

Yukon Quest Mushing Gear

Did you ever wonder what mushers bring on a 1,000 mile long sled dog race across Alaska and the Yukon Territory, through some of the harshest conditions of winter?

THE SLED

With up to 14 dogs, lots of gear, and challenging trail, the Yukon Quest requires a large and sturdy, yet maneuverable, sled. Aggressive angling of the stanchions allows the sleds to be steered, even when heavily weighted.

Stanchions & Runners

Stanchions are the vertical pieces of ash on the sides of the sled that lead up to the handlebar. Their flexibility allows the musher to steer the sled. Runners can be aluminum or wood, but all have a plastic piece called 'runner plastic' attached to the bottom. Runner plastic is made of various types of plastic; some is more durable, while some is slicker in cold or warm conditions. Most sleds have plastic that can be removed and replaced quickly to meet changing conditions or to make repairs when rocky trail cuts gouges. Mushers send several sets of plastic up the trail to each checkpoint with their food and other supplies.

Snow Hook

The snow hook is the musher's parking brake. Fastened to the underside of the sled frame and gang line, the musher sets the hook in the snow to keep an overly eager team from racing off without him or her during short breaks and emergency stops.

The Gangline

The main rope used to attach the dogs to the sled is called the gangline. The rear of each dog's harness is snapped to a 'tugline,' attached to the gangline. The dogs pull against the harness, but they are also snapped to the gangline by a 'neckline' at their collar to keep them from straying too wide on narrow trails.

Pictured above is Newton Marshall, a Jamaican musher mentored by four-time Yukon Quest & Iditarod champion, Lance Mackey, of Fairbanks.



Most mushers layer their clothes. Against their skin, they wear some type of long underwear and socks. The next layer is often of heavyweight fleece, followed by a wind-resistant outer layer. For very cold or stormy conditions, the mushers also have heavyweight down parkas. Many mushers also use a long, light wind anorak that is worn over other layers to keep the wind from whistling through zipper cracks.

In Their Pockets

Everything that a musher wants to keep from freezing is in his or her pockets. Each musher's clothing usually has quite a few interior pockets for keeping a few things thawed, such as foot ointment for the dogs, batteries, water, and the occasional sandwich.

On Their Feet

Each musher has his or her favorite footwear. Choices range from bunny boots to mukluks to pac boots. As with handwear, conditions dictate what mushers wear on their feet each day.

THE MUSER

On Their Head

Most mushers have at least one bomber or musher hat, or heavy fur hat, with ear flaps and a visor, along with a high-powered headlamp for running in the dark.

On Their Hands

Handwear is tailored to the conditions. Mushers will wear many combinations, including fleece liners, cotton chore gloves, fleece gloves, warm mittens, and fur overmitts for extreme cold.

Musher's Required Gear

Yukon Quest rules require all mushers to carry certain equipment in their sled. These items include: cold weather sleeping bag, hand axe with overall length of at least 22 inches, one pair of snowshoes with bindings and approximately 250 sq in area, veterinary records, Yukon Quest promotional material, eight booties for each dog leaving checkpoints, & one functional cooker.

Dog Harnesses

Harnesses, used to attach the dogs to the gangline on the sled, are made of nylon webbing and lightweight foam padding that dries quickly and doesn't absorb water.

As go the feet, so goes the race.

For their canine athletes, mushers carry booties to cover the dogs' feet and ointments to reduce swelling and soothe muscles, as well as zinc oxide foot ointment to prevent moisture related damage between the dogs' toes. Anything that masks pain, such as aspirin, is banned.

Dog Booties

Some dogs and many trail conditions require extra paw protection. Booties are made of a very tough nylon or fleece with Velcro straps and protect the feet from abrasion.