

A person wearing a black and red winter jacket, black pants, and a black hat with a fur pom-pom is bent over, pulling a sled on a snowy surface. The sled is loaded with a large crowd of people, mostly children, who are sitting on the sled. The person is wearing large, dark gloves and is focused on the task. In the background, there is a crowd of spectators and a wooden fence. The scene is set outdoors in a snowy environment.

The 2010 World Championship Dog Weight Pull competition was held in downtown Anchorage during the Fur Rendezvous Festival.

HEAVY-DUTY DOGS

A large Saint Bernard dog is pulling a sled across a snowy field. The dog is black, white, and tan. A man in a dark jacket and cap stands to the right, looking down at the dog. In the background, a crowd of people is watching, and a large white tent is visible. The scene is outdoors in winter.

Man's best friend puts muscles in motion to find the strongest competitor

By Sarah Alban

When most people think of Alaska and dog competition, mushing comes to mind. But another sport is gaining popularity: weight pulling.

Each competitor wears a special harness, distinguishable from the mushing type by the pads that disperse weight and prevent injuries as dogs pull dozens to thousands of pounds 16 feet to a finish line.

Weight-pull competitions usually are held during winter. Training begins in the off-season with dogs as young as a year as they get used to wearing harnesses and then start pulling loads of increasing weight. Owners and dogs need strong relationships because, during competitions, each dog must be motivated to pull a load on its own. Owners can't touch their dogs or coax them with treats, but they are allowed to provide vocal encouragement. >

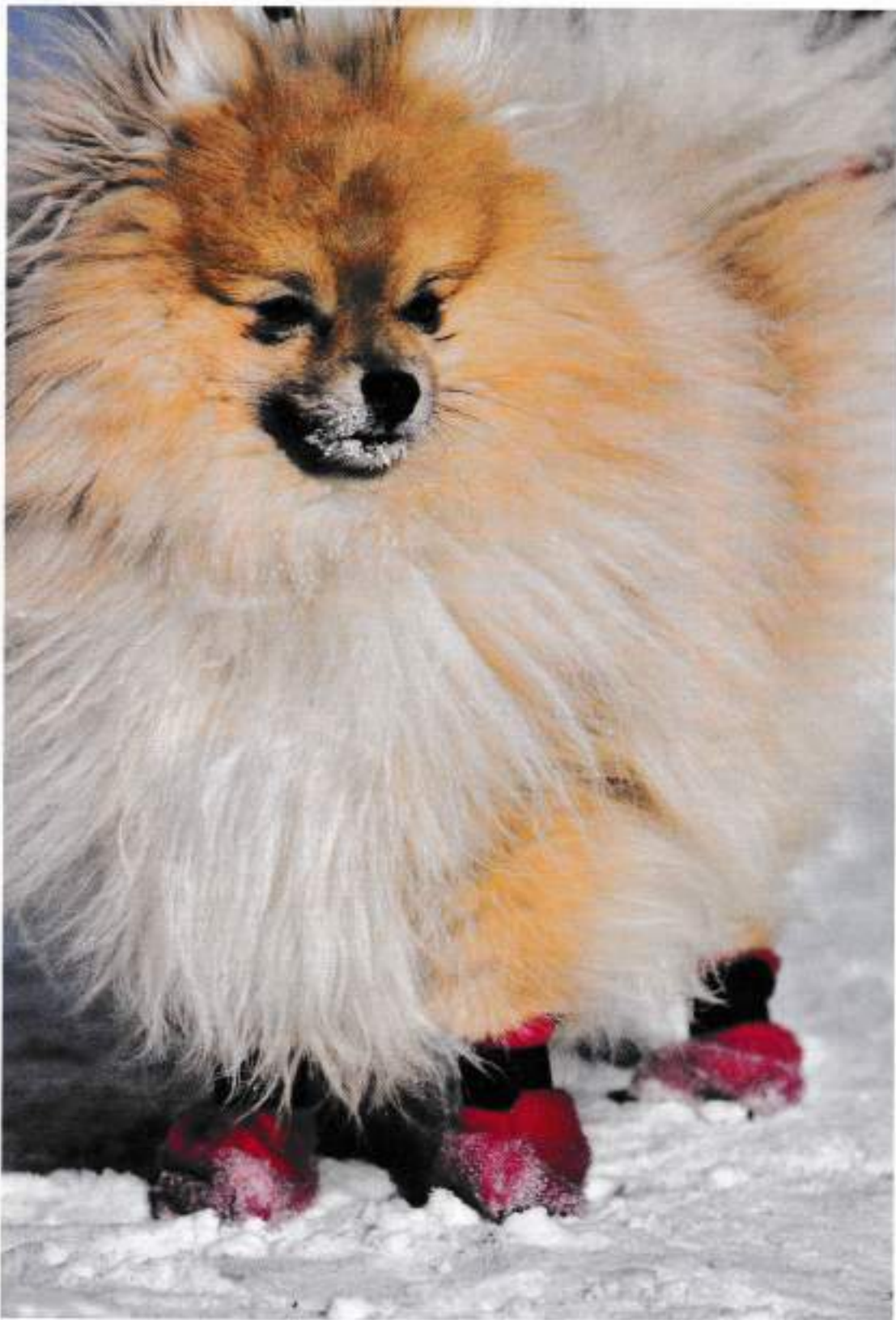
If a dog fails to complete a pull within one minute, the handler is allowed to have the animal finish the pull for training purposes.

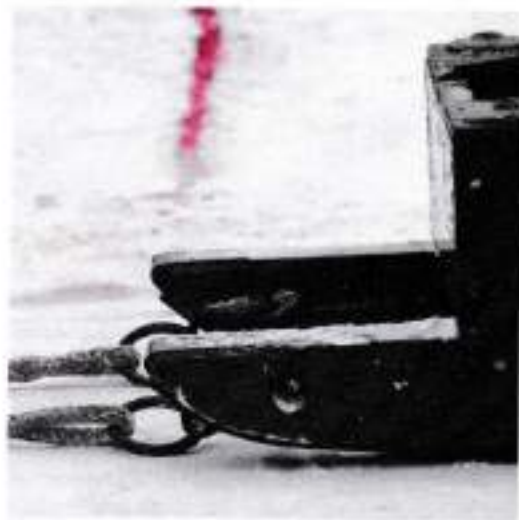




Dog weight-pull contests have four weight categories: ultralight, lightweight, middleweight and heavyweight.

Each dog has one minute to pull anywhere from dozens to thousands of pounds across a finish line.





The sled is positioned at the start line [LEFT]. Just prior to starting the pull, the sled helpers will "break" the sled runners to keep them from sticking to the snow and ice. When the sled is motionless, the handler is allowed to begin coaxing the dog for the pull. Each dog wears a harness attached to a sled. Weight is added to the sled [RIGHT] before every round.



Paul Wood snuggles with Kodiak, who pulled 1,790 pounds to win the 2010 World Championship Dog Weight Pull.

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Handlers can use verbal commands and hand signals (ABOVE), but they cannot touch their dogs—or use treats to entice them—during a pull. **Dog handlers are allowed to pass—or “sit out”—at any weight level, often to save the dog’s strength for heavier pulls later in the competition.**

The dog with the most points—based on weight pulled as a percentage of its own weight—wins.

Weight pulling has roots in the Klondike Gold Rush of the 1890s, when miners and other workers used muscular dogs, such as malamutes and huskies, to haul equipment and provisions. Bored workers spent winters betting on how much their dogs could pull.

Some Alaskans still pass winters in pretty much the same way. ■

Sarah Alban is a former editorial intern at Alaska magazine.

