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The Last Page: With a Little Help from Her Friends

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with a little help from her friends

By Sara Blask '03

A loose dog team is every musher's worst nightmare. In the dogsledding world, the cardinal rule is, don't let go, never let go, don't let go. So on my first solo, a quarter-mile down the icy trail, I still hung on with a one-handed death grip, the sled tipped over on its side, both sled and I bouncing like pinballs.

The preferred view is from above, standing on the two sled runners, where a musher can oversee the dogs' running patterns and the tautness of the gangline, which connects a dog team together. To maximize speed and efficiency, every dog must pull its own weight and oftentimes more.

From atop the runners, two curved pieces of wood that help the sled glide, a musher has instant access to braking mechanisms and can couple verbal commands with the brakes to control a team through hairy situations. Somehow I managed to tip the sled just after "take-off"—too much initial momentum and an imbalanced sled. The dogs hadn't been running a full minute before I found myself being dragged on the ground, hand-over-handing myself up the snub line, a long rope used to secure the sled (and dogs) to an anchor (usually a tree), the only guaranteed method to prevent a dog team from running away.

My two lead dogs, Hudson and Yeti, whose tight tuglines indicated no sign of slowing down, kept turning around to make eye contact, wondering why the sled seemed so much lighter than usual. Less weight means faster speeds. My team kept running; I kept holding on.

Dogsledding 101 for the green (aka rookie) musher includes learning how to right a tipped sled (I did manage it) as well as how to negotiate poor trail conditions or, at 10 or 12 mph around corners, avoid immovable objects.

Not in my wildest dreams did I expect to spend the winter after my college graduation learning how to dogsled in the White Mountains, commuting between "Vacationland" and the "Live Free or Die" states in search of new snow, better trails and fewer snowmobiles. After all, I majored in international studies, not sled acrobatics or, for that matter, poop scooping.

I just couldn't pass up the opportunity. I've always been drawn to the mountains—for their simplicity, quietude and physical challenge—and as a youngster I'd tracked Iditarod and Yukon

Quest teams as they wound their way through Alaska and the Northwest Territories. But I never expected to be caring for 22 sled dogs, especially with a bachelor's degree under my belt. Still, I refused to abandon my mantra—*carpe diem*. There will always be time for computers and cell phones, electric heat and *nouveau* restaurants, ATMs and cushy savings accounts. These dogs needed my help, and as I've learned, I needed theirs.

My technical title is "dog handler," but most refer to me affectionately as the "canine au pair." Now that's some good *résumé* padding. I'm not responsible for dog food or vet bills—that's left up to the dogs' owners, two Outward Bound instructors and long-time mushers. They have "real" jobs to pay the doggie bills and therefore can't spend every winter day ensuring that their sled dogs' every need is met. That's my role.

And it's not always an easy one. There are days when I just don't feel like braving the howling winds and arctic air to scoop raw meat into 22 food bowls. It's my job, though, and they rely upon me as their caregiver. Because of this, I've gleaned many valuable lessons in my subzero outdoor classroom.

Aside from finally conceding the importance of frequent napping and languorous stretches before rising, I've broadened my vision of interdependence and symbiotic relationships. Among other things, Hudson, Yeti and our 20 other canine friends depend on me for food, exercise, heartworm pills, clean paws, beds of fresh straw, tenderness and affection. I'm their lifeline. I feed them when it's -35 and gusting wind; I also feed them when it's 33 above and snowing.

They thank me by dancing on their hind legs when I enter the kennel and howling at me every morning and evening, a veritable chorus of treble and bass with perfect pitch. They've taught me to bark with enthusiasm, eat with gusto and growl (but not bite) when I'm upset. They're my winter transportation in the mountains and my eyes, ears and nose for the trail ahead. They're also my garbage disposal, morning alarm clock—and my favorite comedians.

Denali, an enormous, gentle giant, plays a hilarious game with himself when he's bored. He buries rocks, covers the holes back up with dirt, spins around and around, then proceeds to dig his way back down to the hidden treasures. I



Sara Blask '03 works out with her team.

heard him growling one afternoon while pawing his way around. A foot of fresh snow had covered his trove and I knew that he had no idea where his rocks lay buried. His look asked me to help. So I shoveled while he dug—until we found them. Sometimes we all need help digging.

We depend upon one another. I could let go of the team, somehow lose my grip on the sled's handlebar when the team raced full throttle down the trail. Eventually, though, they'd need me back. They're work dogs, and although they could fend for themselves in the field, life's so much easier when someone's there to help.

I've always believed in the importance of independence and self-reliance. I used to dislike asking for help, fearing that somehow my request burdened someone else. It's taken a long time to realize that things don't really work that way. I'm flattered when friends ask me for help; it's a two-way street. Although I still sometimes catch myself in the stoic, I-can-do-it-myself mode, these dogs have implored me to understand and wholly appreciate the concept of *quid pro quo*. I'm not sure that I would've learned it any other way.