

# PUPPY POWER



LEFT: THIS 4.5 MONTH OLD PUPPY IS ENTHUSIASTIC IN HARNESS.

ABOVE: WATER BREAKS ARE EXTRA-IMPORTANT WHEN TRAINING PUPPIES.

## Malamute breeder, musher and judge Nancy Russell describes how she starts puppies in harness - and creates great working dogs

### The Early Exercise Debate

When I got my first malamute I was told by those in the breed that they should not be worked until two years of age or it would cause hip dysplasia and other joint problems. Then a few said that possibly over a year would be OK for limited exercise.

But when I started reading books on Arctic exploration and Eskimo life, I found that the Eskimos had the dogs in harness at six months. Pups were born in the spring, and by fall they were in harness with the older dogs. Of course the average life span of their sled dogs was six years, but there was no such thing

as a pet dog. If one could not keep up with the team, it was killed.

I became convinced that early exercise was beneficial to the dogs when a litter of my puppies went to Jamie Nelson's long distance racing kennel in 1989. Prior to that I had spent a couple of weeks each June



NANCY RAN THIS TEAM AT EAGLE RIVER, WISCONSIN. NOTE THERE IS A PUPPY NEXT TO EACH ADULT. PUPPIES WERE NOT FROM THE SAME LITTERS OR OWNERS, AND THIS WAS THEIR FIRST HOOKUP.



AS THE PUPPY MATURES, DRAGGING THE TIRE IS REPLACED BY USING AN ATV FOR PULL PRACTICE.

at Jamie's, helping her sort out which Alaskan husky puppies she would keep from her litters. At three months she would put them into harness for the first time. She would have two older seasoned leaders in front, then six to eight puppies, and in wheel used two of my malamutes to do the bulk of the pulling. This team would pull a large ATV plus Jamie and me. The first run was at least two miles, and depending on weather and the performance of the puppies, as much as four miles. We always made many stops to water and praise the puppies and to untangle lines.

When Jamie took my litter of six puppies, who were just eight weeks of age, I knew they were going to be treated like her Alaskan husky sled dogs. They went on chains and also had their first hook up at three months. By one year of age, they had over 500 miles in harness.

Jamie trains dogs going slow but pulling hard. She says too many young dogs are ruined with speed, as it can cause injuries. Speed can also scare puppies, so they do not want to run at all.

Just after my malamute puppies were one year old, Jamie noticed a slight hitch in the gait of one of the dogs. We had hip x-rays done and found there was a faint line in the femur shaft, but the socket was fine. When we rechecked this dog at two years of age, he was OFA excellent and the line was gone. This was Jacob - Ch.

Storm Kloud's Hhere I Am, WLDX, WTDX, WWPD - the leader of the malamute Iditarod team in 1994. Jacob ran lead for me through his 13<sup>th</sup> year and died at 15. I had his hips x-rayed after he died and they were still excellent. There was no sign of wear or arthritis. In fact, of the six puppies in that litter, three were OFA Excellent and the other three were OFA Good.

Until that litter that did the early exercise program, I had never had an OFA Excellent on a male, only on my smaller females. Jacob's two brothers that were also Excellent were 26 and 27 inch males.

For many years I have x-rayed the hips of my dogs after they passed away. Since I do mostly line breeding, I wanted to be certain that a dog did not become dysplastic later in life, and I not know about it. In the early years I did have a few that had arthritic changes on that last x-ray, and so I did not double on those dogs in future pedigrees.

The dogs of the Iditarod team lived an average of two years longer than any of my previous dogs and their quality of life was better as well. They never gained weight and stayed on the same performance diet as they had as young dogs. They could continue to sled and weight pull and lead normal active lives longer. I am totally convinced that early exercise is very beneficial for my malamutes.

### About the Author

As owner of Storm Kloud Kennel, the malamutes Nancy Russell have bred have obtained 212 AKC Championships, 145 Bests-In-Show on six continents, 204 working titles, 61 obedience titles, 34 Register-of-Merits and 22 Working Dog Register-of-Merits. Nancy feels very strongly that breed function should never be lost in the show dog. For a research project to see if her show dogs could survive in the Arctic, a team of 15 of her malamutes competed in the 1994 Iditarod race, driven by professional musher Jamie Nelson.

Nancy's dog-related occupations have included veterinary assistant, a local Humane Officer for 23 years, a professional handler for 25 years and an AKC judge for 10 years.

Nancy has served AMCA as President, Vice President, member of the Board of Directors, and participated on the following committees: Color and Markings, Standard Revision, Illustrated Standard, Working Dog Excellent and Judges Education.



### GOLDEN YEARS!

THE DOGS ON THIS TEAM ARE 8-12 YEARS YOUNG AND WERE STARTED IN HARNESS AS PUPPIES. IDITAROD LEAD DOG JACOB IS IN LEAD ON THE LEFT, AT 11.5 YEARS OF AGE.

# Nancy Russell found early exercise results in healthier dogs that live longer, more active lives. Here she shares her Puppy Exercise Program, which she has used since 1995.

## 6 weeks old – Walks

Start with ½ mile – pup running free

## 7 weeks – Walks

Now up to 1 mile – pup running free

## 12 weeks – Introduce harness work

- Use a racing style harness
- When harnessing a pup always put them between your legs so they do not jerk away when putting a front leg in the harness; this could cause damage to the shoulder
- Hook to airplane tire or wheelbarrow-size tire
- 8 to 10 foot long rope attached to the tire by an eye bolt in the tire
- Pup running free or on a long line so he can choose his speed
- Lots of praise for pulling
- Give a command to start pulling and one to stop

The purpose is to get the puppy used to something behind it, and the idea of pulling in harness. Pups should have an instinct to pull. Direct the puppy to harness work early, but only for short distances. Stop while the pup thinks this is a fun game, not work. Do this once or twice a week, and continue the long walks.

**NANCY STARTS HARNESS WORK AT THREE MONTHS, AND TEAM WORK SOON AFTER. HER PUPPIES OFTEN EARN WORKING TITLES BY ONE YEAR OF AGE.**

*Editor's Note: When I received the photos for this story from Nancy, I thought I had discovered her training secret - the cat! No, it is not part of Nancy's program - this is just a camera-hogging cat that would not leave during the photo shoot. Enjoy!*

## 4 to 6 months – Introduce sled or cart work in a team

Use a harness with a belly band so the puppy cannot escape the harness or turn around. In the top photo on the right, I am posing the puppy to show how I have used a neck lead to create

a belly band, since this particular harness does not have one.

Put the pup next to an adult dog who will set a good example and also one who will not mind a pup that may bounce into, over, or under it, causing tangles. If you don't have such a dog to put the pup next to, then run it single with your seasoned dogs in lead and behind him.

Go SLOW – speed scares pups and speed can cause injuries. So the word is "slow," and learn to pull hard.

Also, short runs to start with are recommended. Even if your puppy is in good condition from pulling a tire and other forms of exercise, working in a team is mentally stressful, so do not overdo the first few times in harness. I usually do one or two miles. Continue tire work – one mile twice a week is good.

## 6 – 8 months – Introduce roadwork with the bicycle

Attach a "Springer" to the right side of your bike, to keep the dog off the road and away from cars.

- Use a non-choke collar to attach the dog to the "Springer"
- Use another collar – usually a snake chain - attached to a leash to make corrections
- Keep enough slack in the leash so that you do not get jerked if the dog stops suddenly
- Vary the speed: gallop, lope, fast trot, slow trot
- Start with one mile

**Caution:** If you cannot keep the dog off pavement, then do not start this young!

**Tire work** – go to a car size tire, shorten line to 6 feet – start with ¼ to ½ mile and work up to a mile.

**Sled work** – continue to increase the distance, keep it slow, but as the pup improves in coordination, confidence and consistent pulling, the speed can pick up, too.

**Any age** – Swimming is a great exercise for any age dog. It's the perfect way to maintain or build muscle

## STEP-BY-STEP



1 - HARNESS PUPPY



2 - ATTACH TIRE



3 - RELEASE CAT  
(JUST KIDDING!!!)



4 - PARTNER UP

in hot weather. Also, keep swimming in mind for dogs with joint injuries, strains, sprains, and arthritic older dogs.

Exercise does not hurt puppies! What it does is:

- Improve timing and gait
- Strengthen topline
- Build body and muscle tone
- Build bone
- Increase dog's confidence
- Enhance his working aptitude

### Examples:

Many of our pups earn Working Team and Working Pack Dog titles by one year of age. Pups just over a year old are pulling 1000 pounds in the Novice class in weight pulls.

These are the old dogs I have today; all raised with early exercise:

- Rocket, Ch. Storm Kloud's AAll Systems Go, WTD, WWPDX will be 14 in November. He ran three mile runs with the team last May, but is now unable to keep up. He is our "Puppy Walker", doing mile long walks on cool mornings.
- Lance, Ch. Storm Kloud's Look At Me Now, WTDA, WWPDX turned 12 in January. He has over 200 miles in the team this year and is showing signs of slowing down so from now on will only be doing the three mile loop.
- Broker, Ch. Storm Kloud's Rising Market, WTD, WWPDX just turned ten. Still the strongest and most consistent puller in my team, he has over 400 miles this year.

### Use common sense and moderation and you will avoid injury to your pup. Consider:

#### Condition of your pup

**Fast growing, uncoordinated, or high in the rear** - This pup has to compensate for his uncoordinated structure, so go slow and do short sessions until he grows into himself.

**Fat, sloppy, couch potato puppies** - This puppy can overheat quickly so go slow and stop often to rest and eat snow or get a drink. Signs of overheating are splaying of the feet, dropping down in the pastern, panting with the head up instead of down, and when you stop the pup will not relax but will get up and down. You do not want to continue if any of these occur. Instead stop and let him cool down completely, or call and have someone come and get him.

**Hyper-active, doesn't consider consequences, short attention span** - This puppy might have better results if you can get some of the energy out first with a game of fetch or running free with another dog. This is the kind of pup that jumps on his partner in the team, tries to dash off in another direction, and doesn't pay attention to his footing, so stumbles into holes or over things. Again, go slow and be patient. When you hook him into a team, either run him single, or pair him with an adult that will ignore him and not get frustrated with his antics and attack him. This pup will probably do better on long slow runs than short ones. If you are working him alone, ignore his antics and just keep going.

#### Previous experiences of your pup

##### Heat and humidity

- humidity is harder on dogs than heat
- dark coats absorb the sun's heat, so work in shade, or before or just after the sun is up

##### Terrain and snow conditions

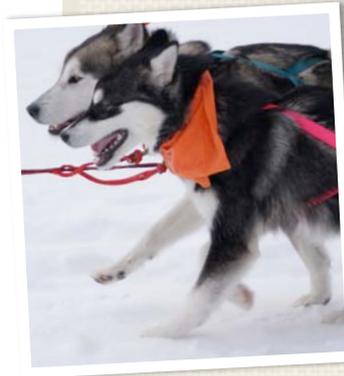
- loose sand or gravel is difficult to go through
- deep wet snow is difficult to go through
- high altitudes make it difficult to breathe

In conclusion, do as many types of exercise as you can. Each one is a learning experience that will develop the pup both physically and mentally, enhancing the versatility of our breed.

## PUPPY DOG TAILS

These four working puppies illustrate how to adjust the exercise program for the best fit.

*Photos courtesy of Karina Burger.*



**PRECOCIOUS PEARL**  
BY 5 MONTHS OF AGE, LITTLE PEARL HAD RUN LOOSE BESIDE THE TEAM FOR UP TO 12 MILES. ON HER 4TH HOOKUP, SHE RAN OVER 10 MILES AND EARNED A WORKING TEAM DOG LEG.



**TREMENDOUS TIESTO**  
AN ONLY DOG, 5 MONTH OLD TIESTO (RIGHT) TRAINS ALONE MOST OF THE TIME. FOR HIS FIRST HOOKUP, A STRONG, PATIENT WORKING DOG WAS CHOSEN TO PARTNER HIM. THEY ENJOYED A HALF-MILE RUN.



**HUMUNGOUS HUCK**  
AT 5 MONTHS OF AGE HUCK WAS GROWING SO FAST, HE CHANGED EVERY DAY! SHORT DISTANCES WITH A SLOW TEAM, LOTS OF WALKS, AND PULLING HIM ALONE WORK BEST UNTIL HE MATURES FURTHER.



**TALENTED TAMULI**  
HIGH-ENERGY 9 MONTH OLD TAMULI (FAR RIGHT) EXERCISES SEVERAL HOURS A DAY. ON HER THIRD HOOKUP, SHE RAN 12 MILES WITH EASE, TO EARN A WORKING TEAM DOG LEG.