

# THE CARTING CORNER

## KICKSLEDDING

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Living in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan we have plenty of snow and time to play in it; so I decided to try the sport of kicksledding with my dogs. I found this sport is great fun and quite addictive. It keeps your dogs (and hopefully you) happy and well exercised during the winter months with healthful out-of-doors fun. Kicksledding is a form of mushing and dog-scootering (dry land mushing on a kick scooter) and is a very popular form of mushing in Europe.

- To begin your kicksledding journey you will need the following equipment:
- Kicksled - This is a smallish 15-pound dogsled originally used in Nordic countries as a piece of sport equipment like a sit on sled. Mine is a Canadian Kicksled.
- Snow runners - These are used on the sled base of the sled. Yours most likely will come equipped with ice runners.
- Harness - An X-back, or recreational, harness that allows a dog to pull straight out in front of a sled or at an angle. It is somewhat like the Siwash harness that we use in carting except it connects to the sled line near the dogs tail rather than on the side as a carting harness does.
- Gangline - The ropes that link the dog's harness to the sled.
- Shock absorber - This item is part of the gangline and keeps the sled and dog(s) from being jerked at bumps and movement from the other dogs or the handler's movements. Not all ganglines have shock absorbers. The start up kit I purchased included the gangline with the shock absorber. In the case of multiple pairs of dogs on a team, only the gangline set nearest to the sled might have shock absorber although other options might be used with the pairs of dogs ahead of the wheel dogs (the dogs closest to the sled)
- Sled bridle - The rope or cable used to attach the sled to the gangline. Some bridles are detachable, some are not, and it may or may not be purchased with the sled. I had to shorten the bridle on my sled as it was really long and tended to get caught under the sled runners with novice dogs learning to keep tension on the gangline.
- Collar couplers (Necklines) - These short lengths of rope link the dog's collars together when using a team.

**Getting Started:** In this sport, your dog(s) need to be able to pull out in front of you. So you need to create/train a lead dog.

To start training, harness your dog and put a collar and long lead on when you go for a training walk with the dog. This is work, and the dog should not be allowed to sniff or relieve themselves. Then hook the long line to the dog's collar and the other end to the harness loop. You hold the long line. When you go for that walk encourage your dog out in front of you and put some tension on the harness line. Use the collar/halti to help "turn" the dog in the directions you want to go and to help with the "whoa" when you want to stop. Give appropriate commands as you go along; your dog needs to understand a command to stop while out ahead of you and stay standing still facing the direction you are traveling. You can use "Whoa" or "halt" or any other command that you want, but the dog must stay out front. Then you can give treats from in front of the dog as a reward. If the dog stops and comes back to you it will tangle itself in the gangline.

Other commands the dog needs to know are: "go right" or "gee", "go left" or "haw". "Line out" means keep tension between the dog and the sled by pulling the line tight. "Hike on" replaces the word "mush." I use "let's go!" "On by" means to pass whatever might be near, maybe another pathway

veering away or a dog being walked on the path. "Get over" means to give way to traffic or to move to a better portion of the path.

There are lead dog training camps but I did not know of them at the time I started with my sled. Mostly when I walk the dogs I use the commands with the appropriate behavior. I reward the correct behavior with voice and treats and correcting/ignoring unwanted behavior depending on the individual situation. Once a lead dog is trained the other dogs follow that dog's lead. Sometimes you can find an enthusiast that will let you run your dog with a trained team or with a trained lead dog to help your dog learn correct behavior. I did not have that option and did not get an offer for it until my dogs were already doing the work. Plus my Berners are a good bit slower and have less endurance than most.

I taught each of my dogs to pull the kicksled individually by taking them around a block pulling the sled. Belle is a natural for wanting to be out in front, but HunyB likes to walk behind me. HunyB did not like that I had taken Belle first and wanted to find out where we had been and what we had done so she "tracked" where we had gone - all the way around the block. Problem solved.

Since the girls have a natural position choice I did not have a problem setting HunyB on the right and Belle on the left side. I coupled them using their martingale limited slip collar's rings (the non tightening ring on the side might be used) and a brace connector or coupler. I then hooked them to the sled and repeated the trip around the block as a team. As they got comfortable with being out in front I would ride the sled runners for a few feet. The shock absorber part of the gangline really helps here as it prevents any jerking as you step on and off the sled runners. As the human partner you need to practice kicking/running strides, and stepping on and off of the sled runners. After all, its exercise for you and your responsibility is to help the dog/team on hills and over rough spots.

Both girls were already familiar with commands like, whoa, easy, go right, go left, on by, leave it, get on, walk on, hook up, stand, harness on, foot, pull, and hike. Some commands were less familiar but practice would make the girls even more proficient. Going off path was self educating. Falling into deep snow is self correcting- especially as one can hardly stop laughing at a Berner butt stuck up in the air-head stuck in the snow.

Speed is not a selling point as the girls prefer a nice steady trot; but having fun on a cold snowy sunny day with the dogs on the snowmobile paths, and snowy drives is what it is all about. One of the selling points with the sled is that you can leave it to settle the dogs and equipment then send them on and pick up the sled as it goes on by. (By the way, you can go Kicksledding without the dogs - even go racing - but where is the fun in that?)

We had some really great times on the Grass River Natural Area cross country ski pathways. The x skiers, snowshoers, and area visitors enjoyed the dogs antics. Going on the nature paths maintained for the x-country skiers and general public was like a mini- Iditarod experience. Mind that you are sharing the paths; and leaving lots of ruts and footsteps will not be appreciated where competitive teams are training. Be polite and considerate in your trail choice and usage.

The moment when it all came together on the snow pack in the woods was truly one of those snapshot memory moments to always treasure.