

The Devil's in the Details

By Diane Stewart

Have you ever played that game where you're presented with several objects, limited time to view them, then when they are taken away you must recall as many items as you can remember? There was something about the game that challenged me to observe and learn from those observations. Darrell and I have had sled dogs for 31 years. We've had times when everything clicked and we've had great runs with the dogs, but we have also made plenty of mistakes over the years, and we learned you're never too old to learn something new. Taking the time to observe your dogs, examining your training and racing techniques, kennel management, and your own manner around your dogs can identify critical details that could use attention. And details can make the difference in your experience, and your team's performance.

KENNEL MANAGEMENT

Gain synergy

I once won a race I thought I had no business winning. I didn't have the best dogs nor had I been in the sport as long as some of the people I figured would beat me. After reflecting on the reasons I might have won, it came down to kennel management. That year the many things that can take precedence didn't distract us. We were "buttoned up" in all areas of managing our dog's health, training, and the synergy we created of working together seamlessly around the dog truck. It's easy to get busy and forget how important it is to have it all together. We did well because we managed our kennel down to the last detail.

Seek to learn

Too many mushers think they know it all, even if they've been in the sport a short time. So I love it when people ask questions because their pride isn't getting the best of them. Whether it's stake-out options, dog structure, equipment or training techniques, dog owners are generally more than willing to share information. Seek to learn from people, who through your own observation, you can see have it together.

Be consistent

Some dog drivers are haphazard. Some feel it unnecessary to feed their dogs every single day, or to feed good food during the summer with the expectation they can undo the damage in the fall. (Interesting, those same people don't seem to be missing any meals). Feed the best food you can afford, and generally feed at the same time of day. Take mental note of each dog's weight and adjust the amount of feed. Don't forget a few extra pounds (on the dogs) before training season is healthy, but overweight dogs during racing season won't perform as well as lean, well cared for dogs. Going into training with skinny dogs is just plain stupid. Worm your dogs regularly, and don't delay when shots are due.

Clean those dishes routinely, scrub buckets frequently and observe your dogs' behavior to detect anything out of the ordinary.

TRAINING

Buy or raise the best dogs you can

You can waste a lot of time on mediocre dogs. You can help a good dog be better with proper food and training, and you can make a slower dog healthier with the same care, but you can never make a slow dog fast. Don't waste your time. Be happy with their performance as is, or find them a good pet home. You can tell from our dog yard that we have soft hearts, but if what you want to do is win, it's an energy waster to spend time on dogs that can't make the team.

You've heard the expression "you're only as fast as your slowest dog". But sometimes it's difficult to know which dog might be holding you back. All of their lines are tight, so aren't they all good? Be discerning, and if you suspect one or two dogs are holding you back, leave them out of the training next run, clock your time or mph and see if it helps. If you don't know if you have a problem, ask a more experienced musher to take a training run or two with you. It's easier for someone new to the team to spot problems.

Also, if you have a dog that's a disciplinary problem that you can't correct, either seek help or take them off the team. One aggressive or uncontrollable dog is incredibly detrimental to the rest of the team.

Be consistent

If you've achieved a synergy with your dogs, don't lose it when you train with other people. While training with other teams/drivers is desirable for a variety of reasons, don't lose your concentration and mess up now. Also, think through your training program before training begins. Do you have a variety of trails lined up, with lots of options for leaders? How will you deliberately increase the mileage as the season goes forward? Are you training as many miles as you need when you convert dry training to snow? What milestones do you need to achieve to make certain you're on the right track? If you are consistent about the way you hook up your dogs, they will come to know what to expect which gives them confidence.

Did you repair equipment during the summer? Do you really know if your harnesses fit properly? Make sure everything is in order before your first day of training, and check the equipment periodically during the year. Oh, the pain of the missed detail of an open caribeaner...Oh, and from Darrell: probably best not to use untested or unused equipment before a race.

Shut up

Ever heard another team coming for miles? There's no better way to piss off other drivers, or have your dogs tune you out, than to say too much on the trail. True in training, and racing. *Continued next page*

Maybe it's your habit or the excitement of the moment, but if you aren't giving a specific command that's needed, keep your mouth shut. 'Nuf said.

RACING

Be consistent (do you detect a theme going here?)

Dogs are creatures of habit, so get into a routine on the road your dogs can count on. Drop at regular intervals, be sure to water them sufficiently, and feed at the same time of day. Don't leave them chained to the truck for long periods while you visit and have a drink with your friends...dogs need their rest, too, and they're relying on you. If you have handlers you can rely on consistently, great! Do whatever you can to keep them happy and willing to help you again and again. If you've ever witnessed handlers helping a team to the line that are doing more harm than good, you know what I'm talking about (I'm one of them). Chaos getting to the starting line is detrimental to your team's attitude and consequently can affect performance.

Blame yourself first

We've all had bad runs at race, and we're probably all guilty of this: We come off the trail with plenty of excuses to go around..."the dogs took the wrong trail", or "King stopped the whole team to poop", or "they shy'd at the spotters and caused a tangle". Again, shit happens but generally you have no one to blame but yourself. Did you train with other teams for sufficient passing training? Did you correct dogs during training when they did something unacceptable, or just hope they wouldn't do it in a race? Put your team in as many variable circumstances as you can during training so they learn to deal with every situation. If you don't know how to correct some things, ask another musher whose opinion you trust.

I was impressed by Charlie Champaine's techniques when we visited him in the '80's and in subsequent conversations. He and his handlers found life-size cutouts from movie theaters of characters and would put them along the trail so the dogs got used to people in unexpected places. Even encountering Darth Vader along the trail didn't phase them. After his dogs finished a race, they loaded them as soon as possible so they could rest, were less exposed to other dogs, and so no one else could speculate about how they were doing physically. (There's a lot more money on the line in Alaska). After the first day of a race, they'd take their dogs out in a remote area and turn them loose one by one to detect any slight injuries or soreness. They examined the dog's feet like crazy. Charlie's motto was, "a race can be won by the dog you leave behind".

Observe your disposition

Where do I start on this one? Do I have stories....well, that's for another time. I don't know a single dog that doesn't appreciate a calm demeanor in their owner. Dogs take on the nervousness of the driver. Keep

yourself in check, observe your own behavior around your dogs whether training or racing. Do you have quick, erratic movement or yell around the dog truck? Or do you approach your dogs and training with calm, consistent behavior? If you're not making a spectacle of yourself, then you're on the right track.

Diane Stewart is the current Vice President of CSDC and usually races in the 4 dog sprint class.

CSDC Pull Training and Meeting- September 20

Directions to Pull Training Session: (for anyone wishing to attend the meeting at Kim's cabin, meet at the pull training at 3:00 and we'll caravan to the cabin after cleanup.

Roslyn Lake from Portland:

Head east on Hwy. 26 to Sandy, OR. Go through town and just past the Arco station (on your left), turn left on Ten Eyck Rd. Go 3 miles and take a left on Thomas Rd. (Look for signs to Roslyn Lake Park). Go 3/10 of a mile and turn right into the park. Pull training is in area #3.

Roslyn Lake from Mt. Hood:

Take Hwy. 26 to Sandy, OR. At the first stop light, take a right onto Ten Eyck Rd. Then follow directions above.

List of items/responsibilities for Pull Training

<u>What</u>	<u>Who</u>
Small TV/VCR's	Kim, Diane
Videos on training, racing, etc.	Anyone
Standards, rope	Tim, Julie
Coffee pots	Dawn, Kim
Coffee, cups	Diane
5 gallon cooler, cups	Becky
Water cooler	Darrell
Buttons designating trainers	Becky
4-H kids to help	Becky
Tires for training	Darrell & others
Pooper scoopers, buckets	Everyone
Pull training leashes	Kim, Carmen
Wood for fireplaces (within shelter)	Darrell & others
Awning, tents (in case of rain)	Tim, Joe
Donuts	Kim
Axles (to attach ropes to)	Darrell
Lines to attach to axles or trees	Becky, Joe
Napkins, paper towels	Diane
Waterless hand soap	Joe
Bottled water for trainers/attendees	Molly
Doggie bags of goodies	Kim
Additional entry forms	Diane
Liability forms	Diane

**Additional questions- call Diane @ 503 829 4545
or Kim @ 503 668 6739**