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FIRST PERSON

## Gone to the dogs, city girl on a sled

### Hitting the trail in a pooch-powered adventure on a beastly cold day

By Kristin Erekson, Globe Correspondent | January 23, 2005

The first words out of Ron Brigham's mouth when he greeted me on the snow-covered stoop of his Warwick home were, "Wow, you are definitely not prepared for this."

Brigham was eyeing my denim jeans, black Doc Marten boots, and navy blue Jennifer Lopez jacket -- attire he found entirely inappropriate for my first dog-sledding adventure.

"You're going to freeze," he said, even though it was only 30 degrees outside on this early January morning. "I better get you geared up in something else."

Brigham, 39, co-owner of Northern Illusion, a dog-sledding tour company, is an officer at North Central Correctional Institution in Gardner. He ushered me inside and handed me some snow wear. I donned lined overalls and a wind-resistant ski coat and traded my Docs for brown mukluks.

With the city slicker taken out of me, I was ready for some serious sledding.

We drove to the Lake Dennison Recreation Area in Winchendon, where snowmobiles roared down trails etched through woods. He then introduced me to my guides for the day: 10 breed mixtures of malamutes and Siberian and Alaskan huskies.

"I love to see the dogs excited and I love to watch the dogs work," said Brigham, whose interest in sledding was sparked eight years ago after purchasing a malamute. When the breeder told him these dogs were meant to pull cargo, Brigham decided just for fun to buy a harness and sled. His dog, Blue, he thought, could cart around his then-2-month-old son, Bryce.

Brigham now enters his dogs in races, such as the 250-mile Can-Am, in which he is participating in March, in and around Fort Kent, Maine, near the Canadian border. But his ultimate goal is to run the dogs in the Iditarod, a race over 1,150 miles of Alaskan terrain.

"I don't care if I win," said Brigham. "I care if we make it to the end, and I'm racing because it's fun. It's good to see how your dogs compare to other dogs."

Prepping the dogs for the ride took about a half-hour and gave me the opportunity to get to know them.

Brigham first filled metal dog bowls with cold water, which I placed in front of the lines for the dogs to drink. Then he opened the tiny doors to a homemade, wooden house perched on the back of his white pickup, and the 10 howling dogs came rushing down a ramp.

My job was to hook them to their places on the line, and while I was working, I couldn't resist scratching heads, talking to them, and putting my face up to theirs. But Brigham warned me that smiling and coming close was a bad idea, because to a dog, baring teeth is a menacing gesture. The best tactic, he said, was to stand tall, offer the back of my hand, let the dog sniff it, and only then pat its head.

I got no hostile reactions, and by getting close, I got a better look at the different-colored eyes four of the dogs had: one blue and one brown.

"That's what happens when Siberians and malamutes breed," explained Brigham. "Siberians have blue eyes, while purebred malamutes have brown."

Once the dogs were in place, I plopped into the blue nylon sled, and before I knew it, we shot off. Ice smacked my face and snow flew into my eyes, even though I was sporting my \$5 flea market sunglasses. I yelled to Brigham that I thought I broke a lens, but he couldn't hear me, because the dogs were speeding down the trail about 20 m.p.h., and the roaring engines of snowmobiles drowned out any other sound. So I sat back, bent my head down, and tried to enjoy the rocky ride.

"Good boys, good girls," yelled Brigham, as my favorite white-furred, blue-eyed girl, Terry, led the pack. Terry was responsible for guiding the team, listening to Brigham's commands, and making sure to stay on the right side of the trail to avoid the zooming snowmobiles.

Driving the sled is not easy, Brigham explained, and accidents happen. He said that at least 8 inches of snow is needed, so the driver can throw a metal hook into the ground to stop the sled in an emergency.

"You need to love dogs, the woods, and nature," said Brigham, citing the qualities of a good musher. "You need to understand the dogs and how they are feeling."

Brigham shouted commands such as "hike" to get the dogs moving as fast as they could and "gee" to turn right. He can tell the dogs are tired when they are not driving hard enough and he feels slack on the two ropes he holds. And after about five minutes, the dogs slowed down.

The more leisurely pace allowed me to lift my head and see snow-topped trees, watch light shimmer on frozen lakes, and view passersby giving thumbs-up signs to the team. But the slowdown also gave me an opportunity to feel the numbness in my feet, and I began to worry that my white cotton socks were not up to fighting off the cold. The word frostbite came to mind. Brigham told me to run alongside the sled to warm up my feet and then jump on the runners behind it. As I stood watching the landscape whiz by, I knew that if I made one wrong move, I could fall off.

As we reached the end of the trail and came within sight of the truck again, I watched the sun beginning to set.

"Good ending, good ending," Brigham shouted.

As I warmed my feet inside the truck, I was happy to see how much the dogs seem to enjoy their work. They wagged their tails and licked my face as I unhooked their collars from the ropes attached to the sled.

"These sled dogs are meant to do a mission," said Brigham. "I treat them as if they were my children."

Ron Brigham's dog sledding team ([northernillusion.com](http://northernillusion.com)) will offer free rides at Pope John Paul II Park, off Gallivan Boulevard in Dorchester, Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and next Sunday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., the team will offer rides at Belle Isle Marsh Reservation, off Bennington Street in East Boston. Participants must register in advance with the Boston Natural Areas Network, by calling 617-542-7696. The event, on a dog sled with wheels instead of metal blades, will take place with or without snow. See [www.bostonnatural.org](http://www.bostonnatural.org) for more information.

## Talking mush? No, here's the real lingo

By 1900, dog teams, which could run faster than horses over the long haul, were the most reliable and common mode of transportation in Alaska.

In 1925, sled dogs became the heroes of Nome, Alaska, after saving hundreds of lives. When a diphtheria epidemic hit the isolated town, mushers formed Pony Express-style teams of sled dogs that battled blizzards over 700 miles of trail to pick up serum in Anchorage. The state commemorates the effort with the annual Iditarod race -- a 1,150-mile journey across Alaska held every spring.

Dog sledding has its own vocabulary of terms and commands that dogs are trained to heed. One misnomer is that "mush" is used to urge on the dogs; the command is "hike."

Hike: used to get the dogs moving as fast as they can go

Gee: Turn right

Haw: Turn left

Easy: Slow down

Musher: A person who drives the dog sled

Lead dog: Dog that "steers" the sled dog team and regulates the speed

Wheel dogs: Dogs closest to the sled

Snowless Rigs (or "gigs"): Usually wheeled carts made of light metals which take the sled's place when there's no snow.

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