

Alaska Homestead Adventures

Dog Mushing 101

We use a “tag sled” system for dog sledding. Two sleds are attached to each other with flexible plastic so they function in tandem. A guide will drive the front sled with one guest seated in the front sled. The second guest drives the back sled. We like to switch positions and give everyone who wants to a chance to drive the sled and also to sit and enjoy the view of the dogs. This is what it looks like:



Beginner Dogsledding Tips:

- When standing on the runners you want to keep your body loose- hands on the handlebars like you would hold the steering wheel in a car. Keep your knees slightly bent.
- When turning, transfer your weight to the inside runner and lean into the turns like you are riding a bike.
- When on a sidehill (slanted slope) lean uphill.
- If you want to slow down a little, use the drag, this is less abrasive to the trail. If you want to slow down faster or come to a full stop, use the break.
- If we see an obstacle (moose, other dog team, vehicle etc) we generally respond by stopping, planting the hooks and have one musher stand on the break while the guide pulls the dogs off the trail to wait for the obstacle to move.

- Hooking up dogs- make sure that the sleds are set up correctly beforehand and secured before starting to hook up. All mushers should have their clothing on and be otherwise ready to go before we begin the process of hooking in dogs. Once dogs are in the gangline, we try to move as quickly as possible to launch the team. This is a bad time for pictures, the dogs are very excited to GO!

Safety Rules:

1. If you feel cold, SAY something- we need to take action to keep you warm. It is best to address cold as soon as you feel it rather than waiting until you are REALLY cold. The best ways to warm up are to move your body (running, walking, kicking).
2. When the sled is moving, watch out for small branches by looking ahead and using your hand or the sled to protect your face if necessary.
3. Never stand in front of the snow hook when it is planted in the snow- always assume that the dogs can pull the sharp hook (into you!)

Dog Commands: We try to speak clearly and with authority. A deeper “I mean business” voice helps. We want the dogs to listen when we speak so we try to avoid excessive talking while running dogs.

“Ready...hike” = let’s go!

“Gee” = turn right

“Haw”= turn left

“On by” = straight ahead or get back on the trail

“Woah” = stop (needs to be accompanied by breaking)

“Easy” = slow down

“Up up” = encouragement, keep going (accompanied by running or kicking, used on uphill or when breaking trail).

Musher to musher communication: It can be hard to hear each other when we’re running dogs so we use some simple signs to check in.

Tap hand on head- “are you OK?” respond by tapping your own head (OK) or waving arm (no).

One hand up in the air “break a little more”

Hand pumping up and down = “break HARD”

Things to look to monitor dogs for while running:

- Are any of the lines tangled around dogs? Loose lines?
- Are any of the dogs trying to tell us something (turning around, hackles up, growling etc).
- Always look ahead for obstacles.

Dog Team Positions:

We generally run teams of 6-10 dogs. Each dog wears a harness and is attached to the main line "tow line/gang line" with two ropes- a tug line is clipped to the back of their harness and is where they pull from. The Neck line is attached to their collar and keeps them from darting off the trail.

