



A Beginners Guide to Mushing

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1. GETTING STARTED

Before you start dry-land sledding, you need the right gear. At the WASSA Beginners Camp you will have plenty of opportunities to view and test the distinct types of equipment available before you buy your own. Make sure you talk to as many people as possible and ask questions about what equipment works for them and why. Below is a list of the items you will need to get started.

BEGINNERS CHECKLIST

- Dog (1 or 2 is ideal to start with)
- Racing Harness for your dog/s
- Gangline (for 1 or 2 dogs)
- Neckline (if running 2 dogs)
- Scooter (for running up to 2 dogs)
- Helmet
- Cutters (capable of cutting through ganglines, tuglines or harnesses)
- Lights (for scooter and/or helmet)
- Wet weather gear
- Enclosed footwear
- Stake out line or crate

2. RACE CLASSES

Below is a guide to the classes generally run at WASSA races. Please note that classes may be cancelled if there are less than 3 competitors in the class or they may be combined with another class and are determined by weather conditions (temperatures and humidity). Distances are a guide only and may be changed if temperatures are on the higher end of the scale. Dogs can only be run in one class per race, with the exception of Canicross, Pee Wee and Mini Pee Wee (e.g. a dog can run in the 2 Dog Open Class and Pee Wee but it cannot run in 2 Dog Open Class and Veteran).

CLASS	AGE	DISTANCE	DETAILS
Mini Pee Wee	Children 3 - 6	0.5km	A class for young children and an adult. Mini mushers ride with an adult on a short track using 1 dog.
Pee Wee	Children 7 - 10	0.5km	A class for older children. Pee Wees can elect to ride solo or with an adult using 1 dog.
Junior	Children 10 - 16	2km	A Class for teenagers involving 1 dog and musher. Children at this age may also choose to run in the Pee Wee class.
Novice	17 years and over	2km	A class for beginners or mushers who have competed in 2 or less previous sanctioned races, involves 1 dog.
1 & 2 Dog Touring	17 years and over	2km	Two non-competitive classes open to those who are not wishing to compete in the competitive open classes. Involves either 1 or 2 dogs and a musher.
Veteran	For DOGS over 7yrs	2km	If your dog is 7 years old or older, you may elect to compete in this class (not compulsory for older dogs).
Canicross	10 years and over	2.5km	A class without a rig or scooter. Joggers run with their dogs in harness using a walking belt. Perfect for those who love to jog and for dogs not quite confident in pulling a scooter.
1 Dog Open		3km	Competitive class for a musher and 1 dog.
2 Dog Open		4km	Competitive class for a musher and 2 dogs.
3 Dog Open		5km	Competitive class for running 3 dogs on a rig.
4 Dog Open		5km +	Competitive class for running 4 dogs on a rig.
6 Dog Open		5km +	Competitive class for running 6 dogs on a rig.
8 Dog Open		5km +	Competitive class for running 8 dogs on a rig.

3. MUSHING ETIQUETTE

1. Always ask permission before patting any dogs and especially when approaching other dogs with your dog(s). Many dogs are very excitable when out running in harness; many are in their family group packs and therefore may not accept strange dogs approaching them.
2. If you have children, who are most welcome to our events, please make sure they are supervised always and do not approach dogs alone and without asking, not all dogs are used to children and an excited dog can easily knock a child over.
3. It is a good idea to stake your dog(s) away from others so that all dogs have adequate space to move and not encroach on others territory. For the safety of all, dogs should be staked out well away from the tracks and not be able to reach the running tracks when on their lines. Please make sure stakes and lines are well secured and not too long, a short line is all that is needed when staked out. It is best to use a metal line to prevent dogs chewing through.
4. If you are training on private land it is a good idea to seek permission first. WASSA has been granted permission to hold Club events in certain areas so check with a committee member to see where we have been granted access to train. With having very limited areas to run our dogs we don't want to risk losing such places by upsetting landowners where we don't have permission to run.
5. Adequate lighting at night is essential, preferably on both your scooter or rig for trail visibility, on your dogs and a headlight for when you need to stop and work with your dogs. Be visible from both front and back. Wearing bright clothing with reflective material is a good idea. These can be in the form of or added to clothing, helmets, vests, jackets, scooters, rigs or wheel valves. To increase visibility of your dogs, flashing lights can be added to their collars and reflective material added to their harnesses and collars.
6. Always keep your dogs under control. Make sure your dogs are not let loose to roam or harass wildlife or other people using the area. Take along extra handlers if you have many dogs. Your dog's behaviour and safety is your responsibility. It is a clever idea to have ID tags on all your dogs in the event of an escape.
7. It is a good idea to check your equipment before leaving home to prevent problems on the trail. Check ganglines, harnesses, collars, BRAKES, lights and wheels for signs of wear and tear. Make sure nuts and bolts are done up adequately. Have spares just in case. A quick check before you leave home can save equipment failure or worse, losing your team. Don't forget that you need to be able to safely stop and control your team while on the trail. Cutters attached safely to you scooter or rig is important. Dogs can get in a tangle quickly and you may need to cut your lines to remove a tangle. Having a first aid kit (dog and human) is essential; a tool kit with spares is also good to have on hand.

4. SLEDDING TERMS & DEFINITIONS

DRIVER: A person who drives a dog team entered in a race.

GANGLINE: Slightly elasticated cord that runs from the front of the sled / scooter and connects to the dogs' harnesses. Refer to the Equipment section for more information on this.

GEE: An instruction for the dogs to turn Right. Other people actually use the word Right as the command, this is a personal choice.

HANDLER: A person who assists in the handling of dogs when preparing for or directly after a race. These people are essential as it can be very difficult to handle a sled or scooter while attempting to get all dogs organised and even facing the right direction.

HAW: An instruction for the dogs to turn Left. Other people actually use the word Left as the command, this is a personal choice.

HEAT: A completion of the trail, or a part of same, after which the ongoing timing is discontinued.

HIKE/HIKE UP: Called to the dogs to go or run faster.

MUSH: This is more of a movie term and is rarely used for actual dog sledding. Below are the commands taught by the club.

MUSHER: This term originates from the french word marche meaning march. This term was used to describe all those heading north to the Gold Rush regardless of how they got there, but has stuck with the individuals foolish enough to put their fate into the paws of insanely energetic dogs in order to get from place to place with a maximum of fuss.

NECKLINE: A small cord that connects adjacent running dogs' collars to help prevent them from drifting apart during a run. Refer to the Equipment section for more on this.

NO/WHOA: Used to try and slow the dogs down, most dogs choose to ignore this command and keep running if they can get away with it.

RACE MARSHAL (RM): The Chief Judge, i.e. the person who shall have supreme authority at an event. The Race Marshal is the only official who can decide upon a disqualification.

STAKEOUT: A cable that can be staked to the ground, allowing the dogs to be clipped to various anchor points along its length. If you have more than one dog, this little device can be invaluable making it possible to keep them organised and tangle free while not running.

STARTING CHUTE: A specified stretch of the trail from the starting line, minimum of 30 metres long and 4 metres wide, where help is allowed.

5. TRACK SIGNALS



RED: The red sign is the turning signal. When you see a red signal, it means you need to take the next turn. If it is on the left side of the track you need to take the next left turn. If it is on the right side of the track you take the next right.



BLUE: The blue sign is the straight on signal. When you see this, it means you are going in the correct direction, so keep going straight. This signal can be on either side of the track.



YELLOW: This is the caution sign. This means beware as the track may be particularly bumpy or slippery or steep. Basically take care, there may even be a double yellow sign, which means be especially careful.

6. PREVENTING PASSING PITFALLS!

Teams passing each other on the trail are an integral part of sleddog racing. Passing rules have been put in place in the interests of safety and fairness.

There are two teams involved in passing – the passer and the person being passed.

The passer has started his race at least 30 seconds after the person being passed, is travelling at a faster speed and therefore has right of way.

The passer must shout TRAIL loudly so that the person being passed can hear – remember he is facing away from the passer. The passer must shout TRAIL well before he is close to the person being passed, to give the person being passed sufficient time to get off his scooter and hold his dogs off the trail if he wishes to do so.

The person being passed must give way to the passer, by moving his dogs and scooter to one side of the trail so as not to block the passing team. The person being passed should also slow down if needed to allow the passer to get by quickly.

If the person being passed cannot verbally keep his dogs on the side of the trail he should do so physically by moving his scooter into the bushes to pull his dogs over, moving his scooter between his dogs and the other team or getting off the scooter to hold his dogs.

The person being passed should allow the passer to get away cleanly. The person being passed may need to slow down a little to do this, if the passer's dogs momentarily lose momentum or confidence after the pass.

The person being passed may not overtake the passer until at least 30 seconds or 200 meters after being overtaken [60 seconds or 400 meters for 3 & 4 dog teams], to allow the passer sufficient time to get by cleanly. Exception: if the passer has had to stop to untangle, repair equipment or has gone the wrong way the person who was passed may overtake the passer before the allowed time.

The last 500 meters of the race are known as No Man's Land [this is usually marked by a witch's hat on the side of the trial] In No Man's Land the person being passed does not have to give way but he must not block his competitors and in the interests of fairness and safety should use common sense and courtesy.

7. Training your Sleddog

Regular training is the key to success in sleddog racing or any dog sport. It also means that you and your team of dogs will be well prepared to have loads of fun together!

You can train your sleddogs every day, even if the weather isn't cool enough or you don't have time to go out on your scooter or rig. Building up the fitness of your dog is crucial in the sport of sledding, but just as important is command training, which can be done during warmer weather and in everyday situations.

Practicing your commands regularly will make your runs on the track much easier and your times will be faster! If your dogs are able to understand directional commands and pass cleanly every time, you won't have to slow down and more fun will be had by all.

There are many ways to teach sledding commands to your dogs, but the easiest is during on-lead walks. Pick routes that have quite a few turns and say the commands when you change direction. This will start getting your dogs used to "Gee, Haw, Left or Right" and they will associate the change in direction with each command. You can also speed up or slow down during your walk, while using the "Hike" or "Woah" command. If you are on a walk with more than one person, you can also use it as an opportunity to practice passing, which is very important. Call out the "Trail" command, and as you overtake the other walker, signal the dog to "On-By", which means leave the other dog alone and keep going.

Dogs also need to be safely kept in trailers, cars, crates or tethered at sled events. Tethers should be made of material that your dog cannot chew; chain or steel cable is ideal. The tethers are called stake out lines and should also be short so that your dog doesn't get tangled or injured. If your dog isn't used to being confined by any of these methods, you can also practice this at home. You can set up your stake out line in your own backyard and sit out with your dog, giving them treats to make it more fun for them, or you can crate train them indoors. This will make the experience much easier for your dog at their first sled event because they will be used to their crate or stake out line.

Every dog is different when it comes to how much physical exercise they need to do to keep fit, the same as people. But free-running (if your dog has a good recall or the area is fully fenced) and swimming are two excellent forms of exercise to keep your dog fit during the off-season as well as between sled training runs. Make sure between each session of exercise, you give your dog rest days so that their bodies have time to recover.

It is safest to keep sled training sessions to one track run per day, per dog (but not every day of the week, rest days are important). Start with small distances (500m – 1km) and work your way up over time. Larger teams of dogs can do longer distances, but the general rule in races is 2km of distance per dog. The more you exercise your dog, the more you will learn what distances they are comfortable with without over doing it.

8. BASIC EQUIPMENT MAINTENANCE

It is important to check over your equipment before the start of each race season and then again before each race. If you maintain your equipment in good working order, this should only take 5 – 10 minutes to do. If you do notice any items that require attention and you are not confident to carry out the work yourself then feel free to ask for assistance or seek the services of a professional.

Harnesses: Check that your tugs are secure, all stitching is complete and that there is no fraying in your harness webbing. Before the start of each season check that your harness is still the correct size for your dog and allow enough time to get a new one should you require it.

Ganglines: Check that your lines are not frayed anywhere and pay particular attention to where your line attaches to your scooter, look for any rub marks or anything of concern. Also check that your clips that connect to the harness tug are in good working order & they do not stick, you do not want them opening or sticking during a race.

Scooter/Rig: To make maintenance on your scooter or rig easier, it is recommended that you clean it after training, you don't have to polish it but a quick hose down to remove mud and muck will make it easier to carry out a visual inspection as well as save you a few dollars with wear and tear on your ride.

Tyre Pressure: People like to run different pressures depending on the set up of their rides, the track conditions and personal preference. This has been discussed on the WASSA Facebook page many times and as previously stated, if you're not sure feel free to ask (as a general rule 30 -35 PSI). It is important though to check your tire pressures before leaving home so you aren't turning up to race and realising that you have flat tires. It is also advisable to carry a few spare tubes in your "spares kit" as it is possible to get a puncture out on the track.

Brakes: It is compulsory for all scooters and rigs to have a front and rear brake that are correctly adjusted and in working order, some race marshals will check this. There are a few distinct types of brakes that are used on scooters and rigs but they all have brake pads which need to be checked for wear, replace pads as necessary. On all cable operated brakes check the condition of the cables paying attention to fraying, kinks and ease of movement. For those that have hydraulic brakes, if your brake leavers have become "spongy" it may be time to replace your brake fluid and bleed your brakes. If you are not familiar with how to do this then this is a job for the professionals so take your ride to your local bike shop.

Frame: Carry out a visual inspection of your frame on a regular basis, you are looking for any visible cracking or thinning of metal. There have been rare cases of frames snapping so it is important to check over your frame.

Suspension: If you are running suspension on your scooter or rig, check that there is no fork oil leaking out the top of your fork seals and also that your suspension is not "bottoming out", this may be a sign that more fork oil or maintenance is required. Finally carry out a nut and bolt check making sure that nothing has come loose,

Helmet: The most important thing is to make sure your helmet fits correctly and is secured. We have had instances of people falling and helmets being split in half, had these people not been wearing a helmet the outcome may have been very grim. If you have an accident and hit your head, your helmet should be replaced immediately!