



Riverview School has 'gone to the dogs'!

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By Ken Johnston, Editor

While students from Rainy River High School go on dog sled adventures every winter, Burton Penner of Aurora Borealis Dog Sled Adventures recently brought the experience to all the elementary students at Riverview School in Rainy River.

Penner and his wife, Michelle, captivated the attention of about 100 students at the school. He showed them a video of one of his trips, near Vermillion Bay, Ontario. It featured several teams of dogs taking people miles away from civilization. Photos of beautiful scenery, the dogs, his trails, his trap line and cabin set the stage for his presentation to follow.

He brought in his best lead dog, Sophie. Penner explained that his dogs love to do two things, "The love to eat and they love to run!" He told the students that it took about three years to train Sophie as a lead dog. "She listens to all my commands, taking us sometimes a hundred miles away from home and back!"

Penner has 43 dogs at home and raises his own puppies. "I watch almost from the beginning to see which pups will make good leaders. The ones that venture out first and try things first are usually the best lead dogs. Without a lead dog, you do not have a team."

Penner asked for a volunteer from the audience. Adrian Trenchard raised his hand and was called up to the front. Penner then explained how important good gear and clothing is to humans on the adventure.

"First you need good boots, I wear mukluks and often do not take them off for a few days when out on the trail. They keep me warm and they are light."

Layers of clothing are then crucial and then a good parka. He put a parka, then good mittens, a hat, goggles and a head light on Trenchard to show how much a person needs to have on.

The mittens had strings on them. Penner emphasized how important it is to have strings tying the mittens to the person is. "You can not let go of your sled. If you drop your mitten and let go of the sled the dogs may keep going and you could be dead."

He said, "The three rules of dog sledding are: 1. Don't let go of your sled. 2. Don't let go of your sled. And 3. See rules 1 and 2!"

"My dogs are my lifeline. We are often 100 miles from anywhere. I count on them to get me there and back so I have to look after them."

He showed the harnesses that he puts on the dogs and special boots and sometimes jackets for them. "The booties are not to keep their feet warm. They are to protect their feet from ice crystals, which on really cold days would be like running on glass. The idea is to protect their pads and the webbing between their toes."

He pointed out that his dogs are very lean. "Some people think they are skinny, but in real fact they are like elite athletes. They are in really good shape and can run 80-90 miles per day!"

He explained that they have a very high oxygen uptake. "An elite cross country skier has an uptake of 90-95 VO₂ max. Huskies, it is about 275 VO₂ max.

Penner brought two sleds and several dogs with him. He hooked them up and took students for rides around the school yard.