

Malamute Myth Busting

Arctic explorer, wilderness survivalist, and malamute musher Joe Henderson explores some common misconceptions of our breed - and sets the record straight

By Joe Henderson

Alaskan malamutes have been on this planet for a long time, and recent DNA testing shows that they are one of the world's most ancient breeds. Throughout history, we have called upon the malamute for the toughest jobs - dragging sleds to the North and South Poles, hauling U.S. mail across Alaska, and packing ammunition for our soldiers in WWII. But why are there so many myths about Alaskan malamutes?

In order to bust some of the myths, first we need to explore their history and origin. The Mahlemuit people or Inuit, whom they are named after, used the Alaskan malamute breed for thousands of years. It is believed that the malamutes crossed the Bering Straits with the Inuit from the Arctic regions of Siberia. They were used as pack dogs, hunting dogs, and sled dogs and protected the Inuit families from bears. It must have been a rugged life back then, and the dogs had to

conform to their environment or else they wouldn't survive. They had to be stout and have stamina to carry a pack or pull a sledge. Their coats had to be lush with just the right length and thickness to hold their body heat and repel whipping snow during blizzards. And malamutes had to be intelligent, trusting, and loyal since they lived with people who valued them as part of their family.

It's also believed the dogs ate when the family ate, which meant that, during famines, they had to develop a digestive

system that allowed them to absorb every micronutrient from their meager rations of food. I have seen dogs half the sizes of malamutes eat twice the amount of food as them - malamutes are just great keepers. These guys also had to develop hefty paws that would endure traveling on dry snow and sharp ice. Basically, it can be said the Alaskan malamute is the perfect breed for a brutal and imperfect environment.

When traders, trappers, and gold miners explored the frozen lands of

Alaska, they were introduced to the Inuit's most important family member - the malamute. Eventually the dogs became quite a valuable commodity amongst the newcomers, which ironically nearly destroyed the breed. The increased demand for dogs decreased the numbers and caused people to start breeding the malamutes with other breeds. Luckily, the line was





saved and was registered in 1935 with the American Kennel Club (AKC). There are several strains of Alaskan malamutes, and a variety of color phases and sizes.

Although the AKC has their standards for the show ring, I prefer the heavier guys with big feet and larger bones. They hold up better for freighting in the Arctic, and that's what the breed was designed for originally. Nonetheless, the smaller strain makes great leaders and swing dogs since they are lighter and more athletic than the larger brutes.

Myth 1: Malamutes have an aggressive nature toward people

Sometimes called aggressive, or half-breed wolves, the malamute's character has been dragged over the coals. It's completely understandable why a person would be intimidated with a 100-lb. malamute. I certainly was when my first malamute looked me in the eyes like he was seeing dinner. Then he knocked me off my feet, pinned me down with his burly paws, and then smacked me on my lip and nose with a big drooling kiss. Malamutes love people; it's just amazing. From the time they are pups waddling around in the yard until they pass on to malamute heaven, they starve for attention from people. This desire to please is the foundation of the Alaskan malamute character, their driving force. It's what makes these guys tick.

Because of this strong instinct to please, malamutes have to be handled with kid gloves, psychologically speaking. These guys are so emotionally sensitive that it's easier to deal with children, but children eventually grow up - and malamutes don't. One of the things that really gets me is their pouting. Now, many of you have kids and have experienced this ancient art of persuasion, or maybe some of you remember practicing this tactic of getting

what you want yourselves. But, when malamutes pout, it seems to pierce your inner soul, and there's no way you can resist, just no way! You end up throwing the white flag of surrender and give them what they want and a bit more for good measure. Pouting is typical behavior from malamutes and not exactly aggressive or wolfish in any way whatsoever.

Myth #2: "Alpha Role" method is an effective way to train malamutes

I have been told that malamutes have to be trained with the alpha role method, a tactic that became popularized in the mid-seventies. With this method, basically you flip the dog onto his back and hold him in that position, sometimes by the throat. The theory is that this teaches the dog that you are the pack leader. The alpha technique may work for other people and other breeds, but I don't think our malamutes attach themselves to me because they think I am an alpha dog. Nope, no way, I don't buy it. I am not one of them, I don't act like them, and I don't dig holes, roll in dirt or howl all night. Those malamutes look at me with respect and love and not as their equal or competitor, and I see them in the same way.

Besides, most malamutes are naturally submissive toward people, and they don't need to be terrified into submission. I have found that even my toughest, macho, hormone raging, dominant dog in the kennel will turn into an innocent, tail wagging ball of fur that acts like a baby when I walk up to him. Take Hero for example, he's the tough guy, the junkyard dog. He intimidates the other dogs just by his powerhouse physique, and polar bear-sized paws. Hero takes no flack from anyone and lets the other dogs know that he's king. He reminds me of a bull dozer, nothing can stop him. But the

moment Hero sees me, he whines like a puppy, completely letting down his macho image, and forgets his dominant role in the kennel. He turns from a lion to a kitten; actually I am embarrassed for him acting like that in front of his girlfriends!

Myth 3: Malamutes are lazy and have no stamina

There are a few myths about malamutes that I have heard that surprise me. Alaskan malamutes were not designed for speed; they are the draft horses of the sled dog world. Malamutes love to work hard. That's their nature. I have never seen sled dogs that yearn to pull heavy loads with such passion and enthusiasm. But my malamutes do not care for (nor are they interested in) sprinting for long distances. Sure, once in a while they enjoy a good run for a few miles, but after that, their tails start to droop down, which usually means that they aren't enjoying life. Droopy tails for purebred malamutes just isn't natural for them and can sometimes signal stress or injury.

Malamutes love the challenge of dragging heavy sleds in rough conditions, and they get bored when they're on smooth, groomed trails, especially the larger brutes. Those guys eat up tough pulls, the tougher the better. Sometimes they growl when they lay into their harness on an uphill pull as if they're proving themselves to their mates. I have one guy named Mitch. His brown and white coat and sharp mask makes him one of the handsomest dogs in the team. Every time we hit a tough pull, he lets out a weird growl/bark that intimidates the dog beside him. Now, if Mitch could speak, I bet he would be barking orders like a drill sergeant: "Follow me! Lean into it, you punks." Those guys can pull with high intensity for hours and hours without tiring. They're just unbelievable!

Is it Our Turn to Ride?

I swear if you let them, a team of malamutes would have you pull your own sled across the frozen white tundra while they relax on the runners sipping hot chicken soup and smoking cigars.

— Joe Henderson



A freight team will put their heart into pulling all day. But there isn't an animal on earth that can work at such high intensity for long; otherwise they would give in to exhaustion and crash. To protect themselves from crashing, malamutes have developed a strategy that sets them apart from other breeds, a strategy that has evolved over thousands of years of hard work. When I first observed a freight team employ this pulling method, I thought the dogs were lazy. But after watching them closely, I realized that the malamutes were performing a calculated and ingenious energy-conserving tactic.

The best way to exemplify this tactic is to visualize that you are standing on the runners with me. Holy smokes, what a white knuckle experience! The whiplash we'll get when 2,000 lbs of malamutes hit their harnesses. After the team runs about a mile and settles to a trot, you'll be able to relax your hands to allow the blood flow back in them. Directing your eyes up the gangline, you will notice that some tug lines are slack and that the dogs are pulling sporadically. Actually, these dogs are testing the load. Like a computer gathering data, those ancient

canine creatures are testing the weight in the sleds and the friction of the snow.

Depending on these conditions, the dogs will set a comfortable pace for themselves that enables them to conserve energy like a marathon runner. Even after the team finds a good pace, they stretch the energy saving tactic even further, and each dog hits its harness for a few minutes then relaxes and hits its harness again. This tactic lets them recover their energy, regain their strength, and then jump back into the game. Often the pace will surge in speed every few minutes when the team employs this method in sync with each other.

Conclusion: malamutes aren't lazy... just wise.

Myth #4: Malamutes are stupid animals

Now, how many times have you heard this: "Malamutes are dumb as a rock." But my favorite is: "Malamutes are dumber than 100 dead chickens." That's great! And it's damn hard for me to keep a straight face when I hear this. These guys have a way of making you think that they are dumb. I believe they have a hell

of a sense of humor. I swear that, if you let them, a team of malamutes would have you pull your own sled across the frozen white tundra while they relax on the runners sipping hot chicken soup and smoking cigars. After all, they couldn't have survived thousands of years by being dumber than 100 dead chickens.

Malamutes are great people trainers. They know how to get folks to do the most ridiculous things. I remember a while back when we were filming the Walt Disney feature film, *White Fang*. We had spent most of the winter prior to the movie in the Arctic, busting through drifts in -70 Fahrenheit temperatures. Suddenly, my team of tough, freight hauling brutes was introduced to Hollywood. Instantly, they had fallen victim to the soft celebrity lifestyle. Wow, those guys just melted with all the attention. Everyone on the film crew smothered them in pets, kisses, belly rubs, and ear massages. By the time they were done with them, they had become a bunch of flower-sniffing cream puffs, and I feared they would find a smelly harness a disgusting insult to their new sophisticated life!

Getting the team adapted to a film set wasn't easy. My freighters pull and stop on verbal command only, which is an extremely important aspect in hauling freight. They don't stop on resistance from the brake or a hard pull, and when they do feel resistance they dig deeper and pull stronger. So the command to go is "OK," and those malamutes live to hear that command. The first day of filming was a blast for my new team of cream puff malamutes. I had them lined up in front of the sled, with the actor waiting patiently for the scene to begin.

"Action" rang out on the director's megaphone. Just like clockwork, the actors carried out their lines gracefully and professionally. Then it was the malamutes' turn to perform. On cue from the director, I said "OK," and the team took off with the actor standing on the runners. It was the perfect scene and a perfectly executed performance. I must say that the director was quite impressed.

Take two: I'll never know why Hollywood directors have to retake every scene. As the word "action" rolled out of the director's megaphone again, the malamutes were on it. Instantly, they sprinted toward the set... without the actor! The leader then recognized his favorite ear scratching buddy, the camera man, and dashed toward him. The team figured out that the command to go followed "Action." So it was only reasonable for them, they thought, to

enter the scene when they heard the director yell "action." After all, the malamutes decided they were the stars of the show and the sooner they put on an Academy Award winning performance the better. What a scene – a team of malamutes nearly plowing over an expensive movie camera in pursuit of their best ear scratching buddy. Nope, these guys didn't win an Oscar, but they proved that they could be a gut busting comedy team.

Of course, the dogs received so much attention for their lively Hollywood performance that they were anxious to do it again. But knowing these guys and how quick they learn, I suggested to the director that he should start the scenes with a different word rather than "action." And also that he should change his tone of voice periodically. The director seemed awfully put out about using ridiculous code words like "start" or "begin please," rather than the traditional "Action!" I couldn't believe it - here was a major motion picture being filmed, and a team of malamutes was running the show!

Alaskan malamutes have been clouded in myths and misunderstandings, but they have risen above it all and have made excellent contributions to our society. They have certainly served above the call of duty and have brought many smiles to young and old. And God willing, the legacy and spirit of the Alaskan malamute will live for at least another 10,000 years.

Editor's Note: This article was printed in the September/October 2009 issue of *Mushing Magazine* and is reprinted with permission.



About the Author

Joe Henderson has explored the most remote regions of Alaska, alone with his Alaskan malamutes, for over 25 years. Although he doesn't admit it, his malamutes have him well trained! An expert dog musher, trainer, Arctic traveler, and wilderness survivalist, Joe has established one of the most resilient, hard-core malamute dog sledding teams in modern times. He shares a special bond with his malamutes, and each one is an integral part of his family.

An accomplished author, Joe has recently published a book, *Malamute Man: Memoirs of an Arctic Traveler*.

For more information, please visit Joe's website at:

www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com.

