

# Exercise Unleashed

Spice up your winter workout with a little dog-power BY AMY SEIGEL

## HARNESS THE FUN:

Amy Seigel and her German Shorthaired Pointer, Sydney, stop for a biscuit break while skijoring in Warner Park.



WHEN THE WIND BLOWS AND THE snow falls, it's all too tempting to ditch your usual outdoor workout for a warm gym—or skip exercise entirely. But few things are more motivating than a wagging tail and a pair of puppy dog eyes begging you to get up off the couch and get moving. If you want to get fit and have a dog who wouldn't mind getting out more often, the dog-powered sport of skijoring might just be the answer to your winter workout blues.

Skijoring, a Norwegian term that means “ski-driving,” combines the sports of dogsledding and cross-country skiing into one exhilarating activity that allows human and dog to enjoy the winter landscape as a unified team. In a skijoring competition, teams of one to three dogs and one skier work together to cover distances of three to ten miles for sprints and up to fifty miles for endurance events.

While it might be tempting to assume that the dogs do most of the work, one look at a skijor team—the dog leaning into its harness, the skier skating strenuously behind—should be enough to put this misconception to rest. It might also be tempting to assume that this is a sport best left to elite Nordies or hardcore adrenaline-sport junkies, but nothing could be further from the truth.





Anyone—from kids to veteran endurance athletes—can learn how to skijor. Cross-country skiing is an incredible, low-impact winter sport that provides a total-body workout and cardiovascular exercise without putting undue stress on the joints. It can also improve your balance, agility and coordination—three things you'll want to have plenty of once you add a dog into the mix.

And what about the dog? Like the average American, our family dogs are often over-fed and under-exercised. Skijoring is the perfect opportunity for your dog not only to get some much-needed winter activity but also some quality training time—something many dogs go without on a regular basis. And you don't need to own a husky or another sled dog breed to participate or excel in the sport—almost any healthy, willing dog is a potential candidate. Dogs love to pull, and they have an instinctive desire to be out in front, leading the pack. Almost all dogs, when given the opportunity and a little positive reinforcement, will take to skijoring with great enthusiasm—perhaps enough to get you out from under that warm blanket and into a waiting winter wonderland.

### What do I need?

All you need to start skijoring is a willing dog and an adventurous spirit—plus a few simple pieces of equipment: a skijor belt for the human, a harness for the dog (note: a standard walking harness from a pet store will NOT suffice), a towline and cross-country skis. Provided you already own skis, you can expect to pay around \$80 for a skijor package for you and one dog, or \$100 for a two-dog team.

### What kind of skis are best?

You can skijor using either classic-style or skate skis. Skate is usually the choice

for speed and racing, while classics are the better choice for beginners or for off-trail exploration. Whichever style you choose, however, be sure you're comfortable with your skills before including your dog.

### How do I get started?

Canicross, running cross-country while hitched to your canine partner, is an easy way to get a feel for the sport, and the very best way to begin training—for both you and your dog. And once you're hooked on dog power, you may want to look into other exciting dryland options for year-round training such as

scooter/cart pulling, bike-joring, and roller-joring.

### Where can I learn more?

The book *Ski Spot Run*, by Matt Haakenstad and John Thompson, is an excellent primer, and websites skijor.org and skijornow.com provide networking opportunities along with useful information on equipment, training tips and race listings. There is even a Yahoo Group specifically for Madison skijorers—just go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/> and search for "Skijor Madison."

**Amy Seigel is a freelance writer and avid outdoors-woman.**



Dr. Michael Huie

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