

How to prepare for the Skijoring Loppet!

Participating in the Loppet will be a fun, exciting opportunity for both you and your dog(s), but there are some precautions to take! While your dog(s) are excited to exercise with you, they may not be prepared for the few other hundred people and dogs running the race. Some dogs may be more fearful, shy, and nervous.

Here are some tips from Dr. Justine Lee:

1. If this is you and your dog's first attempt the Loppet, welcome! However, to make sure the event is safe for you, your dog, other skiers, and other dogs, please make sure to read these hints before the race!
2. Make sure your dog is well socialized for the Loppet – if your dog hasn't been exposed to other skiers or dogs while on the trail with you, make sure to set up a “mock” trial to transition him and get him used to it before the race, ideally! (Ask a friend to run by with a dog, and use positive and negative feedback when appropriate!).
3. On the day of the race, make sure your dog has proper ID on him at all times during the race – collar, ID tag (with a contact number on it), and microchip!
4. If your dog has *extra* energy, it's worth exercising *before* the Loppet – trust me, he'll still have plenty of pull for the race, but it'll just help take some extra nervous energy out of him.
5. On the day of the race, don't feed your dog immediately before the race (or within 2-3 hours of the race) - we don't want to risk vomiting while exercising or bloat! However, make sure to have water available at all times, and offer your dog some water before you hit the start line. After the race, make sure your dog has plenty of access to fresh water. You can resume normal feeding once your dog has settled down and is in a less stressful environment (i.e., when you get home post-race!).
6. Depending on the temperature of the Loppet, it may be 40°F or -30°F. In general, dogs don't need a jacket while exercising for this 3 mile loop, as long as they have normal hair coat. If your dog has a thin hair coat (i.e., greyhound), a light jacket may be necessary if it's cold out, as there may be quite a bit of “waiting around” time at the start line.
7. While it's rare to overheat during this short, sprint run, it's certainly possible. Help prevent this by making sure your dog has plenty of access to fresh water before and after the race. Dogs with dark colored coats are more predisposed. Watch your dog for any constant panting, a racing heart rate, vomiting, brown-colored urine, or collapse. If you notice any of these signs, get yourself out of the way of other racers, stop *immediately* and seek veterinary attention.
8. If your dog isn't used to running in booties, don't start on the day of the race! Dogs need to transition into using them, so prepare by getting your dog used to them *now!* If your dog tends to chew on his booties, keep a close eye to make sure he doesn't swallow them, as they can result in a foreign body in the stomach.
9. Don't cut your dog's nails the day of or the day before the race! While you may think you're giving him better traction, if you accidentally “quick” a nail (i.e., make it bleed), your dog may be very sore on it the next day. When in doubt, cut the nails one week *before* the start of the race.

10. On race day, please keep your dog on a short, tightly controlled leash. Avoid the use of flexible leashes, as you don't have control of your dog. As there will be lots of dogs and lots of different dog personalities out there, make sure to keep your dog close to you, under control, at all times. Please respect other people's dogs by keeping yours on a tight leash – not all dogs (or owners) want any interaction the day of the race!
11. If you have a dog that is a potential fear or child-biter, consider using a basket muzzle (this still allows your dog to pant and drink). Don't let anyone pet your dog without asking permission first.
12. The biggest mistake I see as a veterinarian when it comes to dog behavior is inappropriate negative and positive feedback. If your dog is scared and growling, don't bend over to "comfort" him and cuddle him. You're inappropriately rewarding him for growling, and your dog thinks he's getting rewarded for your bad behavior! Rather, use your leash to pull him safety closer to you, and give him a firm "No!" When your dog is sitting quietly and checking out all the other dogs, give him a rewarding pat on the head for sitting quietly and being a well-behaved canine citizen.
13. Scoop poop! This goes without saying! See stray poop? Be a good citizen and scoop it up too (before it freezes to the ground forever!). You are not required to scoop poop while you are racing.
14. If your dog is nervous, unfriendly, shy, or a fear-biter, keep him away from the start line until the very last minute. Having a quiet, distant space away from other people and pets will relieve some of your dog's pre-race jitters! As this race is self-seeding, please place yourself appropriately at the start line using your own common sense and judgment. Slower teams, shy dogs, or novice skijors are encouraged to start near the back of the line, or along the sides of the race. Dogs don't mind not coming in first, as long as they get a great run in! When in doubt, please start in the back!
15. Last but not least, have fun. Make this a fun experience for yourself, your dog, and those around you!
Good luck!

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