

DOG HEROES OF ALASKA

Dog Sled Culture

Name _____

Date _____

The history of mushing, or dog-powered transport and racing, dates back over 4,000 years. In Alaska, people traditionally used dogs for hunting, travel, and protection. When the gold rush brought settlers to Alaska at the end of the 1800s, mushing became a way to survey land, deliver mail, and transport people. In 1925, when a team of 20 sled dogs helped to rush medicine to a town stricken with diphtheria, mushing drew national attention. Today, mushing continues to be a popular sport in Alaska, with its own culture, lingo, and customs.



Dog sled team, Alaska, c. 1915 | Girls with sled dog pups, Alaska, c. 1913 | Howling sled dogs, Alaska, c. 1911

Mutter Like a Musher!

Although dog team drivers are often referred to as "mushers" and "mush" is thought by many to be the standard word to get dogs moving, "mush" actually isn't often used. It's considered too soft-sounding for a distinctive command.

The word likely came from the early French explorers and the French command *Marché!* (go, run), used as a command to a team to start pulling.

Try out these common commands for a dog team!

HIKE Get moving. ("Mush" and "all right" are sometimes also used.)

HAW Turn to the left.

GEE Turn to the right. (said with a hard g sound, as in "go")

EASY Slow down.

(Kissing Sound) Speed up, faster.

WHOA Stop.

ON BY Pass another team or other distraction.

LINE OUT Used to tell your lead dog to face forward, straighten the line, and keep it tight. (A good lead dog that holds the line tight will prevent tangles as well as help enforce order in the dog team.)

HAW OVER Move over to the left of the trail.

GEE OVER Move over to the right of the trail.

COME GEE An advanced command used to turn around a dog team by having them make a U-turn to their right. If learned and executed properly, it is a very valuable command, especially when running four or more dogs in a team.

COME HAW Same as above but making the U-turn towards the left.

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Balto or Togo?

In 1925, 20 sled dog teams relayed serum that would prevent hundreds of people in Nome, Alaska from catching diphtheria. One dog, Togo, led the pack that traveled the farthest over the most treacherous terrain. Another lead dog, Balto, led the team that brought the serum into Nome on the last leg of the relay. Even though Togo braved the most dangerous conditions in the serum run, he did not receive much fame and recognition. It was Balto who won the gratitude of the town and stole the nation's heart.

Togo was 12 years old when he ran the Great Race of Mercy. For a husky, which has a lifespan of 12 to 14 years, that's very old. With his musher Leonhard Seppala, he led the string of 20 dogs on an incredibly grueling leg of the journey, which included crossing Norton Sound, an inlet of the Bering Sea. At that time, the inlet was frozen but full of jagged ice that could break at any time. The driving snow made it difficult to see, so Seppala relied on Togo to lead the team in the right direction.

The journey went on record as 91 miles long, but Seppala and Togo actually had to travel 150 miles to meet up with the relay. The entire loop they traveled over four days was 241 miles long – an astonishing feat! Though he survived the journey, Togo could not race much after this incredible relay but lived to the ripe old age of 16. Both humans and dogs truly risked their lives to save others.



Balto with musher Gunnar Kaasen | Togo

The second-longest stretch in the relay was the final leg to Nome, led by a musher named Gunnar Kaasen and his lead dog Balto. The difficult and legendary journey was 55 miles long, with the team relying on Balto's nose to lead them safely through a punishing 80-mph blizzard. Against all odds, the team successfully delivered the medicine to Nome. Balto received a hero's welcome and was honored in newspapers, ceremonies, books, and movies.

Togo received attention as well, but only much later and much less prominently. Many mushers believed that Togo was slighted, with praise and gratitude going to Balto instead.



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The Story of Togo

Togo was a skinny Siberian Husky pup that musher Leonhard Seppala tried to sell twice. He did not think the scrawny dog had the potential to make it on a competitive dogsled team. Both times, the clever Togo escaped and returned to Seppala's kennels.

When Togo was eight months old, he freed himself to chase after his owner's dogsled team and easily caught up with them. Seppala had to keep Togo with him to make sure he didn't get into any other mischief and, much to Seppala's surprise, Togo proved himself by the end of that day. He was on the team.

Years of being Seppala's lead dog prepped Togo for the challenges of the Great Race of Mercy.

What Do You Think?

Describe how you would honor Togo. Sketch a design for a statue, write a newspaper article, or create something else of your choice.

Research It!

Both Balto and Togo's bodies were preserved and are available for the public to see. Do some research and find out where you can see these heroic dogs.

DOG HEROES OF ALASKA

The Story of Balto

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Balto was the lead dog in the last leg of the Great Race of Mercy – the relay to deliver serum to the isolated town of Nome, Alaska. For his dogsled team’s success, he received heaps of praise and gratitude. A statue of Balto was erected in New York City’s Central Park in 1925.

Balto in Central Park

Balto in Central Park

The statue of Balto includes the following engraving. Replace each underlined word with one from the word bank – without changing the meaning of the passage. Write the new word directly above the existing one.

Dedicated to the indomitable spirit of the sled dogs that relayed antitoxin six hundred miles over rough ice, across treacherous waters, through arctic blizzards, from Nenana to the relief of stricken Nome in the winter of 1925.

Endurance ... Fidelity ... Intelligence.

Word Bank

afflicted
North Pole
loyalty
unstoppable
stamina
serum
dangerous

Describe how the dogs of the relay demonstrated intelligence.

Can you think of another word you would use to describe the heroic dogs of the relay?
