

#SLED DOGGER

Supporting All Aspects & Levels

Vol. 3 No. 1
Spring 2016

Recreational Mushing Issue

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Squabbles? Not So Serious:

How to keep your cool when a fight breaks out

By: Kristi Benson

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More and more mushers are cashing in on the physical and mental health benefits of daily loose time and walks for their dogs. Whether you're new to the game or an old hat at giving your dogs this invaluable mental and physical exercise, squabbles can be a real concern. However, most dogs' great ability to 'pull their punches' and bite without maiming force means that occasional tiffs, while needing to be humanely and rapidly stopped, are not a welfare issue and are not a reason to avoid supervised loose time with well-planned groups. In fact, new techniques to separate fights are safer for both humans and dogs, and more effective.

Sled dogs can bicker with the best of them, and botched break-up attempts can cause injury, expense, and time laid off running. My hope is that when the inevitable squabbles break out, no matter the cause, mushers and handlers can make use of this quick and easy technique to end the tiff with a minimum of fuss.

When a fight breaks out, the first thing to try is a quick yell. Sometimes that is enough to end the fight, and many fights fizzle out with no intervention at all after a brief exchange of blows. But if the fight is still ongoing by the time you arrive running, and a quick shout has not worked, it is time to get more serious. Do not delay – move quickly and calmly through the steps.

Step one: if there are other loose dogs, nab them quickly and secure them, if you can. This may seem counter-intuitive – it does feel like the most pressing matter is the two dogs squabbling. However, a fight with multiple dogs involved is more likely to turn into a serious, injurious fight. Two dogs fighting are less likely to do much damage.

Step two: quickly choose the dog that seems to be the aggressor, or the one less likely to be called off. In a smooth motion, grab the dog by grasping his hind legs near the hips and pull his back end straight up into a handstand, so only his front feet are on the ground. Back him rapidly away from the fight. This is called a handstand pull-apart, and the dog will be unable to redirect a bite to you from this position. If you have a handler available, you should each grab a dog and do a handstand pull-apart.



Step three: assess. Are there injuries beyond small dings on the face or ears? If not, walk the dogs away from each other, distract them for a few minutes, and let them loose. If they immediately squabble again, they should be secured for the day. Multiple fights over a few days is a flag that you may need to do some detective work and hire a pro.

Like many professional dog trainers, I work with all sorts of dogs, including those who sometimes show aggression to other dogs. I have a secret weapon that many of my colleagues do not: I am a dog musher. I have separated hundreds of fights over my life. Like many of you, I can keep my cool if a dog fight breaks out, even with multiple dogs involved. This is an important skill and one worth cultivating – so the next time a dog fight breaks out, try to keep calm. If you can, practise these techniques on playful and handle-able dogs before you actually need them in the ring. Just make sure you have a dog cookie in your pocket to give the dogs each and every time, so they learn to tolerate or even enjoy the handling.

For most dog squabbles, a handstand pull-apart ends the fight. However, there are some cases when it is just not enough. You may have to deal with latch-ons, and if you are breaking up a fight alone, occasionally the dogs will keep fighting despite the handstand. I will address each of these.

Rarely, a dog fight will end with what's called a latch-on, where one dog grabs and holds the other dog with his teeth. If the dog being held is calm and not in dire straits (i.e. doesn't have his airway



cut off) then this is actually an opportunity for you to take a deep breath before you handle it. We have had latch-ons and they are generally around the head in our dogs. Grab something that is strong but will not break the dog's teeth and is somewhat flat – an official break-stick is a wooden stick the size of a broom handle with a flat end, made for this purpose (there are legal concerns in some areas to do with break-sticks, so please check your local laws). Straddle the latched-on dog, firmly grasp his collar in one hand, insert the break-stick into his mouth near the back and rotate it using the same motion you would if you were revving a motorcycle. This mechanically opens the dog's jaws. Once you have opened his jaws, haul the dog off and move him away quickly, and then assess for injury on all dogs. Unlike handstand pull-aparts, you are at risk for a redirected bite here. However, we have found that other ways of separating latched-on dogs are not effective or safe, nor hygienic, for that matter. Attempting to pull apart latched-on dogs can gravely exacerbate the latch-on. After you have secured the dogs, then and only then can you reach for the whisky – for yourself!

If you are separating a dog fight by yourself and the handstand does not end the squabble, try using the handstand on the other dog. If you have citronella spray, try that next. If these do not work, you may need to get something between the dogs. Grab the most maneuverable dog into a handstand, and back the fight up to a door. Pull the dogs into the door opening and close the door between the dogs' faces, without hitting them. They will separate when the door comes between them.

Other measures for breaking up dog squabbles can have unintended and negative effects. Extended yelling, kicking, or hitting dogs often ramps the fight up and makes it more injurious or intense – not what we want at all! There is also the very real issue of human injury. Getting your hands into a dog fight is asking for a redirected bite.

Happy trails and good luck!

ABOUT KRISTI BENSEN:

A dog musher and trainer for ten years, Kristi is an honours graduate of the prestigious Academy for Dog Trainers, where she earned her Certificate in Training and Counseling. She lives and works in the Parkland Region of central Manitoba Canada, where she teaches dog obedience classes and helps dog owners in private consultations for a full range of dog problems, from basic obedience to aggressive behaviour.

Kristi also helps sled dog owners who need training or behaviour help through distance consults, by email, phone and skype.

She co-founded and runs the day-to-day operations of Parkland Husky, an adoption venue for sled dogs who are trained and placed in pet homes, and volunteers as a dog trainer with the Swan Valley Animal Protection League. Kristi recently started on staff at the Academy for Dog Trainers, helping to shape the next generation of canine professionals.

Contact her through her website www.kristibenson.com, or check out her blog and Facebook page for training tips <https://www.facebook.com/KristiBenson-DogTraining>.

Thank You!

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