

## **Training A Leader**

### **Right and Left:**

Training a leader to take commands is a difficult endeavor, but most mushers would agree that it is one of the most fun parts of dog mushing. There are two main commands that a leader must know:

GEE = Turn Right

HAW = Turn Left

When a musher wants a team to make a corner they say the correct command, and it is the leader's responsibility to turn the team. Sometimes, making a corner is as easy as selecting one of two distinct trails. Other instances requiring the lead dog's assistance are more difficult, however, as commands are also used on areas of glare ice or wind-packed snow, where a team can go in any direction they want. Add in distractions and hazards, such as wildlife or thin ice, and getting a leader to take the correct trail becomes difficult, but even more important.

### **How To Train A Leader:**

Teaching a leader to respond to musher commands takes a lot of time and patience. Because dogs don't know English, this requires a musher to teach a dog a word and 'attach' it to an action.

If I walked up to you and told you to 'Banana', would you know what I meant? Since a 'Banana' is a thing, and not a word that defines any action, you would

probably be confused. This is just like telling a dog to go 'Gee' or 'Haw' before they are trained.

Now, lets say I told you 'Banana' and then led you to a door. Would the word 'Banana' have any new meaning the next time I said it? At this point you might guess that, when I say 'Banana', I'm referring to something that relates to the door.

To reinforce the connection between the command 'Banana' and the door, I would have to tell you that you are doing the right thing. To do this, I could tell you 'Good job!' and give you a candy bar. Both these things would reinforce that you are doing what I want.

This is exactly how lead dogs are trained. A musher will approach a fork in the trail and say a command. Often, an experienced dog is paired with an inexperienced one, and the experienced dog will play the role of teacher. Even then, however, when a new leader takes the correct command, its important for the musher to reward that dog. Rewards can take the form of a simple 'Good Dog!', but often, particularly in the beginning of training, a musher will stop their team, run up to their leaders and give them treats.

### **When Leader Training Begins:**

Mushers begin working with the puppies a few days after they are born, laying the groundwork for future leader training. It is crucial that a leader trusts and listens to the musher. There is no way to force a dog to make a turn - the only control a musher has when on the sled is verbal control, which requires the dog to cooperate. As a result, at a very young age, mushers bond with their pups and teach them to listen. Some will teach their dogs to sit on command; others will make an entire litter of puppies pause before diving into their breakfast, waiting until they are given the command to eat. This early training reinforces the

mushers' role in the team, and teaches that the musher is the one to look to for direction.

As soon as the dogs are ready to be put in harness, formal leader training can be taught. This usually occurs when the pups are 6-7 months old. Training a leader requires a lot of work, however: It can sometimes take years for a leader to develop into a great lead dog.

### **Positive Training:**

Throughout all training, positive training is the standard way for mushers to work with their dog team. The idea behind 'positive training' is that, by rewarding good behavior and ignoring bad behavior, eventually the bad behavior will go away.