

Yukon Quest-sider  
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TAGISH LAKE, YUKON – Huskies Impy and Blackie work hard each winter as part of a sled-dog team that pulls gear and people weighing hundreds of pounds across rugged frozen terrain.

In order to be physically prepared for that kind of rigorous work-out over several months, Impy, Blackie and their canine team-mates must be in top shape by the time snow blankets the ground in late fall.

But pre-season conditioning can be challenging for four-legged athletes that spend much of spring and summer confined to wire-fenced kennels or tied to chains staked in the ground.

For most sled-dog drivers – called mushers – and their dogs, the solution is simple: take a hike, lots of hikes.

“Dogs perform better when they’re in shape, just like people,” says Beat Korner, a former Yukon Quest musher who has run dogs for almost 20 years.

Korner and his wife, Jacquie, who moved here from Switzerland in 1994, run sled-dog tours for tourists at their remote Tagish Wilderness Lodge on Tagish Lake in Yukon’s southern region.

Each winter, visitors from across North America and Europe ice-fish for lake trout, snowshoe, cross-country ski and travel by dogsled just like real-life Yukon trappers and fictional characters from Jack London novels.

The Korners maintain a kennel of 24 huskies, 18 purebred Siberians and six Alaskans, a mixed breed whose lineage can include Siberians, Malamutes, greyhounds, setters, pointers, border collies and Labrador retrievers.

One of their dogs competed twice in the Yukon Quest, a grueling 1,600-kilometre race between Whitehorse, Yukon and Fairbanks, Alaska.

Beat Korner owned a small advertising agency near Zurich in 1991 when he decided to compete in the Quest after several years of doing shorter sprint-type sled-dog races. Korner’s sponsor, a dog food company, told him to either finish in the top 10 or “go down dramatically” in order to maximize media coverage.

He did neither.

Korner finished dead last, taking 15 painful days to complete a race the winner did in 10. Now 48, he hasn’t ruled out doing the Quest again but is content running his dogs at Tagish Lake.

The Korners’ and their dogs cover about 1,500 kilometres a year, including dry-land training in summer and early fall.

They take them hiking on high ridges of the Tagish Plateau behind their lodge during the summer, and in autumn hitch them to an all-terrain vehicle that they pull on a maze of trails. Sled training begins with first show, usually in mid-November.

One day last August, Jacquie and Beat sparked a cacophony of howling and barking when they entered the kennel area with leashes in hand. They chose Impy, a gray

seven-year-old Siberian husky, and Blackie, a two-year-old black and white Alaskan, for that day's hike.

Each dog was fitted with nylon saddlebag-style packs filled with a few pounds of gear to help them build strength and endurance. Jacquie and Beat carried daypacks and a can of pepper-spray in case they encountered any resident black or grizzly bears.

For the next few hours, they climbed steadily under cloudy skies, following faint game trails through the spruce forest and clearings overlooking the snow-capped Alaska Coastal Mountains and azure-hued Tagish Lake, which connects Yukon with northern British Columbia.

The dogs walked eagerly, tugging at their leashes and pausing to sniff animal droppings and interesting scents left by unseen creatures. Reaching a ridge top, Beat and Jacquie finally stopped to rest, affectionately patting and praising the dogs for their efforts.

Impy, red pack bright against his thick gray coat, sat statue-like as he scanned the spectacular panorama.

Perhaps he was remembering when snow covered the ground and ice sealed the lake, and he and his teammates pulled heavily laden sleds just as they were bred to do.

(For more information, check out [www.tagishwildernesslodge.com](http://www.tagishwildernesslodge.com) or [www.touryukon.com](http://www.touryukon.com))