

Dogs need training to be responsive ski companions

By Grayson Schaffer, Outside

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 backward. 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.

Teaching him to heel behind a skier

1. Before you can heel your dog beside you while you ski, you'll need a good off-leash heel on land. You'll know you've got a good heel when your dog is constantly making eye contact while heeling, looking for instruction. If he's still sniffing the ground or occasionally wandering, keep working on correcting these behaviors. An energetic dog with a good off-leash heel will almost run in place to match your slower speed.

2. When you're ready to move to snow, start snowplowing on the beginner slope. Your dog may have to heel behind you rather than beside you. On narrow tracks or in powder, when there's only room for one of us, he naturally goes behind. If obedience breaks down and he lunges for your skis, go back to

using a leash on snow. Move slowly. Have him go from heeling to sitting to build patience. If he breaks, stop and start over.

3. Be consistent. Once you're taking your dog into the backcountry, he should be heeling all the way up the hill. You can't let him run free and then expect him to know that you've changed the rules for the descent.

Upshot

In all of this, you may have to adopt a different attitude about what it means to ski with your dog. I like to think of skiing as one of his jobs. When he's on the snow, he's on the clock: No petting unless it's as a reward; don't let him sniff or wander without correction. You may feel like a taskmaster at first, but once it's ingrained in the two of you, you'll begin to work like a team and stay out of the vet's office.