

Adventure World

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THE
GUN BARREL
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INSIDE AN ADVENTURE RALLY

MUSHING

WITH NO

MUSH



by Rachel White

The red Honda ATV I'm sitting on is parked, anchored by rope to the pickup truck behind me, and the handbrake is held tightly down with multiple loops of twine, and still I'm being bucked around like a cowgirl. Twelve dogs, ranging in size from 45 to 78 pounds, are attached by a 30-foot long rope to the ATV, and are catapulting themselves into the air in a frenzied desire to run and pull. They drown out all other sound with an ear-piercing cacophony of yips and quivering howls as their owner, Tim Curley, makes a final check of their lines to make sure there are no tangles. Their frantic energy adds a building sense of urgency, yet there's nothing I can do to help but sit tight and be ready. The engine is running, but the ATV will stay in neutral, acting simply as a weight and a place for us to sit. Throwing his gloves in the crate on the back, Tim jumps onto the seat in front of me, yells to a bystander to unhook the anchor rope, and in a surge of adrenaline, we're off, being pulled down the dirt track by pure dog power.

The dogs pulling this 400-pound ATV (plus the weight of two passengers) are a mixed breed called Alaskan huskies, moderate-sized dogs that generally look nothing like the fluffy purebred Siberian huskies most people associate with sledding. The Siberian husky breed does undoubtedly contribute to the ancestry of Alaskan huskies, but so do other breeds known for speed, work ethic, and endurance, such as German shorthaired pointer, greyhound, and the traditional Alaskan village dog. Alaskan huskies are bred specifically for this sport, and they love to pull. As anyone who has been on the leash end of an en-

thusiastic dog knows, they can exert a disproportionately powerful tug for a relatively small creature. Imagine that times 12, with dogs genetically wired for stamina, and it's no surprise they can haul an ATV around for miles.

For over ten years, Tim and his wife, Maria, have raced teams of these dogs in the winter using a sled. "It all started when we went to the pound and brought home a

Keeping a sled dog team fit during the summer takes ingenuity.

It also turns heads.

Siberian husky," recalled Tim. "We just wanted a pet. But someone told us sled racing would be good exercise for her, so we started letting her run on someone else's team. She learned fast and she loved it." Compact and trim, with short ginger hair and a neat beard showing hints of silver, Tim gave a wry smile at the thought of how far things have progressed since that day at the pound. "We got hooked on sled racing ourselves and we eventually learned about the superspeed and strength of Alaskan huskies," he explained. He and Maria moved from Portland to the smaller town of Sandy, Oregon several years ago so they would have room to care for their growing team of speed freaks, now numbering seventeen.

Tim, like most sled dog owners, understands that these dogs are athletes and need to keep up their training. In the winter, they race and train with the sled. But the whole landscape of opportunities for running and pulling changes as the planet tilts from winter to summer. For one thing, the warm temperatures raise the chances of the dogs overheating. But mainly, when the snow melts, your sled won't go. Sled dog owners have to come up with other alternatives, such as using an ATV, which they refer to as "quad training." Quad training keeps the dogs



conditioned for pulling, but also gives them a good cardio workout and acts as weight-training to build muscle, since the ATV weighs more than twice what a sled weighs. And, for the passenger, it's pretty thrilling.

7 a.m. in the Thriftway parking lot in Welches, Oregon. Tim's red pick-up is easy to recognize: built into the truck's bed is a double-decker "dog box" with multiple ventilated compartments—a mobile home for his team. Just visible behind the metal grating on the doors to the compartments are dog noses, six on each side of the truck. Like a clown car, it's surprising so many dogs can fit in such compact arrangement, but the compartments are small by design. In the winter, when they travel to races in very cold weather, the snug boxes allow each dog's body heat to keep them warm.

Heading past Welches on Highway 26, we turn on Still Creek Road, an out-of-the-way dirt road that doesn't get a lot of traffic. "We also like this road because it has wide spots," explains Tim. "The trickiest part of quad training is turning around, because you have to try to keep all the dogs lined out and not let them get tangled."

Once he has found a suitable starting point, Tim begins the preparations, which take about half an hour. He unloads the ATV from the trailer, and stretches out the long rope, called the "gangline," that attaches to each dog's individual towrope. The dogs are starting to whine, but Tim gets as much prep work done as he can before "dropping" the dogs, or letting them out, because as soon as he does, the chaos will erupt. They know what's coming and they have only one thought: eat up the trail. They tremble and squirm with anticipation as Tim lets them out and temporarily ties them to a chain that circles the truck so that he can fit each of them with their harness. They are beautiful animals, with short, sleek coats that contour closely over lean, defined muscle. Seven of them are 15-month old puppies. Hope and Hudson are the parents. Ozzy has an all-white coat that's slightly longer, approaching shaggy. Patches, with black and white blotches, is the lead dog. As the lead, he has a harder job. Some dogs don't like the extra responsibility of navigating the trail, negotiating around other teams or obstacles, and being alone out front. But just like people, some dogs have leader personalities. "I used to have a lead dog named Spirit," says Tim. "And she really did have spirit. She would play chicken with approaching teams. If I had to correct her on something I would punish her by taking her off the lead and putting her back in with the team. She didn't like that at all."



With the prep over, the brake off, the anchor let go, and the shout "Hup! Hup!" to the crazed dogs, we start moving forward. In the winter, Tim does distance races rather than sprints, so he doesn't let the dogs go all out. We maintain a pretty steady pace of 8 or 9 miles per hour for the whole trip. A fit trail runner would have to really huff and puff to keep up with us. The dogs, having discovered all over again what they were born to do, glide along, silent now and completely absorbed in the task at hand. Although the weather forecast says the afternoon will see temperatures in the 70s, the morning air is still in the upper 30s, chilly enough to turn bare skin to ice, especially now that we're moving briskly along. "Can you hand me those gloves?" Tim asks me. The dogs love it. In fact, the cold temperatures are a requirement for training them in harness because they are exerting so much energy. To help keep them cool, Tim lets them stop at a snow patch every so often and lets them munch on snow.



Race

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The four mile out-and-back trip comes to an end all too soon and we're back at the truck. The dogs, panting and quiet, send clouds of steam into the air as they cool down. While they are still harnessed to the gangline, Tim gives each dog water and bites of uncooked hot dog, talking individually to each of them. "People ask me how I can love so many dogs," he says. "Well, I want to say to them, 'How many friends do you have? How many people are in your family?' You love them all. Maybe you love them each in a different way because they each have a unique personality, but each one is special." I've only spent a few minutes with these dogs, but their individuality is evident. Tyee scorns the hot dog bite, spitting it out onto the ground each time Tim tries to entice him. Helen and Janet, meanwhile, took a few minutes when Tim's back was turned and chewed through their towlines. Hudson, despondent that the fun has ended, always has to be carried to the truck when it's time to leave.

Dry-land mushing adds a new dimension to the partnership built up between sled dogs and their owners. Without snow, you don't need to stick to groomed trails, so you have more options for training locations. It also provides all kinds of opportunity for obtaining more sporting gear and equipment to cram into your basement or garage. For people with fewer dogs, or who prefer not to use an ATV, other options for off-season pull training include using a special scooter, a customized cart, or hooking a dog

or two to their mountain bike. But bikes can be tricky, because not only do you have to be able to control your dog, you also have to manage the handling characteristics of the bike itself. In contrast, scooters are simpler, have fewer mechanical parts that can go wrong, and have a lower center of gravity so you can jump off faster.

Members of the Cascade Sled Dog Club, based in Portland, have used all these methods to train their sled dogs. Ellen Donoghue, a club board member, spoke about the transition from winter to summer activities. "Usually, Still Creek Road loses snow the soonest of the places we train around the mountain, and I know several of us who have been keeping a close eye on that in anticipation of switching from sleds or skis to wheels," she said. In winter, Ellen doesn't use a sled, but races her two dogs on skis, in a sport known as "skijoring." Her dogs wear the same type of harnesses as Tim's dogs, and tow her on a 10-foot line while she skies behind. In the warm months of the year, she uses a scooter. But not when it's too warm. "Basically, we'll be training our dogs every weekend until the coolest morning temperatures start getting up around 50 degrees. Above that, and it gets too warm for them to work in harness," she explained.

"Dog safety and dog health are our number one priorities. That's why we do everything so early in the morning, given that we always seek out the coolest temperatures for the dogs."

Thad McKracken, club vice president, reiterated how important this lesson is. "The most common mistake made by newbies is overheating their dogs," he said. Hydration is important too, and the owners have to take full responsibility for making sure the dogs drink enough. As Thad pointed out, "If you were going to run a marathon, you would drink extra water in the days leading up to the race to get yourself ready. But dogs have no idea you're going to race or train them the next morning." So the night before a training run or a race, you "bait" their water to entice them to drink. Some people stir in a little wet food, some people use fish. During a training run, owners also make sure and let the dogs stop for water breaks every so often.

At a certain point in the summer, the temperatures will prohibit any training that involves pulling. Ellen, like many people, will continue to take her dogs for long runs and hikes, but they won't wear their harnesses again until the chilly mornings of fall. Other training can be accomplished in the summer, however. Tim plans to use the summer break to train his dogs on general discipline issues. "I'm also going to set up a 'gangline to nowhere,' where the dogs have to get all hooked up to the gangline and just stay in place," he explained. "Then I teach them stuff like not to chew through their towlines."



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Ellen, Thad, and Tim are passionate about this sport, and all of them do very well during the racing season. They also devote copious amounts of love, care, and training to their dogs. "When members of the club are together, all we do is talk about dogs," laughed Ellen. "You'd think there was nothing else going on in the world – no wars, no politics, no big social or cultural events. In fact, some of our spouses and partners have learned to stay away from club events. In general, people in the mushing crowd are fairly unique. We tend to be highly strong-willed, independent individuals."

But not completely independent. This is a sport made possible through a special partnership: a unique team made of human and dog. For the people I met, the

connection with their dogs is clear, and the hours they have spent working together evident. Their dogs seem almost to work as extensions of their own bodies. For them, half the fun of sled racing or skijoring is developing the relationship of trust between themselves and their dogs.

And it's what the dogs live for. These dogs are truly happiest when they have a job to do. You can tell when they are running their big hearts out that they have found what they were meant to do in life. They want to pull, and they want to please you, and that remains true no matter how old they get. "They never want it to end," said Tim. "If I went home right now to my 14-year old dog and got his harness out, he'd want to run. Even on his last day of life, if you harnessed him, he'd be ready." 

