

Time to get Packing!

(By Lori Price from The Crooked River Crier – 2nd Quarter 2006)

There are few things more enjoyable and relaxing than a long hike with your best friend. So, it is no wonder Pack Hikes have become the most popular GSMDCA Working event with more pack hikes planned each year than ever before. Anyone who owns a Swissy can participate and although you can ultimately earn a Pack Dog Title, it is not a competition. It is all fun. No raging egos-- just fun with your friends and your Swissies and the great outdoors. There are few better ways to spend a spring day than enjoying the beauty of nature with your friends and your dogs.

I went on my first pack hikes in Colorado before the event was even recognized. I was lucky to get my feet wet in the beautiful Colorado Rockies in the summer and to learn about pack hiking from the gurus of the Swissy Pack Hike, Tom and Carol Scribner. Tom and Carol are great outdoorsmen and had been packing with their dogs before they even got their first Swissy. They found that Swissies were naturals at pack hiking. So, they organized the first pack hikes in Colorado, wrote our first set of Pack Hike Rules and hence introduced the Swissy community to this wonderful activity.

I thank my Swissy “BuBu (BISS CH RidgeBridge Khumbu v Jotunheim, CD, WPD, WWD, VGS) for accompanying me on those first hikes and being such a happy camper. BuBu was the first male Swissy to earn a Working Pack Dog title. At 8-1/2, he still looks forward to long hikes in the woods with the same enthusiasm as he did 7 years ago.

Training for a pack hike comes down to making a simple commitment of time to taking regular walks with your Swissy — something you should be doing anyway to fulfill your Swissy’s basic exercise needs. You will find that long walks are a wonderful way to relieve yourself of the days stress while working your Swissy and reinforcing your position as pack leader.

Spring is the ideal time to start getting yourself and your Swissy in shape for all the exciting Pack Hikes planned throughout the year, especially the Crooked River Club Swissathlon pack hikes this fall. The GSMDCA Pack Hike Rules state that a dog must be a minimum of 18 months old in order to participate in a Pack Hike.

However, you can start training for this even when your dog is quite young merely by keeping your Swissy in shape by regular walking. You don’t need to put any weight on the dog but you can get him accustomed to long walks carrying an empty pack.

It is extremely important that you know your dog is sound and has no lameness issues before you start training with any weight. Frankly, I think it is a good idea to get preliminary x-rays done on your dog before asking him to pull or carry any weight. By confirming that your dog is radiographically sound before you start serious training, you will reduce the risk of aggravating a pre-existing condition when you start asking him to carry or pull any additional weight.

Start walking your Swissy at least once a day for 45 minutes to an hour and make the walk at least one and a half (1.5) miles long. Ideally, you should do this twice daily -- in the early morning and then again in the late afternoon before you feed your dog. (Remember: Work before Reward.)

One and a half miles is not a long walk and shouldn’t take longer than 45 minutes. (My five-month-old puppy, Oola, has been going on 1.5-mile walks twice daily for about three weeks now and she barely tires.)

If you don’t live near an area where you have access to a variety of surfaces, make an effort on the weekend to go somewhere where you can expose your Swissy to different surfaces, such as tarmac, grass, and gravel. If possible, introduce your Swissy to the concept of wading through shallow water. Best to get him used to the water before the hike so you are saved the embarrassment of your dog playing “twinkle toes” in the midst of a hike!

When it comes to selecting a pack for your dog, you have a lot of excellent packs from which to choose. My personal favorite is the Palisade Pack by Ruff Wear. I also like the Mountain Smith pack. The Palisade pack is exceptional because of the built in water bladders. These serve a variety of purposes, including water storage, built in cooling system for your dog and good training ballast when filled with increasing amounts of water. The bladders are great because you can fill them with water and have easy access to the water during a hike without having to bother with bulky water bottles and carrying empties on returns or on overnights. The bladders serve as a nice cooling cushion against your dog and is one reason why the Palisade Pack is such a favorite.

Once your dog is accustomed to the long walks with the pack, add some weight to the pack and gradually increase the weight each week. I suggest starting out with five pounds evenly distributed in the pack and increasing the weight by five pounds a week until the 20% or 30% body weight limit is reached.

Ziploc bags come in different sizes and when filled with sand serve as wonderful ballast. You can weigh each bag and mark the weight on each baggie with a sharpie and use them for training. Some folks have used filled water bottles or bricks for ballast. However, baggies of sand pack very easily and are not bulky or cumbersome. When you are finished using the sand for ballast, it can be put to good use in your garden for drainage!

Once you start adding weight to your dogs pack, be sure to do at least three walks a week with the pack on the dog in addition your regular walks without the pack. Before you participate in an official pack hike, be sure you have completed at least one hike in the month preceding that is the same length as the Pack Hike you have entered.

If you are planning on doing a hike in high altitude, it is important that you acclimate to the altitude before attempting to exercise in it. I have never witnessed a dog having trouble with altitude but I have been on hikes where people began to feel the effects.

If you feel ill during a hike or if you feel your dog is not up to completing the hike, please inform the hike leader. Do not risk your health or that of your dog because you are worried about disrupting the hike.

Be sure to keep your dog up to date on his monthly heartworm and flea/tick preventative. When you return from the hike, check yourself and your dog thoroughly for ticks.

Whether on a practice hike or an official pack hike, be sure to take plenty of water, as both you and your dog will need it. You can use the water for ballast and as you drink it, you will reduce the weight your dog will carry for the remainder of the hike. You cannot throw out water that your dog doesn't drink. So, if you are carrying water in bottles, be sure to have a separate one in which you can pour the water your dog doesn't finish.

Here is a short list of things to take on your hikes in addition to plenty of water.

- Portable bowl for your dog. Ruffwear makes several good ones.
- Poop bags and a trash bag to carry out rubbish.
- Bite sized treats for your dog and a meal in a baggie if you feed your dog 3x daily.
- Snacks for yourself (Granola bars are ideal. Try LUNA bars!) and lunch if you are planning a long day.
- Small first aid kit containing band-aids and bandaging, antibiotic ointment, aspirin and benedryl, insect repellent wipes and some antibiotic hand wipes, Gas-X and Imodium. For the overnight hikes, I recommend taking some flagyl. This is always good to have on hand in case your dog gets giardia from drinking stream water.

Once you have done one Pack Hike you will be hooked. It is a great event and a wonderful way to spend time with old friends and meet new ones. Your dogs will be in their element and will thoroughly enjoy themselves. At the end of the day, you will find yourself feeling that sense of "good tired" – when you are both exhilarated and worn out from a day working in the outdoors.