



AN INTRODUCTION TO WORKING & COMPETING WITH YOUR DOGS IN HARNESS

It can be quite overwhelming or even frightening when you first contemplate training for, entering and competing in a sled dog rally. You're not sure how to start, and you have a thirst for information that needs to be quenched. Your head is just full of questions that you want answering? and quickly!

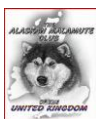
How old does your dog have to be before you can start? What equipment do I need? Where can I get it from? What's the best way to train? How often do I train? Where can I train? Which rallies can I compete at? How do I enter? What classes can I enter? These are just some of the questions we all have when wanting to get started. Hopefully the following will go a long way into helping answer some of these plus other questions you may have. One thing to remember is that there's no better way to learn than through experience. Even if your just starting and not competing, try to get to as many rallies as you can. This will not only help yourself, but more importantly help your dog(s) get used to the rally atmosphere. Until you actually go to a rally, it's hard to imagine the noise that hundreds of excited sled dogs can make. This is one thing it is best to get your dogs used to as soon as possible, as it can be quite intimidating for them at first. Attending a rally is also a good way of getting to know people "on the circuit" and a good chance to tap in to all the knowledge they've gained through experience. It is important to remember though that if you are taking your dog to a rally, to not interfere or get in the way of any of the competitors just before their turn to race. You'll have plenty of time to chat after they've finished.

When to start?

As soon as possible. Start by getting your puppy used to wearing a harness, the walking type. It is a good time to do this when doing lead training. What many owners do is while training their puppy to walk to heel, also train the puppy to "pull" in harness. So basically when the puppy is wearing the harness, let them pull on the lead all they want without correction. This should help the puppy associate the harness with "it's OK to pull now", and hopefully the collar and lead with the opposite.

When the puppy is 5-6 months get them an X-back racing harness. This differs from the walking harness in that it covers more of the dogs' body. Again get them used to wearing it. After a few weeks attach a length of thin rope/string to the "loop" at the back of the harness. Then tie an empty plastic bottle or something else lightweight to the end of the rope/string. This is to get the dog used to having something being dragged behind them. It's the noise of the "thing" behind them that takes the biggest getting used to. After this you could use a small branch or similar, just to increase the load slightly. From this, many owners will then progress their dog onto pulling a small car tyre at around 9 months. Only very small distances at first, starting at just around 10 metres. This gets the dog used to pulling a weight.

Slowly increase the distance so that by around 11 months, the dog is pulling the tyre around 1 mile. From here progression is then made onto pulling a rig. The main thing is to take things slowly. Always make it fun for the puppy. The last thing you want to do is make it feel like a chore.



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Equipment

There are many items of equipment that will be needed for both training and competing. Here is a list of the main items: -

Rig - The three-wheeled vehicle that the dogs pull

Scooter - The two-wheeled bike like item used for lightweight training

X-back Harness - A specially designed harness that distributes the load safely. Comes in varying sizes or made to measure.

Gang line - This is the main line between the rig and the dogs. It is connected to the harnesses and onto a carabiner at the rig. This line will vary depending on the number of dogs that you wish to run, so if you buy a two dog line you will need a different line to run three dogs etc.

Carabiner - This is a strong clip (more usually used in mountaineering) which is connected to the rig. The gang line and shock absorber (bungee) are hooked onto it

Neck Line - This is a shorter line with clips on either side. It is attached between the collars of two dogs so that they run together in the same direction.

Shock absorber/bungee - This is slightly stretchable, one end is connected onto the carabiner while the other end of it is attached, approximately one foot away, onto the gang line. In this way when the dogs begin running the shock absorber takes some of the impact, allowing the dogs to run forward without there being a sudden jerk when they take the full weight of the rig and musher. This is usually provided as part of the gang line assembly.

Snub Line - This is a strong line which is used to hold the rig onto a stationery object while the dogs are being attached to the gang line and until the musher is ready to run. It has a special quick release hook

Boots - To prevent dogs from getting injuries to their pads some mushers put boots on them. The decision on whether to use them or not depends a lot on the conditions underfoot and the individual dog.

Dog Bag - This is required if running more than two dogs. The bag clips onto the rig in front of the musher. It is used to carry an injured or over exerted dog. A sled requires a different style of dog bag.

Equipment suppliers

Many suppliers of equipment, including rigs, do not advertise, and rely on "word of mouth" to help promote their products. Many compete themselves. So ask around at rallies and build your list of contacts. Remember though when ordering a rig, many of the manufacturers are "one man bands" and have big order lists, so you may have to be patient. Harnesses and lines are more readily available.

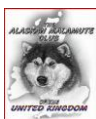
Many can be ordered over the internet:

Snowpaw Store - www.snowpawstore.co.uk

Culpeppers - www.culpeppers.co.uk

Black Ice (USA) - www.blackicedogsledding.com

Some will also have a few items with them to sell at rallies, or fun days.



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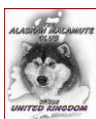
Training

Ask ten different mushers their training schedule, and you'll probably get ten different answers. There are no set rules on how to train. The trick is to find the best way that works for both you and your dogs. For those just starting, some of the training methods have already been mentioned in the "when to start?" section. Most people starting out will have just one dog themselves. You may want to compete in the one dog classes or you may want to join with someone else who is in a similar situation and form your own two dog team. It's best to find someone who lives fairly local to you, or you have somewhere you can meet "half way" to train, as the dogs will need to be well socialised before they can be put in harness together. As always start off slowly. Put the dogs in harness, attach them to the rig with the gangline and connect the collars together with the neckline. Also have a lead attached to each of the dogs collars. Now one person stand on & steer the rig while two others walk the dogs down the track. Do this the first few times. This gets the dogs used to each other, it also allows you to see how they would work together without actually "running" them. After a while, and when you're confident enough, try running them together. Again start off with short distances and build up gradually. Most rally circuits for two dog teams are between 3 and 4 miles, so its best to work up to these distances. One very important part of the training that must not be overlooked, is command training. The basic commands are "Gee" for right turn, "Haw" for left turn, "Straight on" for straight on at a say a crossroads, "On by" for overtaking or passing a distraction. There are many other commands such as "Hike on" or "Get on" for speeding up, or "Steady" or "Easy" for slowing down. Many mushers use these are variants of these, the main thing to remember is to be consistent. One of the best ways to teach the commands is through repetition.

This can be done, by taking the same course over & over again so that the dogs "know the way". Always giving the correct command at the appropriate turn etc. This should help the dog associate the turn with that command. It's surprising how quickly they can catch on doing it this way. Another method of training to help improve general fitness for your dog, and yourself for that matter, is to use a "Springer". This is a U-shaped spring, which by use of brackets can be attached to a bicycle frame. The idea behind it is that you can cycle along while your dog trots beside you. The spring is to help reduce the force of the dog pulling to the side and therefore the chance of being caught off balance. Although this method of training will improve the fitness off your dog, it will not teach them how to pull, this is best done with the tyre method.

Training, how often?

Again there are no set rules to say how often, or when you should train. Many mushers train all year round, to keep a general level of fitness in their dogs. Others finish in the spring and then restart in the autumn. If you intend to train in the summer months, keep training to a minimum, both distance and frequency, and only early in the morning or late in the evening when the temperatures are cooler. It is advisable not to train dogs in temperature above 16 degrees Celsius. Whenever you train your dog, be it in the summer or winter, always have plenty of fresh water on hand. Training 2 to 3 times a week on build up to the rally season should be sufficient.



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Again building up distances slowly. During the season, when you'll have a rally many of the weekends, it may only be necessary to train them once or at the most twice during the week. One of the best ways to train if you are "one" part of a 2-dog team is to use the tyre, especially if you're the part that doesn't have the rig! Again do this 2 to 3 times a week. The main thing when training is to never over do it. Always observe your dogs' condition during and after training. Fitness in dogs, is like humans, it takes a long time to achieve, so don't try and push your dog too far, too early.

Training, where?

It is important to know that, before you start training with your rig in public places, you first must obtain public liability insurance cover. There are a few schemes on the go out there, so again ask around to find the best deals. Once you have your insurance cover, you must then seek a permit from the owner of the land. Ideally its best to train on forest trails, so find your nearest forest and have a wander round to find the most suitable trails. When trying to obtain a permit, it is best to also send a map indicating the trails you wish to use. The Forestry Commission maintains most of the bigger forests, so it is best to write to them with your proposals. They will ask to see your insurance cover before granting you a permit. You may be asked to donate a small annual fee in return for using the trails.

Sometimes you will be allowed to train only certain hours, you may be given a key for the gates. Remember to adhere to the conditions of your permit, otherwise you risk not only spoiling it for yourself but for everyone else wanting to train their dogs in the forest.

Which rallies can I compete at?

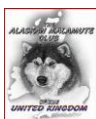
There are many different organisations that run rallies all over the U.K. You can run at all of them providing you comply with their rules and regulations. Some you have to be a member of before you can compete at one of their rallies. Overleaf is a list of these different organisations.

How do I enter?

To enter a rally, you must fill in a rally entry form, making sure it is returned well before the closing date indicated. Many of the organisation web sites have forms ready for you to download. You could also contact the organiser by phone, fax or email. They will be only too happy to send you a form. The more entries the better.

What classes can I enter?

Classes differ from organisation to organisation. When running a malamute team, it is best to look for those classes that are noted as Malamute or freight breed classes. If these are not available, look for the mixed breed classes (e.g D.2, for SHCGB). Remember if in doubt with anything, just ask.



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RALLY ORGANISERS AMWA (Alaskan Malamute Working Association) www.amwa.co.uk
Do not need to be a member to compete at their rallies although members have discounted entry.

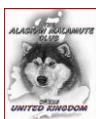
SHCGB (Siberian Husky Club of Great Britain) www.siberianhuskyclub.com
Need to be a member to compete at their rallies All members are covered by third party insurance to compete.

ABSA (Affiliated British Sleddog Activities) www.absasleddogracing.org.uk
Do not need to be a member to compete at their rallies.

SDAS (Sled Dog Association of Scotland) www.sdas.org.uk
Need to be a member to compete at their rallies.

SSHC (Scottish Siberian Husky Club) www.scottishshc.org.uk
All OWNERS of dogs competing must be a member to compete at their rallies

BSHRA (British Siberian Husky Racing Association) www.huskyracing.org.uk
Do not need to be a member to compete at their rallies.
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