

Training helps dogs ski with their people

By Grayson Schaffer, Outside

All you need to know about going wild with man's best friend.

Of all the hazards out there in the woods—mountain bikes, porcupines, thin ice, your trigger-happy hunting buddies—none are as dangerous as skiing with your dog. You've got four long, sharp metal edges that move at high speed; he's got four soft paws and, most likely, a strong drive to chase and be near you. If you ski with your dog, chances are you've cut him. If you're lucky, you didn't sever a tendon or muscle. Of the half-dozen editors' dogs who ski with us on a regular basis, including my dog Danger, I can't name one that hasn't either been cut or, worse, run over by a snowmobile.

The fix is investing the time and discipline into proper obedience. Your dog should wait patiently while you ski down, stop, and call him to join you. On cat tracks, he should heel beside you without nipping at your skis. Do it right and your dog gets to run around in the mountains all day. Avoid it and your dog is stuck at home. The only commands you need are heel, here, and sit. To ski with your dog, though, you'll need these commands ingrained over time as behaviors.

Teaching him to wait

Start all new training drills in the home, where obedience is likely to be better than outside. Most dogs will master new skills better if they initially learn them without the distraction of unfamiliar places.

1. Have your dog sit. He should remain sitting until you

either call him to you or ask him to heel. Practice by walking circles around your sitting dog. He should follow you with his eyes but not get up.

2. Now walk away from him. If he breaks and runs to you, correct him immediately and return him to his sitting position. Make him wait. Then call him to you and have him sit again. This is the way skiing should work: You move away from him and then call him to you. In some cases, you'll want him to wait for you to stop, in others, like powder, you'll get a head start on him and then let him follow.

3. Now take it to the field. Once you're getting consistent results inside, build up your pup's patience outside, where there are distracting smells. If he won't do it while you're in street clothes, he definitely won't when you're on skis.

4. If he's consistent on land, then you're ready for snow. Many local ski areas allow up-hill skinning and dogs on the slopes before the lifts open. Pick a mellow beginner slope, preferably groomed, where you can slide away from your dog backwards. Have him sit. Move only a few feet away, make him wait, then call him to you. Build up the distance slowly. You want him to succeed every single time. Once he's solid on groomers, take him into the backcountry.

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