

DOGSLEDDING FACT SHEET



Image: Sled Dogs at Sunset by Sylvain Tasso, accessed via Flickr. Com Creative Commons

Dog Power

People have used dogs to pull sleds for thousands of years, and dog sled teams are a vital part of life in many parts of the world. They are or were used in Greenland, Canada, Lapland, Alaska and Siberia and were used to assist exploration to both the North and South Pole. Fast, reliable, and adapted to the environment, it's hardly any wonder dog sled teams and mushers (the people who drive the sleds) are so famed, and such an important part of history and human culture.

Dog sled teams are or were used for transportation, recreation and sport – dog sled racing is still very popular in many parts of the world.

How Does It Work?

A team of dogs – usually harnessed in pairs, but sometimes arranged in a fan in front of the sled – works together to pull a sled across the ice and snow. If harnessed in pairs, the lead dog goes in front, the point dogs are harnessed just behind the lead dog, swing and team dogs are harnessed behind the point dogs and finally the wheel dogs are harnessed in front of the sled. The wheel dogs are powerful, strong enough to pull the sled through the snow and get it moving, and all the dogs in a sled team are chosen for their strength and their ability to endure harsh weather conditions and taxing physical exertion. The lead dog is a very important part of the team and needs to be a highly intelligent dog. The swing and team dogs are the 'engine' of the sled.

The sled itself is made of lightweight but durable material, with large runners underneath to help it move smoothly over the surface of the ice. The musher stands at the back of the sled and any cargo is carried in front of the musher. The musher can control the team with vocal and whistle commands, and aids in directing the sled by leaning their weight from side to side, depending on what way they want the sled to go.

The Race to Save Nome

In 1925, the children of a then-remote Alaskan town called Nome began to fall ill with the deadly disease known as diphtheria. Without medication, there was very little chance of survival – and Nome's stock of the medication had run dangerously low. The only supply

was in a town called Nenana, which was many miles away. The only way to get the medication to the people of Nome was through using dog sled teams, and a call was put out for volunteers. A brave group of mushers and dogs travelled in relays across almost 700 miles of forbidding terrain, carrying a case filled with fragile glass tubes of the diphtheria medication, in order to save the people of Nome just in time.

Every year, in honour of the sacrifice and heroism of these incredible dogs and men, a dog sled race is run across Alaska. It is known as the Iditarod Trail. One of the most famous of the dogs who saved Nome was Balto, the lead dog of a Norwegian musher named Gunnar Kaasen – it was Balto who led the team into Nome, though the longest and most hazardous leg of the journey was undertaken by musher Leonhard Seppala and his lead dog, Togo.

Balto in *The Eye of the North* is named in honour of Gunnar Kaasen's dog.

Activities:

Imagine you are a musher in charge of a team of twelve sled dogs. What are your dogs' names? Where are they harnessed in your team?

Draw a picture of your sled and your dogs. They can be arranged in a fan or in pairs.

What sort of personality traits do you think sled dogs need? Think about the terrain (landscape) they are travelling over, how long they need to work every day, what they need to eat and drink, and the different roles they play in the sled team.

Think about a situation like the one in Nome, where an emergency has occurred and it's up to you and your dogs to save the day. Write a story describing: the emergency, your dogs, your sled, your cargo, the environment and landscape, and the difficulties you faced in getting to your destination. Make your environment as forbidding as possible!