

Dog Talk

Nikko smiled sinisterly as he lay on top of the dirt pile. His shovel-sized paws were crossed in front of him in a dignified manner.

He was proud of his work and he knew it would get a reaction out of me. Maybe that's why he did it. Maybe he enjoyed seeing my jaw drop and hearing my string of profanities echo through the forest.

As I worked my way through the dog yard carrying the feed bucket, Nikko sat up. His wide eyes followed me and his red, bushy tail swept the dirt back and forth, stirring up a cloud of dust as I approached him. "Nikko! Bad boy! I'd better get you out of there before that tree falls on you," I scolded.

Nikko had ingeniously undermined the trees so they delicately balanced on their roots. It's amazing how quick and deep Nikko digs a hole. I mean, these aren't little holes like a poodle buries a bone in – Nikko excavates them large enough to bury a car. I guess in a way it's his own method of expressing himself, but what exactly is he trying to communicate? I'm proud of his strong work ethics, tough-mindedness and stamina, but when he pulls a stunt like this, it really irks me. Yet, there isn't anything I can do about it. I've tried pouring concrete in his spot in the dog yard, but somehow he peeled it up as easily as you'd peel an eggshell, and proceeded to dig a waist-deep hole that filled up with water during rainy season and became a mosquito breeding ground.

We know that dogs have a variety of ways to communicate. Digging a swimming pool is one way, but most dogs are vocal. During his first year in harness, Nikko screamed and whined when he pulled. Sometimes it was outright deafening. But he pulled with passion. I am sure my neighboring dog mushers got a kick out of hearing my dog team literally screaming



down the trail.

Another dog that exhibits a strong desire to express themselves in our kennel is Mitch. He's a handsome gray malamute and very muscular. If he were a human, he'd be a power lifter for the USA Olympic team. He's tougher than heck, and he doesn't have any patience for slackers. When we hit a hard pull and the gangline is straining and the sleds are crawling at a snail's pace, Mitch growls and barks. It reminds me of a drill sergeant yelling orders at his soldiers – "C'mon you sissies, toughen up and keep pulling!"

There are others in my team who are notably vocal and communicative, like Moose. Now, this guy looks like a clumsy, dumb ox with gargantuan paws and long legs. He's cloaked in a gray shaggy coat, and he's missing his right eye, but Moose is smart as a whip.

He is one of the few malamutes that I have, besides Mitch, who can muster a good bark. Moose has figured out if he barked twice in the right tone, and at precisely the right moment, usually after I've harnessed the last dog and everyone's nerves are itching to go, he can get the entire team to lunge ahead without me. In the ears of malamutes, apparently his two syllable bark sounds similar to my command to go. It's a brilliant strategy and has worked several times. I am sure Moose gets a good laugh from it.

This brings us to Bandit. Many, many years ago, Bandit was one of my first sled dogs. Every time we approached my cabin at the end of a run, he belted out a short, sharp succession of barks, which excited the team and sped them up. Eventually, I figured out that if I imitated Bandit's bark, the team responded the same



way and sprinted for short distances. I'm sure I looked and sounded like an idiot barreling down the trail barking like a dog. Luckily, I didn't have neighbors! Over time, I phased out the bark and replaced it with a command from the human language that had a similar tone and to this day I still use it to encourage and speed up my team. So, Bandit taught me an important command to use, and every time I tell my dogs to "hit" they sprint.

Now, Charlie is one of our house dogs. He's a very well-mannered gentleman of a malamute with a shining gray coat, sharp ears, and a thick brushy tail. He communicates on an almost

human level. If he happens to notice that his water dish is empty before we do, he will carry it in his mouth and pace in front of us until we offer to fill it for him. He'll prance into the kitchen and wait for his drink and when we ask him if he wants a treat, he actually shakes his head yes, just like a person.

This leads us to Melvin, our black lab, who shares our domain with Charlie. Although he never has and never will run in the team, my wife and I like to call him the team captain. He's vocal and communicates with body language as well. Melvin loves popcorn, actually any kind of treat for that matter. He lets us know when he wants more treats by stomping his feet, like a marching band member in a 4th of July parade. It's fascinating how the canine brain works. But Melvin is easily distracted from food by stuffed animal toys. He loves them. That dog will play with a toy for hours and be oblivious of what's going on around him. That said, any stuffed animal we bring home for our new baby, Elaina, who was born this July, will be fair game as far as Melvin's

concerned. But Melvin won't ruin the baby's toys on purpose. Until now, he's been the baby of the house. He loves her...how could he not? Elaina is gorgeous with dark hair and a beautiful smile like her mother, my wife, Andrea. Although I don't expect she'll be digging holes like Nikko or stomping her feet like Melvin as she grows older, one thing is for sure - she already loves the dogs and she has her own special way to communicate that to us - when the team's howl echoes through the forest she opens her eyes wide and smiles.

Joe Henderson and his team of 22 purebred Alaskan malamutes have been conducting remote expeditions in Alaska's Arctic for 30 years. In summer, when Joe's not busting trail in the arctic, he's busy trying to figure a way to keep Nikko from digging giant holes in the yard. For more information on Joe's expeditions, please visit www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com.

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