

## TRAINING A LEAD DOG

By Ray Gordon and Roger Carpenter

What we'll be referring to as training in this article is a common sense approach to training sled dogs the same way that it's been done for generations. The only difference in training sled dogs over other kinds of training is in the results. "When we call our dogs up," Ray explains, "they go away from us. When other trainers call theirs up (to do a task or perform) their dogs come to them."

We won't offer self help for trainers or how to pick the best dog for training. Ray will, however, tell you that the best lead dog in bad conditions is a little female headed for home base. "Going away from home base — good, strong males are the best," is his recommendation.

### ANY DOG CAN BE A LEAD DOG

Every dog on your team is capable of being a lead dog any time YOU decide, as long as you train them correctly. Yes, some are "naturals," but most are not. In either case, you'll need to train a lead dog to your own personality and your own needs — that includes a lead dog trained by someone else, professionally or otherwise. "It's a lucky musher who's had one good lead dog in a lifetime," Ray muses, then adds, "I've had four."

A dog should have the mental strength and maturity to handle your personality. They may require up to 3 years to "fully season". Some dogs need more time than this and some less, but they must first be able to consistently follow all commands for gee, haw, track and not go to spectators at races or chase horses on training runs, for example. In other words, they need to be good, solid team dogs first, then lead training can begin.

When you start training a lead dog, and if you don't already have a trained leader, don't start your trainee next to an untrained "leader". He'll learn ALL the bad habits of that dog. You should train your new leader alone or together with another dog of equal skills and maturity. Both of these scenarios require that the dog/s have the mental maturity to accept and respond to training.

### FIRM CONSISTENCY WITH INSTANTANEOUS REACTION

This topic is one that is surprisingly deceptive and would take a whole book to cover adequately. Ray admits that, while his reaction time is not what it used to be, he still has that deep understanding and intuition which give him the ability to train lead dogs. "It just takes about twice as long as it used to," he notes with a little bit of bittersweet humor.

"The foundation of good training is firm consistency," Ray points out with authority. "FIRM" means the right discipline for the dogs you are training and "CONSISTENT" means not having to get off the sled, cart or ATV in order for your dogs to complete the command that you have requested. Do not, for example, give a command for your dogs to cross a stream if you can't follow through if they do not obey. That trains them to be inconsistent.

"Firm consistency is the 'language' that dogs understand," Ray emphasizes. You will, however, need to develop your own individual concept of what "firm" is for each individual life you are dealing with. Like people, each dog will vary in responsiveness to each trainer, but you **MUST** get the behavior you are giving the command for before any other command or training activity occurs. This is absolutely necessary and cannot be overlooked or done poorly.

Because dogs do not have the ability to reason, praise for correct command reactions **MUST** be instantaneous (in less than 3 seconds). This is also the same amount of time for your reaction to a dog's non-compliance to your command — any longer than 3 seconds diminishes the effectiveness of your discipline because after 3 seconds a dog will forget the command.

Be sure to set up a training situation to meet your own needs and one which is fairly easy for you to control so that you get the consistent reaction (behavior) that you want from the command that you give for it.

#### **DRIVER'S REACTION TIME IS CRITICAL TO EFFECTIVE TRAINING**

The mistake that Ray sees most often in trainers is their slow reaction time as just described. The faster a trainer's reaction time, the more effective the training. "Both praise and discipline require your instantaneous response or the training is ineffective," Ray tells trainers.

Most drivers do not react quickly enough to train good leaders even if they thoroughly understand what's just been covered. Ray's own experience is that a split second of difference can make all the difference between a well-trained leader and an inconsistent "bad" one. Once again, the inconsistency comes from the trainer and not the dog.

#### **TRAIN WITH SMALLER TEAMS FIRST**

When you start training a lead dog, you must be able to control your team at all times. As you begin initial training, start with a smaller team of 4 to 8 dogs, then increase the numbers in the following weeks. A smaller team is easier to control. If you are running a team of 16, half of that (or 8 dogs) will be a "small" team for you. Likewise, if you're running a team of 8 dogs, 4 dogs will be your "small" team size when you begin training.

#### **A NOTE ABOUT EQUIPMENT USED FOR TRAINING**

"Sled training is the best," advises Ray. "It allows you faster response time because you're closer to the ground and can get off your sled faster than ATVs or carts." Get off your sled and go to your dog/s to move them/him and give a command simultaneously. This is much easier than doing the same maneuver on an ATV. A cart is more like a sled than an ATV in that your speed to move to your dogs is usually faster than an ATV but usually slower than a sled.

#### **BAD TRAINING EQUALS BAD BEHAVIOR**

This is where the role of the trainer comes into the equation of training. Remember that your dogs, just like most people, have an underlying desire to please you and do what you

ask them to do. And, just like people, they respond to praise far better, and with better results, than any other kind of discipline. "I can't re-emphasize this enough," says Ray.

If you're not getting the kind of behavior (trained responses) that you desire, then it's YOUR responsibility to find and improve YOUR communication with your dogs. And don't forget to have fun doing it — your dogs will know if you are and will do better as a result.

March 26, 2006