

The Quest Team - The Dogs

A great leader is a special dog. Even if you treat them all the same as pups, she's different. She's got a great desire to pull, and she's all business. She's got a good work ethic, a positive spirit, and is able to take lots of pressure. She's smart and a fast learner, following commands without distraction. It's like she has tunnel vision - seeing only the job she has to do. Musher's spend more time with their leaders, so there is a close bond between them.

Many mushers have different leaders for different trail conditions. For instance, if the team is near a checkpoint and must make a turn, or if the trail is winding or not well marked, then a "gee-haw" leader is best to put out front. If the trail is straight, the musher doesn't need a dog that follows gee-haw commands perfectly.

Swing dogs run just behind the leaders. They are your dogs that you are training to be leaders. They are right behind the leaders, learning to follow commands. Sometimes you put them first and have your leaders in the swing dog position. Then if they make mistakes, the leaders can correct them. Sometimes the swing dogs can be retired leaders or leaders that are being given a break. The reason they are called swing dogs is they help turn (swing) the team.

Many mushers train puppies by letting them run loose with a team. Some pups run behind the team, and some, possibly future leaders, run out in front of the team. These are good ones to try out as swing dog.

Team dogs need to like to pull. They have to really want to. Some are born loving it, and some you have to motivate. Some overachieving, young team dogs work too hard; then they "burn out" after 30 miles or so. It's a learning process. Some team dogs

have to learn that when the team takes a break, they need to lie down and rest, too. This knowledge comes with maturity and experience. Team dogs need to be good workers, with a good pace, good feet, and good appetites (like all the rest of the team). Some team dogs are distractible. It's nice to have team dogs that are left AND right handed, so they can run easily on both sides of the gangline.

Wheel dogs are placed closest to the sled. They don't always have to be big and strong, but they must be athletic. Their job is to redirect the sled away from obstacles. A good wheel dog may jump over the gangline if needed to pull in a sideways direction to get the sled going in the right direction. Then he jumps back over into his place. They learn to pace themselves, and they can take their time, but when their power is needed, they are there to do the job.