

MANAGING DOGS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Some people just seem to have a knack for working with dogs. Others don't have any sense for it, and will have nothing but trouble with them.

My dogs are all pets or semi-pets, but there has to be discipline. A dog has to know that you're the boss, but they're also feeling beings, and they've got to feel like doing what you want them to do. If you have a dog that won't work with you, you need to get rid of it.

I have probably traveled more with three or four dogs because I could do what I needed to do with a team of that size, and I didn't feel like I could afford to feed any more than that. I might not go as fast, but when you have fewer dogs, you can have a more individual relationship with each one.

I've also done a lot of work even with just one dog. I've traveled with a small sled and a single dog, or one with dog packs on it.

When a dog is pulling a sled, it's hard for it to go slow. It doesn't want to go at your pace. It's much easier on the dog to go a little faster, because the momentum will help it over the harder places.

Dogs know the difference between you and a sled. When they're young and eager to go, that's when I train them to go easy. If they don't get it, I tip them over backwards a few times, and they will get the message.

If you are using a lead dog that pulls out too much, you can tie the rope to your belt or your waist. I don't usually do that. When you have dogs like that, you train them not to pull on you.

I train my dogs to stay when I say "stay". Then I will go ahead as much as 75 yards, as long as I can see back that far. Then when I call the dog, he will come running at his own pace.

Some dogs like to go ahead. I've had a couple of dogs trained so that I could tell them "go ahead", and they would. Then when they get up there a way, I'd "whoa" them and tell them to stay, and they would wait until I had caught up with them.

That works a little better, since you are behind the sled and can help to get it restarted. Some dogs have a knack for starting a sled, jogging from to one side to the other to get it restarted, but that's kind of unusual.

Of course when you're doing that, with the dog ahead, you'd better not do it when there are lots of rabbits or caribou to be seen in the distance.

One time, at spring camp, Sasha and I went out just for a ride while there was still some snow left. Kalle was small, and was in the sled too. A band of caribou saw us coming and took off, and just for fun, we broke our rule of never letting the team run after them.

After a while we came to a downslope, with a stream of water at the bottom. I put on the brake and told the dogs to “whoa”, which they did. However, our leader’s trace broke, and she took off after them, by herself.

I watched in dismay, but Sasha hollered the dog’s name. “Tinnik!” The dog stopped, looked back at us, looked once more at the caribou, and then trotted back to us. Of course we praised her and petted her like crazy.¹

Oh boy, that dog was well trained!

Tommy Lee got me a dog one time, and it was trained to chase caribou. Tommy didn’t have very good eyes, and if he realized that he’d wounded one of them rather badly—it was maybe running on three legs or something—that dog would chase it, get it by the nose, and bring it down.

My first winter in the Kobuk, when I’d built that tiny iglu about three miles downriver from Ambler, I used to hear Tommy driving his team on the river below to go check his mud shark trap. One day I walked down to watch.

The whole thing was fascinating. One memory I have is that he had ten dogs. He’d turned the sled around so that they were facing back toward the village. The dogs were sitting in perfect order, side by side in pairs, except for two that were standing up in their places and playfully pawing at each other.

He noticed me looking at them, and kind of apologized. He just said, “Puppies.” I was mostly impressed by how orderly the other eight were.

His dogs were a little afraid of him. Clara helped him quite often. When he had Clara or one of the older girls with him, he was free to run alongside and discipline a dog that wasn’t being responsive as she worked the brake.

What is your method of training?

I don’t know as I have a method.

Dogs are all individuals. When they’re young, I make them wait as I put their feed out for them, until I tell them that they can go ahead and eat.

I did the same thing. I wouldn’t have them jamming their snouts into their dog bowls while I was still dishing up their food, and as you said, that was another chance to let them know who was the boss.

Most dogs like to run ahead, so when I’m first working with them, I fasten a rope onto them and let them go to the front end of the rope. That rope might be 50 feet long or so.

Then the first thing I would try to do is teach them to “whoa” and “stay”. With the rope, if they didn’t stop, I could tip them over backwards, or make sure they knew that if they didn’t stop, something was going to happen. Then I could tell them to stay.

I’d coil the rope in my hand as I worked up toward them, and if they got up and started to take off, I’d pull them up again. That went a long way to giving me control over them. They learned that my voice meant something.

When I was teaching a dog to pull, I’d put a harness on it and attach it to a stick of wood, five feet long and three or four inches in diameter, with a pointed front. When the dog wanted to go, it wasn’t used to the idea of having something behind it. Some dogs would be frightened by it and would take off at full speed, so I’d lead them until they got used to having something behind.

I'd also make them stay behind me. That made it much easier to use them for one-dog mushing.

We did the same thing. Sasha made a small harness that we could use when the dogs were still puppies. We'd take one pup at a time for a walk.

Sometimes the dog would get tired and sit down, and then be unable to break the drag loose. We'd keep on going. The dog would be whining and looking at us, very unhappy. We'd call to it and encourage it. Finally it would leap at the harness, free the drag, and come to us. Then we'd pet it, praise it lavishly, and walk on.

I usually used one dog at a time, so that they got the idea that if they didn't pull, nothing would happen. By fooling with your dogs that way from the time they are a couple of months to six months old or so, you can do a lot to train them.

One thing I never managed to do was to get my dogs so that if there was a bear or caribou around or something like that, they would pay attention to me. They would be so focused on the bear that I might just as well be quiet.

I remember riding through the village, with dog yards on both sides and all the dogs leaping at their chains and barking. One of my wheelers always wanted to drift off to one side or the other and take them on, but Tinnik would keep right on going as if nothing were happening.

If your dogs are well trained and sufficiently impressed with your voice, that's when you have control of them.

When you're meeting another team on the trail, you have to have them trained to get off the trail. I once came around a curve and there was a big long team coming. I hawed² my leader, and even though he had seen the team, he went out into the soft snow and pulled my team clear off the trail. The other driver was very impressed by the way my dogs had gotten out of the way.

How did you train your dogs to gee and haw?

Usually I'd pack down some trails, with side trails taking off to the right or left, but not opposite each other. I'd have the dog ahead, and when it got to a fork, tell it "gee". If it didn't turn and wanted to go straight, I'd tell it again. It would try the other trail, and I'd encourage it.

Some dogs are just naturals and learn quickly. They read your mind, I think. Other dogs, you'd better put them at wheel³ or someplace else.

The very first time I mushed a team was early in my first winter near Ambler. I borrowed Mike and Sally Jones's three-dog team to go check mail. They had their two dogs, Nukik and Ashes, in the lead. At wheel they had a skinny, ratty-looking dog they'd picked up, named Pete.

We got there all right, but as I tried to leave the village, the leaders got confused and wouldn't haw. They wanted to gee up another trail that led up the bluff, deeper into town. I had to take hold of their collars and lead them along past the junction.

However, I'd noticed that Pete, following behind the others, had jumped his trace from the right side of the tow line to the left side when I'd said "haw". So, a little way out of town, I put him in the lead, and put the others back at wheel.

Then I'd do just as you said. Whenever the trail split, he'd kind of turn his head and look back at me for instructions. I'd let him get just past the junction, and then call out the command for whichever trail he hadn't taken. He'd invariably jump over to the other trail and keep on going. I had a real warm spot for him after that.

How did you teach your dogs "come gee" and "come haw"?⁴

I didn't usually use that term. I never tried to train my dogs to do that. I'd usually say "gee" or "haw" and then say "come". But I have had some leaders who'd have the sense to do it. I would lose the sled and the leader would miss me, and would make the whole wide turn and bring everybody back to me.

Whoa, that's impressive.

I remember one fellow who trained his team to start off when he shook the handlebars of his sled and made the lashings creak. No voice command. One day, when he had stopped the team and let go of the sled for some reason, a new dog in the lineup leapt at his trace. The other dogs heard the creaking of the lashings, and took off.

The guy had to follow them on foot for miles, until he found the team tangled in the brush where the trail finally left the river and went through some willows.

I'm convinced that there is a bond between the dogs and humans. It's the same with bears. They know if you are a danger, or are afraid of them.

I consider it a handicap to be in tune with the animals. In a tight situation, I never feel fear. It's only afterwards that I realize the danger of it. I'm so concentrated on what's the best thing to do that I don't have the feeling of fear, for some reason.

One time I had a young dog. We were over at the new house, separated by a stand of timber from the old house. The trail was such that I couldn't see the old place. There was a bear up on top of the old house. The dog sensed it, saw the bear, came running back, got my attention, and started back over that way, looking at me, wanting me to follow it.

I took the rifle that I usually have hanging above the doorway outside, and went with him. When we got far enough along the trail to where I could see the house, the slope of the roof was such that if the bear had his head down I couldn't see it, but he heard us and stuck his head up.

The dog was right beside me. When we saw the bear and I stopped to size things up, the bear ducked down again. I reached down and petted the dog a little bit. I don't know as I said anything. He realized he'd done something worthwhile, and I acknowledged it.

The bear wasn't about to take off, so we started around. I went through the trees to where I could see up onto the roof. Since the bear didn't want to run off, I shot him. I don't want bears around that are too bold.

Was it a black bear or a grizzly?

Black. During the summer.

Did that pup get a reward?

Oh, yes. That is a major part of training dogs. Those rewards can be quite subtle.

Can you tell me of other instances and means of giving rewards?

I used to carry some dog feed pellets in my pocket. When I was training a young dog, I'd let him go ahead to the end of the rope, and then tell him to stay. When I got up there, I would reward him.

What other dog commands do you use?

"Stay" is one of the most important ones. I don't make them sit or lie down, but quite often if I tell them to stay, they'll lie down or sit pretty quick.

When you have a dog hooked onto a log that you are trying to skid out of the woods, you've got the log peeled on the bottom end at least, and you have a rope tied around it with a wooden toggle on the end. You are lifting it up and hunching ahead, and the dog needs to know to go ahead when you tell him to. Pretty quick they get the idea, and they'll work with you.

A dog can't pull a log by itself, but when they lean into it and you tell them to go, they will lunge ahead and go as far as they can. If the snow is soft, you only get a few feet at a time until you get out onto a trail.

By the way, when I'm pulling logs like that, I usually use a loop of fairly heavy wire that has an eye in one end and the other end wrapped around a little stick. The wire loop is stiffer than a rope, and often I can push it through the snow under the log, retrieve it, pull it up around the log, and run the stick through the loop like a toggle. When I pull on the toggle, the wire cinches down on the log. Then the toggle serves as a handle that I can use to lift and pull the log. Being wire, that setup won't slip very much.

You can straddle a good-sized log and have the toggle about even with your crotch, or a little longer. You can lift up, and inch it ahead at the same time. Then you step ahead and repeat.

I had a number of those, of different lengths, and would use the one that was most appropriate for a particular log. It's important to be able to nudge with your legs bent a little bit, instead of using your back.

What were the dimensions of the toggle?

It was a piece of birch eight inches long, enough to get one hand on either side. It was 1-1/4" in diameter, and had a little groove in it where I fastened the wire.

I'd give a voice command to the dog each time I lifted the log, and the dog would lunge ahead. After you have had a dog for a while and worked with it, it is amazing how much it will think and cooperate with you.

How did you handle discipline?

Punishment was a very minor of it as far as I was concerned. It was much better to work with rewards and have a relationship where the dog wants to please.

I usually carried a stick in my hip pocket. I didn't want the dogs to be afraid of a stick in my hands, so I used a little one, maybe an inch in diameter and a foot long. I'd take dog by the collar and rap it a little bit on the nose. It doesn't take much of a rap, either.

It wasn't too often that I had to do that, but if the dog was rebellious, that was the main thing. If it didn't want to respond fairly quickly to what I wanted, then it had to have a little punishment. But a few times when they'd get to fighting, a good rap would get his attention and settle the fight.

Here's one thing about teaching dogs: If they've been running loose, it's much more difficult. But if they've been chained up, they want to run and get out, and it's much easier to work with them.

How do you take care of your dogs' feet?

It seems obvious, but that's a big problem if you don't take care of it. If you're going to use dogs, you've got to take care of their feet, or they'll get so sore that they're handicapped.

Dogs with fine hair, like collies and some other breeds, have a bad situation in soft snow when the weather's not really cold. Little balls of snow form on the hairs between their toes. Other dogs have good feet, with oily glands so that snow doesn't gather on those hairs.

Some dogs, if they get a chance to stop, will lie down and chew those balls off before they get too far, but they usually don't get them all off, so you have to help them. It helps a lot if you keep the hairs between the toes trimmed off short.

One thing I used to do was to carry a little bottle of kerosene, and squirt some of that on the dogs' feet. That seemed to help a lot.

Isn't kerosene toxic?

I suppose, but dogs have amazing stomachs. I never had any problem that I know of. They just had a little bit on their feet. It wasn't saturating any of that pellets that had built up. In fact, they didn't build up much at all with kerosene on there.

What about toenails?

You need to study the problem a little so you know how far you can trim toenails down. I don't usually try to trim them off too much, because dogs depend on their nails when the traction is poor.

I had a neighbor who trimmed one dog's nails too close, and she had quite a bleeding problem there. I don't like to get too close to the quick. I leave the dogs with some claw. But when the points get too long and start turning down too much, that's no good either.

Ever since I have had working dogs up there, I've always tried to take care of all those kinds of details. I have a lot of respect for my dogs, although sometimes they probably didn't think so in situations where I had to push them a bit too much.

What about booties?

On some big dogs, I have seen booties that had holes for the toenails. I have never made any that way. Usually I just take whatever stray material I have, cut a piece, fold it, fasten one side, round off the bottom end, sew up the sides, and sew a tie onto it. It's important to have it long enough so that you can tie it around the small part of the foot.

There are two types of situations where dogs need booties. One is when they are breaking through a thin crust on the snow. That is really bad on dogs' feet.

There are also times when dogs are working hard and the weather is quite cold. I've had dogs that got sore feet just from just working on a packed trail that was quite cold. I don't know what caused the problem, maybe a change in temperature, but the surface of the trail was rather rough.

Maybe the condition I'm talking about is when frost begins to form on the ground or on the trail. The dogs also have to work harder to pull a sled when it's really cold.

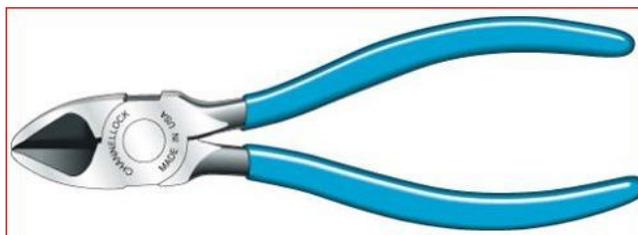
What about dewclaws?

That toenail should be kept trimmed off. Dogs that have dewclaws that weren't cut off when they were pups can have a bad problem when there is a little crust on the snow, and they are post-holing.⁵



Image source: <http://dogblog.ruffwear.net/2011/01/04/dog-paw-anatomy/>

When puppies are real young, those bones aren't very solid there, and you can clip them off with a pair of scissors. I had a pair of dikes that were real good, but sometimes I'd have to finish with scissors.



Typical dikes. Image source:

<http://www.amazon.com/Channellock-436-6-Inch-Diagonal-Cutting/dp/B00004SBDE>

Dikes are a tool for cutting wire and so forth. They have cutters where an ordinary pair of pliers would have grippers. They taper and are very sturdy, because they're very wide on the outside edges and hollowed out on the center on one side, so that you have cutting edges that come together.

If you've got a new pair of those and keep them just for that sort of thing, they do quite well. But if you have an old pair where the edge is chewed up, that's no good.

How old are the pups when you clip the dewclaws?

I think the sooner you do it, the better, and the less traumatic it is for the dog. I suppose if you had a dog of any age that was giving you trouble and had injured a dewclaw, you could take it off, but you'd have a bleeding problem there.

People who have dogs will have to deal with injuries of some kind sooner or later, seems like. My experience has been that dogs don't seem to be as sensitive as we are. I've had to sew up dogs and pull quills out of them and so forth. Some dogs are very hard to handle, but most of my dogs would just lie there and let me work on them. They seemed to understand that I was trying to help them. It was surprising how much they cooperated.

I've had dogs with quills that I couldn't get out. Eventually they worked their way clear out through some part of the snout. When they were trying to poke through on the outside, the dog

would keep trying to paw at them and work at them, but usually I had pretty good luck on getting them the rest of the way out.

I read something about maybe using vinegar to soften the quills so that they would come out easier, but I've never tried that. It's usual that I have a little kit of pocket tools, and in that kit is a pair of pliers. That's one thing they get used for. Whenever I'm out and a dog gets into a porky, I pull the quills out right then and there.

I've heard that porcupine quills are hollow, and that you should cut them off to deflate them before you pull them out.

I've never heard of that.

How do you teach a dog not to chew its harness?

Any dog that I raise learns real young not to fool with those kinds of things, and never chews a rope or a piece of cloth or webbing, but I've had a couple of dogs given to me that had that habit.

One of them would chew on the main tow line as I was harnessing the team. After I realized what he was up to, I'd watch him and then correct him at the time he started to do that. A few times I had to whip him. He learned.

The other dog never did learn. If he knew I was watching, he wouldn't do it. But if I wasn't alert, he'd chew on something.

We had one dog that wouldn't learn either.

If a dog that chews is a good dog, you hate to get rid of it. But the only cure for that particular dog was a hole in his head.

The dog that chewed had been our son's puppy. I just resigned myself to taking it out of harness and chaining it to a bush whenever I had to park the team for a while.

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- 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) "Gee" means go to the right, "haw" means go to the left.
 - 3) The wheel dogs are those immediately ahead of the sled.
 - 4) Reverse course 180 degrees on the right side or the left side of the sled, respectively.
 - 5) Repeatedly breaking through the crust.