

BOBSLEDS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Another type of sled that I have found handy is a bobsled. They're very convenient when you're hauling long things, like house logs.

Usually, rather than make up a bobsled, I'll just use two ski sleds that I already have. Those ski sleds are almost flat, without much upturn at the front. I can put one of them ahead of the other.

To convert a ski sled into a half of a bobsled, you start by placing two sturdy pieces of wood lengthwise on top of the sled. They should be just the length of the platform of the sled, or maybe a little shorter. They have to be long enough so that the bunk is supported on a good length of the sled, both back and front.

Then you securely fasten a crosspiece, called a bunk, to those lengthwise pieces. It is 2" high and 8" wide or so. Its purpose is to distribute the load across the lengthwise pieces.



Horse-drawn bobsled.

In Oliver's design, the bolsters can swivel independently.^{1,2}

Image: <http://www.plowdenhorselogging.com/blog/>

The bolster is a heavier piece of wood that lies above the bunk. It is 4 or 5" wide, 3 or 4" thick, and as long as the width of the sled. It could even be a little longer, though if it sticks out too much beyond the runner line, it could snag on obstacles along the trail.

I usually use a piece of plywood for the bolster, but I've also used hardwoods from fork lift pallets and that sort of thing. Birch works pretty well, and is more available.

A heavy bolt goes up through the middle of the bunk and up through the middle of the bolster. It can be half an inch thick. The bolster has to turn all the time, and the bolt acts as an axis on which it can swivel.

The first sled I made, I just tapered the bolster toward the ends from the swivel point in the center, so that it was thicker at the center. However, it was hard to turn when it had a weight on it, so I made something like a big washer and put it on the bolt before I mounted the bolster. Its purpose was to allow the bolster to turn a little easier, rather than having it bear down on the bunk when the sled wanted to tip a little.

So on top of your lengthwise pieces you have the bunk, the washer, and the bolster, with the bolt going up through all of them. The sled will be going over high spots on the trail, and your load has to be up high enough so that your front and back sleds have some room to flex up and down.

The back sled is set up the same way. If you have one sled that is longer than the other, it goes behind.

If only the front sled were free to swivel, the back sled would track off the trail when you go around a short curve. To get around this, I make a cross yoke by tying a rope from one side of the front sled to the opposite side of the back sled.

The yoke is designed to keep the back sled tracking behind the front one. For example, if the front sled turns to the left, the rope from the back of its right side tugs on the front of the back sled's left side, forcing the back sled to swivel to the left. The back sled then follows the track of the front sled in a smooth arc.



Oliver's son Gerald brings a bobsled load of firewood home to Ambler, circa 1967. Image: Cameron family photos

When I haul logs, I load them with the butt ends toward the rear, so that the main load is on the longer sled and the front sled can turn a little easier. However, you can also put one butt ahead and one butt behind, so that each sled will have more or less the same weight.

I usually make holes through the ends of each bolster, from front to back. Then I put a loop of rope through the holes on each side of the sled, leaving them long enough that I can fold them partway up over the load. The loops come together near the middle, and then I can fasten my tie-down rope to them and cinch my load down to the bunk.

I have pulled a dogsled with a team, with a bobsled hooked on behind it. A bobsled doesn't have any brakes. If you are on the middle of the load, you can't stand behind to work a brake.

Ordinarily when I've used those, it has been in comparatively flat country. There were some ups and downs, but no steep pitches. I fastened a gee pole onto the front bob, and controlled it from my position on the back end of the runners of the towing sled, or in some situations by running along ahead of the bobsled.

When you're riding the sled that the dogs are pulling, you use its brake and hold the bobsled with the gee pole. It can be dangerous. If you're hauling five green logs of any size, there is a lot of weight there. That gee pole needs to be skookum³ and has to be fastened so that if you trip, it will hold you up so you won't get run over by the bobsled.



Gee pole (steering pole) attached to the front of a dogsled.

Image:

I hesitated to put this section in. It's not for anybody who is not reasonably strong and active. I just hope nobody gets hurt.

Could you just use the automatic chain brake on the bobsled, the way you described for your toboggan?

If you have a heavy load on a fairly steep incline, that rough lock won't work. There's not enough purchase. Instead, you wrap chains temporarily around the runners of the rear sled, one on either side. You have to prop the sled up a little bit and wrap the chain around the runner several times, going back.

A chain brake is not very effective in really soft snow, so you would snowshoe the trail ahead of time, making it plenty wide and adequately straight. Then you let it set up overnight, so that the chain brake will have solid snow to work against.

How many dogs did you use with the bobsled?

That depended on what I had. The most I ever used was four dogs.

Charlie Jones had a bobsled. One time we were fishing for sheefish out on Kobuk Lake. Here comes Charlie with a long team of dogs pulling a 10 or 12' basket sled, and behind that a bobsled with a bunch of kids riding on it. They set up a tent with a wood stove, and had firewood to keep warm. It was a real production.

I got a lot of this information about sleds from him. Most Eskimo people know how a thing should be done, but they don't necessarily know why. You ask them why they do it their way, and they say "We always do it this way." They don't know.

Charlie was different. He knew.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) A participant named "MitchMaine" clarified this terminology in a post to a forum of the Draft Animal Power Network (DAPNet). <http://www.draftanimalpower.org/forums/topic/bobsled-question/>.

3) **Sturdy, substantial, strong.** "Skookum is a Chinook Jargon word that has come into general use in the Pacific Northwest." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skookum>)