



Welcome! This page has been designed with the interests of teachers, scout leaders, and the general public who might be interested in learning more about the sport of mushing. We hope to have useful information and ideas that you can take with you to the classroom or for your own interests. If you have ideas you would like to share with others regarding other educational resources or activities, please contact us at [colomtmushers@yahoo.com](mailto:colomtmushers@yahoo.com).

### **Background on Mushing**

The term “mushing” is actually derived from a French term meaning “to drive” – which is what the Musher is doing – driving the dog team! For this reason, it is very important that the dogs trust their human driver to make the correct (and safe) decisions while out on the trail. If this trust is not established, then you don’t have a true dog TEAM, and you could run into problems!

The native Inuits in Alaska, Canada, Russia, and Greenland used (and some still use) dog teams as their primary source of transportation in the arctic regions where snow and ice covers the land most of the year. They used dog teams to transport goods, to hunt, and to get between villages. After the introduction of



snowmobiles, many Inuits stopped using dog teams, since snowmobiles could go farther, faster and didn’t need to be fed! Today, many people are rediscovering what a joy it is to be

carried by your furry friends through the snowy back country – and much quieter than snowmobiles!

### **Sled Dog Breeds**

There are many breeds that can and are used as sled dogs. If your dog likes to pull when you walk them, they might be able to learn to be a sled dog too! The most common and classic Nordic sled dog breeds are the **Siberian Husky**, the **Samoyed**, and the **Alaskan Malamute**. **Alaskan Huskies** (or Village Dogs) have been used for generations in Alaska, and increasingly becoming popular in many other mushing circles. This breed is not recognized by AKC – this breed is made up of many different breedings to produce what many claim is the “ultimate” sled dog athlete. Many mushers try to breed different traits into their sled dogs – like the speed of a greyhound or German shorthair. Some of these cross breeds are referred to as “**Eurohounds**”. Good descriptions of the

different breeds can be found on [www.sleddogcentral.com](http://www.sleddogcentral.com) and [www.cabelasiditarod.com](http://www.cabelasiditarod.com).



Siberian Husky, Samoyed, and Alaskan Malamute – sketches from [www.AKC.org](http://www.AKC.org)

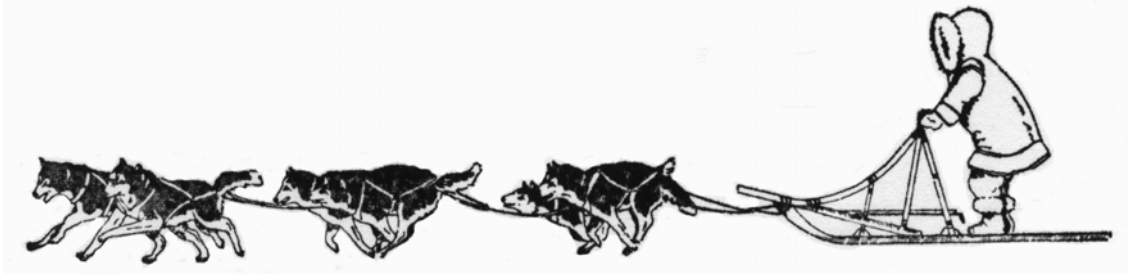
As a side note, many people fall in love with the cute, furry puppies of sled dog breeds and want them as pets. Sled dogs, in general, can be difficult house pets. They need LOTS of exercise every day, they are hard to train, they dig, they howl, and they can have strong separation anxiety problems. These dogs *can* make good pets, if they have patient owners that are willing to work with them on these issues. Sometimes, after a sled dog has “retired” from their duties as a working dog, mushers will look for a family who might want to adopt an older (and much calmer) dog. If you are interested in possibly adopting a retired sled dog, let us know ([colomtnmushers@yahoo.com](mailto:colomtnmushers@yahoo.com)) and we can try to find a good match for your family and lifestyle.

### Terminology Used

To get a dog team moving, the Musher will use the command “**Hike!**” or “**Lets Go!**” – although you generally don’t need to do much more than get on the sled and lift the brake to be off and running! Turning commands are “**Geel!**” (right) and “**Haw!**” (left). Like with horses, “**Woah!**” means to stop. “**On By!**” is the command given to tell the dog team to keep moving straight ahead – in case a distraction or side trail comes by. There are lots of other commands that are used by mushers, and variations on these commands are common.

A “**gangline**” is used to hook the dogs to the sled. “**Tuglines**” hook to the back of the harness, and “**necklines**” hook to the collars of the dogs. A “**sled bag**” is used in the sled to carry gear or dogs that need some rest. “**Snow hooks**” are used like emergency brakes in a car – to keep the sled from being pulled if the musher has to get off or stop suddenly. “**Drag brakes**” are used if just a little slowing is needed for control on hills or curves.

### The Dog Team



This is an illustration of a 6-dog team. Dog teams can range in size from 3 to as many as 24 dogs! Sometimes they run side-by-side, as in this drawing, but other times they run single-file or in a “fan hitch” that is commonly used when crossing icy lakes and seas. The “leaders” are the first dogs that are trusted with understanding the musher’s commands and trail conditions. They must be smart and fast with lots of courage and confidence. The next dogs are called “point” or “swing” dogs – they act as back-ups to the leaders and help turn the team and keep them on the trail. The dogs that run in front of the sled are called “wheel” dogs – these are the big, powerful dogs that provide much of the pulling power for the team.

### **Come Watch a Race!**



Photo by TC Wait

The Colorado Mountain Mushers races are always free and open to the public who want to come and watch. Click [here](#) to see our [race schedule](#). Bring your cold-weather gear, cameras, and a chair to sit in (and maybe a thermos of hot chocolate)! Please don’t bring your pets from home, though – as they might not have very much fun and would be a big distraction to the racing dogs who

need to focus on their races. And always be sure to ask the Musher before you pet any of the dogs!

When the mushers are not racing, they are usually very happy to answer questions you might have about their team, the trail, and dog sledding in general. CMM members come from all over the state, are young and old, male or female, work in a wide variety of professions, and like to talk about their favorite sport – dog sledding! Some just run for fun, and others are quite competitive. Our members include mushers who have competed in several big dogsled races, like the Yukon Quest and Iditarod, and the first Colorado kid to compete in and finish BOTH the Junior Yukon Quest and Junior Iditarod!

### **Having a Musher Visit**



Photo by TC Wait

The Colorado Mountain Mushers members enjoy introducing the public to the sport of dogsledding. One aspect of our education role is for mushers to visit classrooms or scout groups to show off their dogs and equipment and talk to the kids about dog sledding. This is something that is done on their own time, so if you are interested, you might have to plan ahead to get a visit scheduled! If you would like a Musher in your area to

visit, please contact us at [colomtnmushers@yahoo.com](mailto:colomtnmushers@yahoo.com) with what you have in mind, the number and ages of kids (or adults), and any particulars you have for your group. We will work hard to find someone who can make it to your school for a visit!

### **Classroom Activity Ideas**

Lots of kids are learning about dog sledding and following the Iditarod race that is held every year in Alaska in March. Here are some ideas for things your class can do to learn about dog sledding:

- 1) Read a great book from our [reading list](#).
- 2) Visit some of the links on our Website – there is lots of information on mushing and sled dogs out there! The Iditarod website ([www.iditarod.com](http://www.iditarod.com)) has a special link for educators with activities.
- 3) Have each kid follow an individual musher's progress during a big race like the Yukon Quest or Iditarod.
- 4) Have the kids brainstorm what is needed (equipment, gear, training, food, etc) to run the Iditarod or Quest. Use math to calculate how many booties, how much dog food, and other supplies will be needed.
- 5) McGinnis Middle School in Buena Vista held their first annual McGitarod in 2004 – “teams” were made of 7 students (one musher and 6 “dogs”) and had to pull their sled through several check points where the musher answered questions about math, history, science, English, etc. The “dogs” only understood the correct commands from the musher!
- 6) Consider getting an Associate Membership to CMM – it is only \$10/year and you will get a wonderful newsletter all about our club and dog sledding. Maybe your group could contribute an article!
- 7) Write to a musher – many of the Iditarod Mushers get mail from kids all over the country to encourage them on their adventure. Or, you could be pen-pals with a local Colorado or Wyoming musher to get your questions answered.
- 8) Hold a contest – CMM has helped promote reading and writing by having reading competitions or essay competitions for awards ranging from special “back stage” dog visitations, to actually getting to ride with the

team! We can work with your group to find something worth writing (or reading) about!

- 9) Do a project to benefit a local animal shelter. Lots of dogs (and cats) need exercise, food, love, and care – maybe your group could help them out a little. A pet-food drive for a special dog sled speaker, or a day of walking homeless pets at the shelter?

If your group has done some interesting units relating to dog sledding, we would love to hear about them! Send a picture and description to:

[colomtmushers@yahoo.com](mailto:colomtmushers@yahoo.com) or PO Box 476, Conifer, CO 80433.