

ONE DOG MUSHING

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

On a good trail, one dog can pull a lot, if it has a good sled.

You have to use a little judgment about what the dog can do. You have to think about the dog having more control over the sled, so you use a longer yoke. You have a short tug that goes from there to the dog's harness, or it may be almost a part of the harness.



Oliver strides out on snowshoes as he helps his dog pull a heavily loaded sled.

Image: Sasha Wik

When you come to any steep uphill pitch, you are going to get back behind the sled and help the dog. That has a lot to do with the training of the dog.

Some dogs, unless they are well trained, are used to following, and don't want to go head by themselves. Then you have a problem. But if you have a dog that you've been working, especially if you've raised it since it was a puppy and was eager to go, and if you've allowed it to go ahead on a fairly long leash, it will be used to the idea of going ahead.

Dogs are individual personalities. Sometimes they have their own idea about what they want to do. You train them to gee and haw^{1,2} so that they can work with you when you're behind the sled.

Another thing you can do is to fasten a rope into the yoke and loop it over your shoulders so that you can give some help. I don't like to do that, because it tends to spoil the dog. It sometimes takes away his sense of responsibility.

If you are leading a dog or two hooked to a sled and you go over a little rise, the sled is going to run ahead and overrun the dogs. In order to prevent that, you can provide a sort of rough lock by fastening some chain on the outside of the runners and back a little bit. It doesn't have to be real heavy.

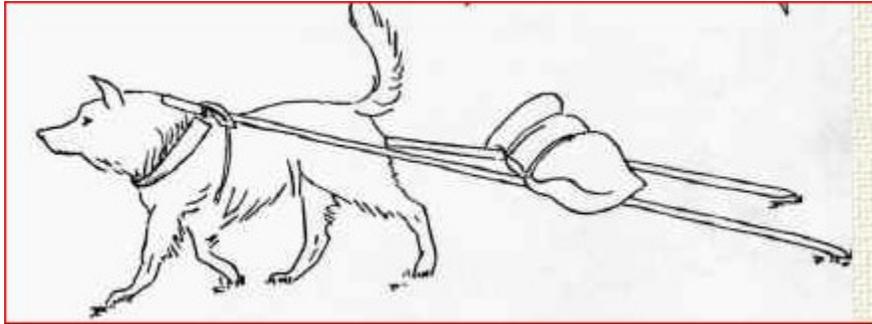
Then when the sled starts to run up on the dogs, the tow line goes slack and allows the chain to be bit under the runners, automatically slowing the sled until the tow line tenses again. I described this in detail in our discussion on bobsleds.



Ole Wik and Dorene Cameron (Oliver's daughter) ferry gear from the Wiks' sod iglu to spring camp, Kobuk River, 1974. Image: Sasha Wik

Travois

I've also used a travois several times. When you have a bulky load like skins and bedding and such, a travois is a handy way to move it.



"Typical dog of the Sioux."

Image source: http://www.majesticview1.com/NAIDs/the_sioux.htm

I used a couple of sticks of spruce that were small so that the tips were limber, about ten feet long. I made a simple harness, just a breast strap fastened on each side by a short piece to a strap around the dog, a little behind the front legs. Then I fastened a strap, maybe five inches wide, between the ends of the poles there near the front. It sat on the dog's back just behind the shoulders. There was a string tied onto that belly band or waist band and to those side poles.

I put the thick ends of the poles on the dog, so that the limber ends were at the back. That way the load would bend them down and make runners of them.

I used a crotch from a small tree or willow or something to use as a spreader to keep those two side members apart, fastened right of the front end of the poles.

The reason that I needed a spreader there was because in the pictures you see of horse travois used by Indians, they had quite a wide angle and they crossed over the horses' back and fastened to a saddle or something.



A Kainai (Blood) Travois with poles crossed over horse.

Image source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Travois>

That's fine if you're out on a prairie with just grass, but it's not practical to have them spread that wide when you have to muck around through brush and trees. So I nailed a board across behind the dog, and then a few more farther back. They kept the side members more or less parallel.

The travois was about two feet wide at the back, and tapered to just about the width of the dog at the front. There has to be some flexibility there so that the dog is free to turn a little bit when he is pulling around a curve.

I've hauled meat and firewood on that contraption. I'd just put my cargo on the deck and tie it down. It puts quite a load on the dog, but most of it is back on the runners or sides.

For firewood, I'd cut small dead spruce trees into maybe three feet lengths, lay them lengthwise, and tie them down.

How did your travois compare to a dog pack?

I probably pulled 100 pounds, quite a bit more than a dog would want to pack. I was using a fairly large dog, 65 or 70 pounds. He was not apt to run off with the load.

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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" and "haw" are the commands for "turn right" and "turn left", respectively.