

# VT MUSHES

## NEWSLETTER

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cover photo by: iSkiVermont.net

### A MUSER'S FIRST RACE

When people see you have sled dogs, one of the first questions commonly asked is, "Do you race?" My reply has always been no -- life is too competitive and dog sledding is way too much fun to mix the two. Until now (and that is not to imply that my calling has taken me to a life of being a competitive musher). I completed my first 25-mile sled-dog race, hosted by [North Country Mushers](#) at Groveton, N.H., on Sunday, March 20, 2011. My results -- the coveted Red Lantern Award. (Outposts note: This is awarded to the last place team.)

I have never thought I wanted to get seriously involved in competitive sled racing, and I am sticking with that plan. The events leading up to my participation in this event occurred rather serendipitously when a fellow mushing friend informed me late last week that there was a rescheduled race taking place in northern New Hampshire. I needed to get weekend coverage at work to participate, because if I didn't go, he probably wouldn't either. Logistically, it would mean getting to northern New Hampshire by the mandatory 8 a.m. mushers meeting. MapQuest indicated it was a 3 1/2-hour drive, backing the departure time to 4:30 a.m. Then planning for time needed to load dogs, load the truck -- switch all the dogs and gear from one truck to another in Rockingham -- better add a half hour -- now looking at 4 a.m. departure. Then I started thinking I should probably arrive just a tad early to the mushers meeting, say, to

drop dogs and sleds and at least look like we're in the hunt; so add another half an hour -- departure at 3:30 a.m.? And that's a tight timeline and didn't allow for any unforeseen circumstances.

I agreed to go, and we contemplated the best way to manage our tightly laid-out timeline. As fate would have it, neither one of us slept -- I tossed and turned from 10:30 p.m. until midnight and tried to fake sleep like a child waiting for Santa. I think I may have gotten



#### Gear Questions:

NE Outfitters, Inc is owned and operated by the Vitello family (Gregg, Eileen and kids) of Brookfield Massachusetts. The Vitello Family & Kennel have proudly been a part of The New England Mushing Family since 1997 and VTMA members.

Given their years of using and selling equipment for dogs and humans, they are willing to answer gear related questions. Send questions to: [aিন্নirbard@gmail.com](mailto:aিন্নirbard@gmail.com)



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an hour and a half of shuteye and was wide awake at 2 a.m., well in advance of my 2:30 a.m. alarm-clock setting. I called my comrade at 3 a.m., half an hour before my "leaving-the-house" plan, scheduled for 3:30 a.m. He answered promptly and alert with: "Couldn't sleep either?"

Something interesting happens when you change the format from a fun run to a race. For two days, I was plotting and planning what I would need to bring. Not like all that stuff isn't in my truck anyway, but this was different -- it was a race, and I wasn't going to be in my truck. I had to have all the stuff I needed but not too much as space is at a premium when carpooling with a fellow musher and his dogs. I reevaluated and re-analyzed what I needed, being certain not to be without. The mental mindset had changed. This was a race.

The race was the end-of-the-season finale for the club, and I thought it a nice chance to explore this venue. I had absolutely no expectations other than to compare our performances as a team in a race setting to what we had been doing in recreational runs this season. In the few longer runs (15-plus miles) we have done this year, we had an overall run average of 5.7 mph and a moving average of 8.1 mph. My team is a hodgepodge of Siberian huskies ranging in age from 1 year to almost 9. The first was

initially purchased as a pet, plus a couple retired race dogs and some acquired at various stages of puppyhood and trained to pull by ignorant but eager owners who embraced the breed and wanted to exercise them properly and, most of all, have fun.

Just as I was more discerning about my packing for this venture, once on the trail, I found myself more analytical of the dog's behavior and actions in harness. The race brought into focus nuances upon which I had to act strategically -- the type of things that might have been ignored on a recreational fun run. The race was 25 miles -- the longest run we would embark on this season.

Anthem and Espresso started out in lead, Lyra and Kadee in point, Tarot and Strider in team and Nina and Kaleb in wheel. Anthem is a trained lead dog; Espresso has no command training but has the best forward drive on the team. Lyra is a very smart girl and knows her commands but is sometimes more interested in smells on the trail than her forward orientation; Kadee has the drive of Espresso but very little lead or command training and at just 1 year old is young for the role of lead but has potential. Tarot is a powerhouse and rock-solid muscle -- a solid team dog with lots of drive. He is the most vocal of any of our dogs, and if he were a child surely would be classified as having attention

deficit disorder with separation anxiety. He is very bashful around strangers and has a very loud, annoying squeaky bark if he isn't getting the attention he deserves (his nickname is Squeaky Boy). Strider is a big 'ol sweetheart, lanky in the leg and very personable and is a talker, eager to run and a solid team dog. Nina was our first Siberian and the kennel princess (self-promoted to queen). She has a strong attitude and is always eager to run -- just not too fast -- and is a consistent team or wheel dog. And Kaleb is a big teddy bear of a dog whose sister is Kadee and at only a year old is still young in terms of what to expect or how far to push him. He runs well in wheel or team, is strong, always eager to run, but doesn't quite have the drive his sister does.

About seven miles into the run, Anthem does not want to be in lead -- his tug line is slack and Espresso is neck lining him down the trail. So I decide to place him in point and give Kadee a go at lead. Less than a mile later, she too is telling me with a slack tug that she doesn't want to be in lead. The next dog I have in line for drive is Tarot, and though he's probably the strongest physically and has incredible drive, he has no training. But what the heck -- we'll give him a go. And to my surprise, he did great and actually showed some signs of listening to commands though was very far from a

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polished lead dog. Surprisingly, Anthem ran with tight tugs in point and showed great support from the point position.

Just as we as mushers seem to up the ante logistically and strategically, I too sensed a heightened performance from the dogs. Anxiety about staying to the right, passing and being around other dogs and snowmobile traffic all proved to be unnecessary. The dogs gee'd over [turned right] like never before, did some great passing of other teams on the trail without incident (well, mostly allowed others to pass) and passed snowmobiles perfectly while in motion.

After our Mile 18 water and snack break, Nina showed signs of being tired -- her tug was slack, and she was getting neck lined on some of the faster downhill runs. Thoughts of bagging her ran through my mind, but she did fine as long as we set a slower pace. As I mentioned, she was our first Siberian, and I really wanted her to complete our first race. Around Mile 22, Kadee showed signs of tiring -- her tug was slack, her drive evaporating, and her neckline tight from the front -- so I set the hook and gave her some attention. A little break from running and a lot of positive reassurance for all the team

worked wonders. Again, setting a slower pace was in both Nina's and Kadee's comfort zone. There were only a few miles to go, and I didn't want it to end.

We started as a team, and we finished as a team. We came in dead last, a whopping half an hour behind my front competitor, which is decades in race terms, and 1 1/2 hours after the first-place finisher. I am not in this to be competitive -- remember, dog sledding is too much fun to add the stress of having to compete.

Competition can be, however, a very useful tool. I learned about my dogs, we bonded on the trail amid new scenery and a different venue and, hopefully, built more trust and mutual respect. We met our goal of improving our overall average and moving average (7.0 mph overall, 8.4 moving average) and couldn't have asked for a better experience. Coming in dead last was a huge success in this musher's mind, and racing doesn't have to be competitive. It just may prove to be one of the best tools you have, though, to bring out the best in you as a musher and the best in your team.

*Story and photos by Allan Tschorn*

## Kong Circles

We all know what the chew toy referred to as a "kong" is, right? If not, they are a conical shaped chew toy with a hollow center that you can fill with biscuits, provided of course by the manufacturer. The concept is for the dog to chew and break up the bits of cookie and get tangible rewards (besides the satisfaction of chewing). We invert the device in a disposable cup or kitchen measuring cup(s) and fill them with a plain, high quality yogurt and freeze them in the freezer. Dogs LOVE them, it is cool and satisfying, and best of all, and yogurt is a great probiotic that promotes a healthy gut in your dog.



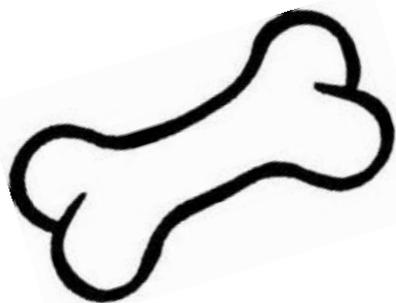
*Sheila Goss mushing with Gryphon.*

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## Marrow Chew Bones

We have always been of the opinion that bones are fine for your dog as long as they remain uncooked. Cooking the bone can make it brittle, and subject to splintering and hence a danger to the digestive tract of your pet. Remember, in the wild the bounty a dog is rewarded is not de-boned or magically turned into a nice size uniform kibble. Neither is it cooked. Most meat sections of supermarkets will have a nice size (6 to 8 inches) of a beef femur marrow bone. The dogs love to chew, and lick the marrow from either end. Once the marrow has escaped the reach of their tongues, simply cut in half (I use a band saw, but a fine tooth bone saw works well, too), and it is like a new bone. Once hollow, I collect the bones and cut to 2 1/2 to 3 inches in length. For stuffing, use a quality ground beef and kibble in equal parts processed in the food processor. Stuff bones and freeze.



### A Group of Spoiled Dogs

*And this is where they think they are sleeping!*

*Hemi, Kelsey, Devon, Pixie, Mazey and Star*

*~Photo by Erin Kelley*

*Do you have a spoiled dog? If so, submit your picture of your spoiled dog(s) to: [ainnirbard@gmail.com](mailto:ainnirbard@gmail.com)!*



*Bait ready for freezing*

## Baited Water

We own a small recreational mushing kennel of Siberian huskies. Since we do not have heated dishes I had been trying all kinds of bait for water. My efforts had yielded poor to fair results. Getting the dogs to drink the water was only one of the challenges. I often did not gauge how long the bait would last in the refrigerator and family members had been known to pour chicken bait out of a recycled milk jug in to the coffee in the morning. A friend had mentioned freezing bait and that made all the difference in making good baited water. Now I buy the soup or roaster chickens, whatever is on sale. I cook it in a big pot till it falls off the bone. I take the meat off the bone and chop it up. I will add any good leftovers to the chicken water like bacon fat or meat drippings. In the blender I mix 1/3 chicken broth and 2/3 chopped chicken. I pour it out in ice cube trays and freeze. The next day I put all the cubes in a container in the freezer. Each winter morning I get out the cubes and melt them down in the microwave oven then mix them in to a gallon jug of warm water. Since using this method I know the dogs get a good drink in the morning before I leave for work. This past winter I used about 4 chickens, which cost about \$20-25 total. ~article and photo by Jean Coffey

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### Braeburn Siberian Models

Top photo: Seppala Freight Harness

Middle photo: Nansen X-Back Harness

Bottom Photo: Nansen H-Back Harness

Next VTMA meeting is Friday, April 11th. Stay tuned for location and time.

If you, as a member, have articles and/or pictures you'd like to submit for future use, please send them to Judy Gilmore at [ainnirbard@gmail.com](mailto:ainnirbard@gmail.com).

## Fitting the Harness to a Sled Dog: Not Just What Meets the Eye

There are fairly standard guidelines among harness manufacturers and mushers for fitting a harness to a particular dog for the purpose of dog sledding. These tend to be what I call the visible outside-of-the-dog factors. There is also what I call invisible inside-of-the-dog factors, information which seems to be much less available.

The two primary visible outside-of-the-dog factors are:

- a) making various measurements of the dog and then selecting a S, SM, M, ML, L, etc. harness, or for the dog that doesn't conform to these sizes, having a harness custom made; and
- b) choosing the correct style of harness for the dogs' build and the dogs' job.

The necessary measurements are:

- 1) base of the neck: from point of the breast bone (top of the sternum), around the base of the dog's neck (not the shoulder blades) and back to the point of the breast bone;
- 2) length: from point of the breast bone, between the dog's front legs and along the length of the dog's body up to the base of the tail; and
- 3) height: floor/ground to between the shoulder blades.

Hints for getting an accurate measurement are to : follow the carpenter's adage of measure twice, cut once; measure the dog and not its coat; make sure that the dog is standing straight and square on a flat surface; have someone assist; and use a cloth tape so as to get a snug measurement.

The two main harness styles are the Nansen standard X-back or H-back, the Nansen collared X-back or H-back or the Seppala breast plate or side pull. In addition, there are two different pulling angles for each style; "high draft" or "low draft". A "high draft" harness pulls off the top of the dog's loin or sacrum, as in Nansen harnesses. A "low draft" harness pulls from beneath the tail and behind the hocks, as in Seppala harnesses. In addition to the measurements, a dog's build and weight are important factors when choosing a harness style. A stocky, large boned dog needs a different style of harness than a leaner, finer boned dog, even if their measurements are similar.

The purpose of measuring the dog and choosing an appropriate style of harness is to make sure that: a) the harness does not press on the windpipe, leave wear marks on the fur, or chafe the body (especially the armpits), and that b) the harness does fall behind the last rib and reach the base off the tail. *(See photos this page.)*

When fitting a harness to an individual dog, it is critical to remember that the harness will be load-bearing and thus putting pressure on parts of the dog's body. It is this fact that makes it important to take harness fitting beyond the visible outside-of-the-dog factors to the invisible inside-of-the-dog factors. These factors are based on the science of biomechanics. This is the mechanical cause and effect

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relationships that determine the motions of living organisms. I discovered biomechanics through my daughter who successfully applies its principles to yoga and to horse training, and through one of my vets who uses its principles to diagnose, manage and prevent injuries in canine athletes. With this discovery, I came to understand that the invisible, inside-of-the-dog factors are an equally critical part to properly fitting a load-pulling harness, and perhaps even more important, are critical to preventing subtle internal injuries (such as lameness) that can become chronic and more serious injuries (such as spinal injury). In addition, a properly fitting harness simply helps a dogs' overall performance because it feels good!

The invisible guidelines are parts of the dogs' skeletal structure. They can all be found by palpating the dog. They are:

- a) the manubrium, or the fore chest
- b) the scapulae, or the shoulder blades
- c) the iliac spines, or the hip bones, on either side of the dog's back
- d) the lumbo-sacral (LS) junction in the spine; this is the junction between the last lower back vertebrae and the pelvis
- e) the thoraco-lumbar (TL) junction of the spine; the spinal junction between the chest and the lower back, approximately equivalent to where the last rib attaches to the

spine. Note: this junction is a bit tricky to find and so it is best to have someone show you the first time.

(See diagram this page.)

A properly fitting harness should not:

- a) lie over (and therefore press down on when under load) the lumbo-sacral junction, the thoraco-lumbar junction, or the iliac spines;
- b) lie directly on the tops of the scapulae, but rather ahead of and

(accurate measurement as described earlier helps to accomplish this goal).

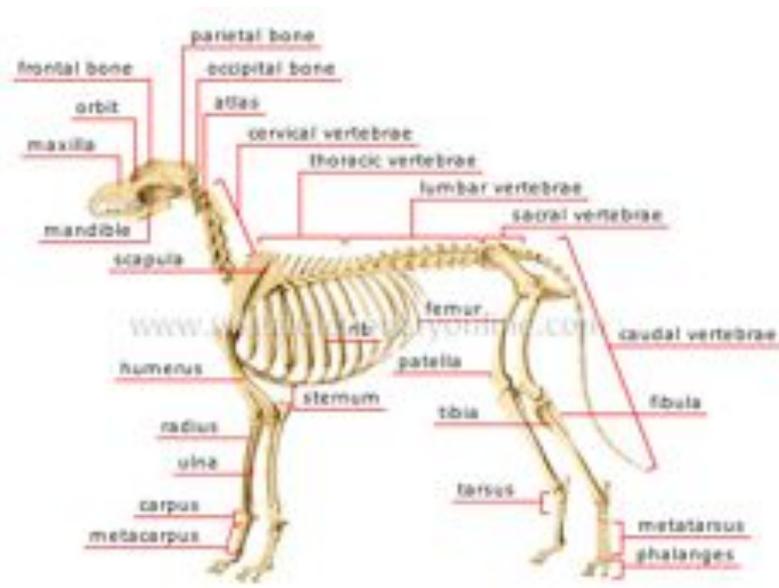
Although the invisible biomechanical inside-of-the-dog factors are common sense, much to my chagrin, I didn't clearly focus on these factors in detail until I had been mushing for several years. I then fine-tuned many harnesses, and several dogs got a complete makeover; I like to imagine that this was much to their relief! My largest dog switched from a "high draft" 2XL

standard H-Back harness to a "low draft" freight (Seppala side pull) harness in order to remove all pressure from his iliac spines and his lumbo-sacral junction. He now stands taller and is able to put all of his 75 lbs. into pulling efficiently.

The readily available information about visible, outside-of-the-dog factors of harness style and dog body measurements are one part of correctly sizing a harness to a particular dog. With the invisible, inside-of-the-dog factors

based on biomechanics added into the equation, you can be certain to have a harness that will allow a dog to be comfortable, injury free, and able to move her body to her best mechanical advantage, allowing her to be an efficient and effective puller mile after mile on the trail!

Article and photos by Kathy Bennett, Braeburn Siberians with input from Dr. Jonit Barsky, DVM structural skeleton from <http://visual.merriam-webster.com/animal-kingdom/carnivorous-mammals/dog/skeleton-dog.php>



- between them; or
- c) rub against the dogs' upper hind leg where the femur leg bone attaches to the pelvis.

A properly fitting harness should lie directly over the manubrium; not to one side or the other and not above (which would be over the trachea).

In addition, downward pressure from the harness should not impede the dogs' movement. The pull should be evenly distributed between the top and bottom straps with the rib straps intersecting with the bottom strap behind the last rib