

Have dogs, will run

Dryland Mushing

SAY “MUSHING” AND MOST people envision a team of sturdy, excited dogs pulling sleds hundreds of miles along snowy Alaskan trails. Increasingly, however, urban dog lovers are learning that dog-powered activities are a great way to keep themselves and their pooches in shape while experiencing the joy of human-canine teamwork. Once temperatures turn cool and trail traffic thins out, your favorite non-paved trails are perfect for dryland mushing. You don’t need a lot of equipment, a team of Huskies or even snow.

Dryland or urban mushing refers to non-snow, dog-powered activities that involve one to two dogs, a human and minimal equipment. In canicross, the most popular type of dryland, dogs help runners or walkers increase their

speed, stride and endurance. It’s also a fantastic way to bond with your furry buddy. Once the principles of canicross are mastered, you may also consider bikejor (dog pulling a bike) or dog scooters. Whatever you choose to do, it is important to be absolutely comfortable with the apparatus you’re using so that you can focus on your dog’s experience of the activity.

Any breed can take part in canicross; all you need is a dog who’s healthy and loves to run. (Puppies, dogs with prior injuries or older dogs with arthritis should not take part in dryland activities.) If your dog hasn’t been particularly active, get him in shape first. Begin by walking and progress to running as his endurance improves. As with any new activity, check with your veterinarian before starting.

For canicross, in addition to a dog (or two), you’ll need a properly fitted and padded pulling harness; a padded belt for you; and a gangline, which connects you to your dog. Appropriate harnesses can be found online (search for “canicross equipment” for a list of sources), but be sure to read measuring guidelines closely to ensure a proper fit. Dogs rarely stand still for long, so measure your dog several times to get a reliable average.

The harness must distribute the pulling weight along the dog’s shoulders while avoiding shoulder joints, belly and spine. Many people prefer a shorter, “buggy-style” harness for dryland because it gives a better pull angle, but you can also use a traditional X-back sled harness. Freight- or weight-pulling harnesses do not work



Défi Mi-Loup canicross race, St-Jean, Orleans Island near Quebec, Canada.



Dryland Mushing Basics

- Always consult with your veterinarian to be sure your dog is physically able to run in harness.
- Use a well-fitted, padded pulling harness.
- Start slowly and build gradually.
- Make the experience fun.
- Use unpaved trails.
- Remember that dogs overheat faster than humans; train when the temperatures are cool.
- Be consistent with your commands.
- Be patient during the learning process.
- Make sure both of you are well-hydrated.
- Don't feed your dog before or right after a strenuous workout.
- Remember that mental challenges are as important as physical ones.

well, since they're designed for a load that's much closer to the ground than the average person's waist. Each harness maker designs a variety of fits and features to accommodate different breeds, sizes and activities. Most are very knowledgeable and are willing to help you find the right fit for your dog. You can expect to pay between \$25 and \$50 for a good harness. For the human portion of the canicross setup, a commercial skijor system with a belt and gangline will run between \$40 and \$70, and is often sold as a kit.

You can also design your own system; make sure it's comfortable, keeps you safely connected to your dog and has some sort of shock absorber (such as an interwoven bungee) between you and the dog to prevent jarring injuries. The line should be long enough to keep the angle as low to the ground as possible, yet not be an obstacle to other trail users. Most skijor lines have about eight to 10 feet of quality polypropylene rope between the waist belt and the dog's harness. This allows the harness to properly distribute the load and the dog to have more forward power.

Initially, some dogs are more willing to pull than others. The most important thing to remember when getting started is to give dogs fun and positive experiences so they end their training sessions craving more. If you've worked

hard to train your dog not to pull, never fear! You can maintain your dog's leash-friendly behavior by conditioning him to know that wearing a harness means it's Okay to pull. Be consistent: if a dog is wearing the harness, he needs to be pulling something. Start off with something small—a little log, a milk jug filled with water, a small wheelbarrow tire. Go on your normal walk, but put the harness on your dog and have him drag the object. Once he's used to having weight and movement behind him, you can gradually increase the load to about 25 percent of his body weight.

As your dog becomes comfortable with pulling weight, start positioning yourself behind him while he's pulling to get him used to the idea that you will be behind rather than next to him. Now, you can introduce some commands. Traditionally, "gee" means turn right, "haw" means turn left, "whoa" means stop and a cheerful "hike" means "Let's go." However, you can use any set of terms you wish as long as you use them consistently and they are distinct enough to not be confusing for your dog.

Always say the turn commands as you are making the turn. If your dog starts down the wrong direction, stop, give a verbal correction (I use "Ah!") and repeat the turn command. The moment your dog looks down the

correct trail, give a happy "Good dog!" and start moving. Be patient and make sure you don't give an incorrect direction. A dog will naturally learn that the correct direction means the walk continues.

Another important command is "on by," which means "Continue straight through that intersection or past that distraction" (squirrels, other dogs, kids). While your dog is working, you want him to continue down the trail and not stop to visit along the way. Be sure to give him lots of praise at the end of each session.

Once you and your dog are working as a team, start increasing your speed and distance. Try new trails. Add some challenge by going to an area with lots of turn choices; when it comes to team-building experience, mental workouts are just as important as physical.

If you're lucky enough to live where there's snow on the ground, a pair of cross-country skis (no metal edges) will allow you and your dog to try the Scandinavian sport of skijoring, gliding along snowy trails together. As you get more proficient, check out local mushing clubs to see if there are any events in which the two of you might participate. Before you know it, you and your dog will be working as a unit, enjoying the cool days and staying fit through the winter. **B**

Holly Merriman with dogs Rio (in front) and Lakota (following), Park City, UT.



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