

Fall Training Tips for Sled Dogs

There are as many opinions about training dogs as there are people in the sport. This is intended to be mini-guide for recreational mushers getting started with the sport.

Training begins in the fall

We start in the fall, because it is too hot to run during the summer - more about this later. When you start training your dogs, keep to short distances at first, 1-2 km runs; 1-3 times max in a day with at least a 1/2 hour break between. Keep it fun for the dogs, so it's play rather than work, especially with a new or young dog. Don't run more than 3 times per week at first.

After a week or two (total 3-9 runs), if the dogs seem comfortable, you can increase the distance to 2-4 kms, and then up by a maximum of 25% a week until you reach your target distance.

Many racers choose to run a cycle of 2 days training and 1 day rest. Recreational mushers often only run the dogs 2-3 times a week.

Each dog should be partnered with a team that runs comfortably together. You should not see loose tug lines or tight necklines. Your team should never be running faster than a comfortable pace for the slowest dog. Use your brakes to ensure this.

Never run more dogs than you can fully control for the safety of your team and the other teams around you. You should be able to stop your team and keep them stopped using brakes, voice commands, and snub line to a tree if necessary.

Starting a new dog

Most northern breed dogs love to run, so it is really much harder to teach them to stop than to run in harness. That said, some care should be taken to ensure that each dog has a good first experience.

Many dogs will not care about putting on a harness, but it is helpful to give them treats, pets and praise while you are doing it for the first couple of times, especially if it is a shy dog.

Partnering a new dog with an experienced friendly dog is a helpful way for a new dog to see what is expected. With a nervous dog, sometimes it is best to run them alone behind a pair of experienced dogs who will ignore the new dog entirely. It can be helpful to have the owner run or cycle beside or in front of their dog until they look comfortable with the new activity. Be positive and encouraging to the dog. Let them know you are pleased, as you likely grumped at them when they pulled on leash, so they need encouragement to understand what is desired. It may take several weeks to convince them the pulling is a good thing in this instance. You may also need to remind them that pulling is still not ok while on leash. They are quite capable of learning when it is acceptable to pull, but it does take a little time for them to distinguish when it is appropriate.

Some mushers prefer to start new dogs back in a team where the dog may be comfortable not being expected to lead a pack; others prefer to start new dogs in lead, where they can pick the pace. It really depends on the circumstances and the individual dog and musher. Just remember that the dog must be comfortable, if a little confused, but not frightened or overwhelmed.

No dog should pull more weight than they can easily manage – it is too discouraging. Both distance and weight should be as easy as possible at first. For sledding, ideally, the combined weight of the dogs on the team should about as much as, or more than, the gear and the musher. On wheels the weight ratio can be increased, but the musher should help to get the motion started and on uphills until the team is rolling easily.

Non-northern breeds may not understand the idea of running out front at first. Have the dog run to catch his/her owner with another team in front. Let them catch up and visit a bit at first, then gradually increase the time and distance apart. Once they seem to be enjoying the running for its own sake, try having the owner on the sled/scooter with their own dog, but someone they know well on the team ahead so they still have someone to chase. With time and practice the dog usually comes to understand that staying out front is what is desired, and learns to enjoy their independence.

When is it too hot to run?

Recommendations differ on running in warmer temperatures, as dog breeds and specific individual dogs also differ. Heavy coated dogs and dogs carrying any extra weight (ie you cannot easily feel their spine or ribs) will overheat quicker than lighter and/or shorter coated dogs.

Training recommendations: Many mushers choose to use a combination of humidity and temperature to determine their cut-off point. If temperature in Fahrenheit plus Humidity level (F+H) equals 120 most mushers will not run their dogs, other than a very short distance. Some mushers use 100 as their cut-off. Especially for a beginning musher, or a new or old dog, it is wise to consider distance with care if the F+H is over 100, better safe than sorry until you know your dogs better. Many dogs are enthusiastic enough not to realize that they are overdoing it, so it is your job to ensure that the run is safe for the dogs. See chart in appendix A for F+H cut-offs and care zones (with Celsius conversions as well). Consider shorter distances and/or a rest/water break if you are in the questionable zones.

Consider if the course you are running is in full sun, or shade. Obviously full sun can add to heat stress, particularly with dark coloured dogs. Some say that 2-3 km and under is short enough that running somewhat over the temperature recommendations may be reasonably safe if the musher is attentive for signs of stress.

Distance mushers generally recommend to take care running between 6-10°C, taking humidity into account, and not to run more than 7 miles or so. They recommend a water stop and short break at 3 miles or so. They are generally training with an ATV and use the engine or brakes to hold the speed down. Remembering that these mushers are experienced and know their teams very well. They have well trained dogs who know to vary their effort according to the musher's directions, so are far less likely to overdo it. The musher remains alert for any sign of stress, knowing that any individual dog may find this too much.

I have seen individual dogs overheat in somewhat under zero degree conditions when running more than 5 miles, so take care with longer distances when running recreational dogs even at what may seem like lower temperatures. Partner slower dogs together so that no dog is running faster than they are comfortable with.

Testing your dogs: After your run, or while taking a break during a run, offer your dogs a small treat. If they won't eat it (and normally would), they have likely run too far, or too hot. Take a long break, or put the affected dog on the sled to ride back; and in future adjust your distances or teams to avoid this.

Offer water 5 minutes after returning from a run. Normally

the dogs will take only what water they need to rehydrate, but occasional dogs will drink too much, particularly if they are feeling overheated. This can cause bloat. Limit to 1.5-2 cups of water, then offer again in 5-10 minutes when they have had a chance to digest. Consider adding ice-cubes to the water if it is warm, not too much ice though as you can put an overheated dog into shock with a severe temperature change.

It is not uncommon when the dogs are first getting back into shape for them the cough up mucus after a run that is longer and harder than they are used to. Take this as an indication that you have likely trained too hard, and ease off for the next run.

Racing organizations like IFSS, WSA, QSDA, ISDRA have specific rules for racing temperatures. These organizations are setting cut-offs with experienced mushers and racing fit dogs in mind; and even then mushers are expected to know their own dogs' limits and judge accordingly. These cut-offs range from 10 degrees with 85% humidity to 18 degrees celsius with some higher exceptions for short distances. Many will cut the distance at 10 degrees, and cancel entirely at 15-18 degrees. Cut-offs can vary for canicross, bikejor and sooting/sledding. For specific race giving organization rules see Appendix B. For mushers' general training for heat comments see Appendix C.

Rewarding your dog for a good run

Many mushers will make a soup or broth with meat that they give their dogs after running – called slops. It's a way to reward your dog for a job well done, rehydrate them; and motivate them to keep moving smartly at the end of the run (anticipating their reward meal). Good mushers also take the time to visit each dog after the run and praise them individually, which is a good time to check for any signs of stress or injury, and judge if you run was appropriate for each dog.

Feeding times and exercise

Dogs should not run until at least 2 hours after their last meal, as running on a full stomach can cause stomach torsion, a potentially fatal condition. At the least, it will be uncomfortable for the dog as it may make them feel ill – how do you feel running on a full stomach?

Some mushers will give their dogs broth before a run to help keep them hydrated. You should not give more than 1/2 c of liquid, 20-40 minutes before the run so it is already starting to digest.

Proper weight for running dogs

Some racers like to keep their dogs light enough that you can see that there is no fat, and very lean muscle; others allow a bit more weight giving a more solid muscular impression. A running dog should not carry excessive fat as it is hard on the joints and makes the running more strenuous. You should be able to easily feel the ribs on the sides of your dog and the top of their hip bone, with solid muscle around their spine, chest and legs.

Running with extra weight requires extra care until they slim back down to a reasonable running weight. Keep to shorter slower runs and increase distance more gradually.

Bathroom breaks

All dogs should be given an opportunity to eliminate every 2-3 hours, and immediately after eating or drinking. Recreational dogs are often house pets, and may need to be walked to eliminate. Particularly 20 minutes after drinking or eating, and generally every 2 hours or so if in a box or on a chain. It's not fair to expect house pets to soil the area around their tieout chain, and can be uncomfortable for them to "hold it".

Dealing with overly-excited dogs

It is not fair to expect every dog to like other dogs, or in some cases any other dogs. Dogs are as varied in temperament as people. There are lots of reasons for negative behaviours towards other dogs, ranging from high excitement, high prey drive, overly-shy dogs, and bad past experiences. It is everyone's job to keep the dogs safe. Until you know your dog will behave appropriately, you need to supervise interactions like passing a team, and strange people approaching your dog.

Dogs must learn to trust that other teams are not a threat, and pass them without reacting to them in either a friendly or negative way. It is your job to ensure that this trust is well placed. If you are not sure that your team will pass another team safely, let the other musher know what you are doing. Stop your team and stand between them and the other dogs to ensure a safe pass; you may even drag your team off the trail a bit if necessary. Likewise, if you have had previous trouble with another team, you owe it to your dogs to ensure that they have a good experience. Ask the other musher to stand with his or her dogs, or stop your own team and stand between them and the problem dog as they pass to avoid a further issues.

There are many different ways to approach negative dog behaviour on the trail, and which works best very much depends on the reasons for the dog's behaviour: the primary thing is to separate to dogs as quickly as possible and work to avoid similar circumstances.

Dogs that "look" at another team, or attempt a friendly visit should be verbally corrected, and blocked from successfully "visiting". Dogs should conversely be verbally praised for good behaviour. You may even choose to stop your team after a particularly good pass and treat them if there is room to safely do so.

Some dogs get overly excited while they are being hooked into the team and will jump, yank or nip on the dog next to them. This is not fair to the dog's running partner. Consider asking an experienced person to hold the excitable dog until you are ready to start running, as the behaviour usually ends once the team is moving.

Running with a muzzle cage can be a solution for repeat problem dogs. The muzzle cage must be well secured, but allow the dog to move, breath and pant freely. Some dogs are perfectly happy to run this way, but of course if any particular dog does not adjust well, then other methods may have to be used. In the most difficult cases, the dog should be left at home.

Equipment

Warm clothes and good winter boots that are easy to move in and allow for good blood circulation are very important; getting frostbite is not fun, and can be very dangerous, leaving permanent damage if it is severe. It is always better to have extra gear with you. Consider having chemical heat packs and/or a hot thermos of tea/coffee. It's surprising how cold it feels standing around a parking lot waiting for your team to return, or standing on the sled of a running team at 30 kms per hour, making your own wind.

- Dog harnesses (these come in a variety of shapes and sizes, you should consult and experience person to find out what may work best for your dog)
- Wide flat durable collar with a large ring to make hooking up the dogs easier
- Sled, scooter, cart with brakes suitable to stop the dogs you intend to run
- Gangline and coupler/neckline (attaches the dogs together and to the sled/scooter/cart)
- Snub line or leash to tie your dogs in case of emergency
- If on a sled, snow hook good enough to stop and hold your team when needed
- Vented sled bag (to carry a tired or injured dog back to the truck)
- Helmet, eye protection, some people even choose to where dirt bike body armour
- Dog bowls and water for after the run. Treats or slops if desired.

Skijor additional gear:

- Skies/poles/boots typically for skate skiing
- Climbing or skijor harness

Commands (pre-teaching them)

- Gee (right)
- Haw (left)
- Hike (start running)
- Whoa (stop)
- Easy (slow down)
- Gee Over (go to the right side of the path)
- Haw Over (go to the left side of the path)
- Leave It / On By (ignore the other team or distraction and keep running)
- Come About (Lead dogs come around turning the team 180° in as wide an arc as the trail allows, so as not to tangle the ganglines),

You can practice most of these commands on leash while walking around your neighbourhood. Before you turn left say Haw, likewise right is Gee. Tell the dog the command, then enforcing it's meaning by doing it on leash with them, so they have to follow, thus the dog learns what the word means and develops a body memory of what is expected. Praise and treat the dog when they do the action without your enforcing it; then gradually increase their distance in front of you on leash so that the command becomes habit in that position. Dogs take the situation into account, so it may not translate immediately into the same behaviour when they are in front, or when they are running in a team, but it will come easier once they understand the concept.

For Leave It, or On By, you can also practice around distractions in the neighbourhood. Be sure to have a command (such as OK) to allow the dog to visit when YOU permit, but only when you have given the command in advance.

Start with the distraction / other dog across the street, so that it is not too tempting. As you pass, say ON BY, or LEAVE IT, then praise and treat the dog as they go by (be a better distraction). If the dog does try to visit while passing, don't be discouraged, just say No in a firm tone, and pull them away before they have a chance to visit. Praise the instant you have their attention away from the distraction. Eventually they will learn that they can't visit, and that it is really better to keep their attention on you, since you are more interesting anyway.

When the dog keeps its attention on you and goes by reliably, gradually delay the treat until the dog will pass distractions cleanly without immediate reward. Now decrease the distance from the distraction, and/or increase the distance the dog is in front of you gradually until they will pass a distraction on command from 6 feet in front of you and on the same side of the street as the distraction. Keep in mind that the other dogs are not being trained, so you need to choose which dogs you can pass closely without a visit attempt from either animal.

APPENDIX A

Musher's Temperature/Humidity Running Guide

SNOWDRIFT SIBERIANS

TEMP/HUMIDITY RUNNING GUIDE

TEMP	Celsius	Fahren-heit	HUMIDITY						LEGEND
			30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	
0		32	62	72	82	92	102	112	RUN
1		33	63	73	83	93	103	113	
2		35	65	75	85	95	105	115	
3		37	67	77	87	97	107	117	
4		39	69	79	89	99	109	119	RUN USING CAUTION
5		41	71	81	91	101	111	121	
6		42	72	82	92	102	112	122	
7		44	74	84	94	104	114	124	
8		46	76	86	96	106	116	126	DO NOT RUN
9		48	78	88	98	108	118	128	
10		50	80	90	100	110	120	130	
11		52	82	92	102	112	122	132	
12		53	83	93	103	113	123	133	DO NOT RUN
13		55	85	95	105	115	125	135	
14		57	87	97	107	117	127	137	
15		59	89	99	109	119	129	139	
16		60	90	100	110	120	130	140	DO NOT RUN
17		62	92	102	112	122	132	142	
18		64	94	104	114	124	134	144	
19		66	96	106	116	126	136	146	
20		68	98	108	118	128	138	148	DO NOT RUN

APPENDIX B

Max temperatures for racing dogs – rules from various racing organizations

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR SLEDDOG SPORTS (IFSS)

B . III Temperatures at Dryland races – Guidelines

21. At dryland races there shall be a thermometer and a hygrometer in the starting area. They shall be readily visible, placed in the shade, at 50 centimeters (20 inches) above ground level.
22. The minimum and maximum temperatures and humidity shall be noted during the entire race.
23. Given the minima and maxima, trail conditions and local circumstances (e.g. humidity), the following guidelines are available for decisions to be taken by the race giving organization and the race marshal for the well-being of the dogs:
 - 23.1. Temperatures below 18°C for Canicross and 16°C for all other classes and with a humidity below 85 %: normal competition
 - 23.2. Temperatures above 16°C, but below 18°C: the distances shall not exceed the minimums given in §22 above. This maximum temperature is set at 22°C for Bikejoring classes and at 25°C for Canicross classes.
 - 23.3. Temperatures above 18°C, but below 22°C: the distance shall not exceed 1.5 kilometers for demonstration purpose only except for Bikejoring and Canicross (see §22 above).
 - 23.4. Temperatures above 22°C: no team shall be harnessed except for Canicross (see §22 above)
 - 23.5. If the temperature reaches 18°C, the race marshal shall call a meeting with the race veterinarian(s) in order to decide upon whether the race shall be delayed or cancelled. The veterinarian's opinion shall be preponderant in case of different opinions. Animal welfare shall always be the major deciding factor.
 - 23.6. Depending on the race trail (i.e. large section under the sun) or other facts, the Race Marshal may impose shorter distances or other measures if this is favouring the sport, even if the maximum temperatures above are not reached.

INTERNATIONAL SLED DOG RACING ASSOCIATION (ISDRA)

7. TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY

- a. If, at the discretion of the Race Marshal, the temperature and/or humidity are detrimental to the health of the dogs, the classes not yet run shall be canceled for the day.
- b. Due to the number of variables involved, absolute cutoff temperature and humidity levels are difficult to specify. Generally speaking, temperatures ranging from 50 degrees F/ 10 degrees c. to 60 degrees F./ 15 degrees c. or greater, at anytime prior to or during the race, should cause immediate review.



19 The race veterinarian in conjunction with the Race Marshal or race judge may rule a dog(s) unfit to start or continue in the race and to remove the dog(s) from the race for medical or other reasons. If the Race Veterinarian diagnoses any dog present in the race area to have a contagious disease, that dog shall be disqualified and the competitor shall immediately leave the race site with all his/her dogs.

20 All dogs participating in a race shall be vaccinated according to the current recommendations of the WSA Chief Veterinary officer. Vaccinations need to be done in accordance with regulations of the host country in which the race is taking place.

B.III. Temperatures at Dryland races – Guidelines

21 At Dryland races there shall be a thermometer and a hygrometer in the starting area. They shall be readily visible, placed in the shade, at 50 centimetres (20 inches) above ground level.

22 The minimum and maximum temperatures and humidity shall be noted during the entire race.

23 Given the minima and maxima, trail conditions and local circumstances (e.g. humidity), the following guidelines are available for decisions to be taken by the race giving organization and the race marshal for the well-being of the dogs:

23.1 Temperatures below 10°C for all classes and with a humidity below 85 %: normal competition.

23.2 Temperatures above 10°C, but below 14°C: the distances shall be reduced down to, or less than the minimums given in 37 below, with the exception of canicross. The maximum temperature is set at 16°C for canicross classes.

23.3 Temperatures above 14°C: no team shall be harnessed except for canicross (up to maximum 16°C - see 23.2 above).

23.4 If the temperature reaches 14°C (or 16°C for canicross), the race marshal shall call a meeting with the race veterinarian(s) in order to decide upon whether the race shall be delayed or cancelled. The veterinarian's opinion shall be preponderant in case of different opinions. Animal welfare shall always be the major deciding factor.

23.5 Depending on the race trail (i.e. large section under the sun) or other facts, the Race Marshal may impose shorter distances or other measures if this is favouring the sports, even if the maximum temperatures above are not reached.



14.1 Dispositions concernant la température

Les dispositions suivantes ne s'appliquent pas à la discipline de trottinette sauf 14.1.8 qui s'applique aussi à cette discipline.

- 14.1.1 La température est mesurée à 50 centimètres du sol et à l'ombre et à l'abri du vent.
- 14.1.2 Aucun chien ne doit être attelé et participer à une épreuve au-dessus de 30 degrés Celsius (« °C ») et en dessous de -30°C.
- 14.1.3 Lorsque la température dépasse 15°C, une petite piscine ou un plan d'eau près de l'aire d'arrivée doit obligatoirement être disponible pour les chiens.
- 14.1.4 En bikejoring ou en scooter, les distances maximales sont établies comme suit, en fonction de la température :
 - a. 15°C ou moins : maximum 7 km;
 - b. 15 à 20°C : maximum 3,5 km;
 - c. 20 à 25°C : 2 km ou moins, en type d'épreuve : fun run (voir Article 13.3).
- 14.1.5 En canicross, les distances maximales sont établies comme suit, en fonction de la température :
 - a. 15°C ou moins : maximum 8 km;
 - b. 15°C à 20°C : maximum 5 km;
 - c. 20°C à 25°C : maximum 3,5 km;
 - d. 25°C à 30°C : maximum 2 km, en type d'épreuve : fun run (voir Article 13.3).
- 14.1.6 En canitrail, les distances maximales sont établies comme suit, en fonction de la température :
 - a. 15°C ou moins : maximum 20 km;
 - b. 15°C à 20°C : maximum 12 km;
 - c. 20°C à 25°C : maximum 6 km;
 - d. 25°C à 30°C : maximum 2 km, en type d'épreuve : fun run (voir Article 13.3).
- 14.1.7 En skijoring, l'organisateur, en collaboration avec l'officiel de course, devra adapter l'épreuve selon les conditions de la piste dans le cas où la température serait de plus de 0°C.
- 14.1.8 En cas de conditions jugées extrêmes, l'organisateur, en collaboration avec l'officiel de course, peut modifier ou annuler une épreuve.

Appendix C

Comments from experienced mushers on heat cutoffs

Mike Ellis

(Tsuga Siberians - Yukon Quest and Iditarod finisher)

Tstaying cool!!! I've seen a lot of chatter online and gotten some emails from folks recently about fall training and when and how to 'run' the dogs. I'll throw my 2 cents in for any who care, as I think it's important information, but as always, consider the source and take ideas from others, but find what works best for your dogs in your situation. - We are not fond of charts, guidelines, graphs, and the like for determining what temperatures and humidity to run in, as it matters much more HOW you run. There are simply too many variables to consider to make any 'cut-offs' useful for more than the person who made them. If it's above freezing, we are extremely careful of how we run the dogs, not 40F, nor 50F, nor temp+humidity less than 100, but 32 degrees F is where we draw the line for being very careful in how we run. 'Careful'? Dogs are the most prone to overheating in the early season when they are not yet in great shape. Of course this is the season when we're all trying to get out but the temps just won't keep up with our ambitions. Practice patience in when you run and how far you run. Speed is the biggest cause of teams getting hot. The warmer and more humid it is, the slower and shorter we go. Increasing distance too quickly in the fall is a serious pitfall, for lots of reasons. We are a month in to Yukon Quest training, and our longest run of the year is still only 7 miles that took a bit over an hour to do. We avoid hills, especially steep ones, and run on the smoothest of our trails when it's warm, to keep the workload down. We always carry fresh water and bowls and water the dogs during the runs, and do it early in a run, usually only 10-15 minutes in, not a lot, but enough to cool down after that initial burst of energy. Also make sure they are starting well-hydrated and without much food in their bellies when it's warm. Puddles are good for cooling down, too, just make sure YOU decide which puddles they stop in. If a dog was warm today, make sure they take tomorrow off. Always run within the abilities of the 'weakest' dog on the team, you put them on that line!! Now bring on some cooler weather!!! Happy trails. Respect your dog!

Comments from other distance mushers on heat cut-offs

When asked about using the brakes to limit a team's speed in early runs: We don't train above 10C and are really careful between 6 and 10C - if it feels too humid we don't go. We did a run the other night where we left the yard at around 7C - only going 8 miles but we stopped to water after about 4 miles and a couple of the dark coloured dogs were drinking an awful lot of water and panting hard. I am not sure. If you have a dog used to going fast and you are forcibly slowing him down I would think he would be expending as much energy. With our dogs they get used to running at slower speeds all the time so wouldn't expend the same amount of energy - if that makes sense!

I don't believe in those charts AT ALL. The thing is that everyone's dogs are different. What is right for one dog isn't necessarily right for another dog. The everyday temps your dogs live in, the humidity they are used to, the type of dogs they are, your style of running, etc, etc, etc ALL factor into it. Overheating dogs is a SERIOUS thing. I ALWAYS recommend erring on the side of caution. Even if a dog survives an overheating episode, they are never the same. It permanently affects them. I used to run at anything below 10C but have changed that to 5C - just 'cause I am not under such pressure to get miles anymore and this it is safer for the dogs and more enjoyable for us all. If at 10C your dogs are doing a lot of open mouth, head back breathing, I would say it is too warm. But you need to understand and know YOUR dogs and YOUR situation and do what is right for THEM.

Comments from a sprint racer on heat cutoffs

When we were running dogs, we always used a performance factor. What you had to do is this. Take your celsius temp, convert it to F & add the humidity to it. If the factor was below 120, it is safe to run your dogs. If the factor is marginally over the 120 you just give your dogs more rest periods. The other factor to look at is the distances. Keep your runs at a low distance when you are starting the season (2-2.5 miles). Increase the distance of your events as you get more training. No more than 4 miles for the fall.