. But there is lots of training involved for an Arctic freighter to facilitate their natural abilities and toughness.

Training a freighter, however, is very different than conditioning or training a long distant racing dog. The freighter must put forth 100% effort all the time whereas racing dogs

are conditioned to "hold back" and conserve energy like a marathon runner. There is an exception with freighters in regards to going 100% though. When temperatures are above freezing it becomes natural for a malamute to take it easy. It's a matter of survival for those heavy-coated guys and gals so they don't overheat. Nonetheless, training freight dogs to break trail in waist deep snow and under extreme cold weather circumstances while pulling thousands of pounds in the sleds requires a very in-depth training regime. Unfortunately it's not possible to cover my training strategy completely in one article, but I can offer a few pointers.

Essentially there are three steps in training an exceptional and powerful freight dog. First, forget about a quick and easy training formula— it requires many, many years. Second, build a bond of trust with him.

Third, do not ever break that bond of trust by overworking him. It's all about trust. This is the secret for training malamutes.

The strength of a malamute rests in his heart and soul. This untapped strength will only show itself if there is a mutual bond of trust between the person and the dog. It's a trust that cannot be broken, providing it's derived from the root of goodwill and compassion. When the dog believes that his strength will not be taken advantage of, he will offer it willingly and without restraints. If he senses otherwise, he will hold-back and will only give you half his strength.

When I travel with my team we are one being, one cohesive unit which works and lives together. Neither they nor I will survive without the other. My relationship with the dogs is humanlike. They are like family, brothers and friends who I have gotten to know, discovering their unique personalities, weaknesses, quirks and strengths. I don't ever look at them as beasts of burdens and they don't look at me as their master. They relate to me like a friend whom they love and adore and want to please. They will do anything that they know pleases me. But I will never take advantage of their inherent desire to please. If I do, then I will lose their trust and we will fail miserably. Trust is the key component into tapping a dog's incredible strength. Without their power and strength, it would be impossible to succeed in our expeditions.

Earlier I mentioned a dog's intelligence as a top priority besides metabolism. I've found that it is most important because freighting is very difficult work both mentally and physically for dogs. They are required to quickly learn the verbal commands ("stop", "go", "stay") and prevent themselves from tangling in the lines. And they must learn how to break trail through waist to chest deep snow. Sometimes it requires several years for a lead dog to learn a proficient trail breaking technique.

My training strategy might be somewhat different than others because of the difficult terrain that we cover and the harsh weather we endure. It's grueling work for both me and the dogs. Our typical solo expeditions lasts 60-90 days without resupply. Sometimes the team and I will travel 20 or more consecutive days without a day of rest. It is always my goal that the dogs remain enthusiastic for the entire expedition. They are just as excited on the last day of the expedition as they were on the first day of the season.

My other goal: the dogs gain weight on an expedition. This enhances their enthusiasm and overall physical and mental health. That said, my dogs will start gaining muscle and weight in November whether they're working or just hanging around the dog yard howling at the stars. It's believed that muscles have memories and will increase in strength and size according to the history of their demands. And my guys and gals have been pulling freight for a long time. It's in their DNA.

Nonetheless, in order to train a dog to have high incentive to pull for long durations requires a 99% psychological training strategy. My training methods are very "out of the box" but they have worked well. Which is an understatement considering the team has conducted the longest unsupported solo Arctic expedition on record: four months without resupply.

The training starts at two years for a team dog and three years for a leader. So, for the first two to three years of a dog's life he or she is not introduced to a harness or any pulling contraption whatsoever. I know many of you are wondering how my dogs learn how to pull. Actually, I've never had a malamute that didn't make the team for not knowing how to pull or without the desire. Pulling is



Alaska's North Slope 2014. Climbing the pass and heading home after breaking trail for a grueling two months in unprecedented deep snow during a Brooks Range expedition.

so ingrained into their DNA that they adhere to it naturally, unless they've had a sour taste of sledding when they were young. Otherwise they will always pull with passion. Let me explain: freighting is extremely hard work and if a dog is not physically mature and becomes sore or injured while sledding 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.

It has to be fun for freighters at all times. And without pain. If they trust they will not become injured or overworked they will not hold back. Thereby, allowing a sled dog to fully mature before going to work almost guarantees a lasting enthusiasm and longevity. Most of us have seen a dog's incredible strength at weight pull competitions. Obviously they love pulling and are not holding back at the competitions because they know there isn't a chance they will be overworked.

Now, the falling snow is gently covering the dogs' thick fur as they lay comfortably on straw and with full tummies outside my log cabin window. They are curled tight with muzzles under their bushy tails with eyes closed and sugary frost on their eyelashes. As I reminisce our travels of the past three decades, I envision how we have crossed the many expanses of jagged sea ice to the edges of nowhere and have broken trails seemingly to the ends of the earth. We have ventured deep in the mountains where the spiraled peaks stretch so tall that angels of heaven use them as footstools. And together we have experienced such brutal hardships that the thought of survival was a distant hope. But I always view my malamutes as my comrades: friends, brothers and sisters and mentors. They take both the struggles and good times in stride. They endure hardships with humbleness and celebrate triumphs with joy. They are true cheerful warriors. •



Accepting the good with the bad. This photo shows the result of hurricane force winds and -96F wind-chill. The image was captured on Alaska's North Slope during one of the coldest winters in recorded history.