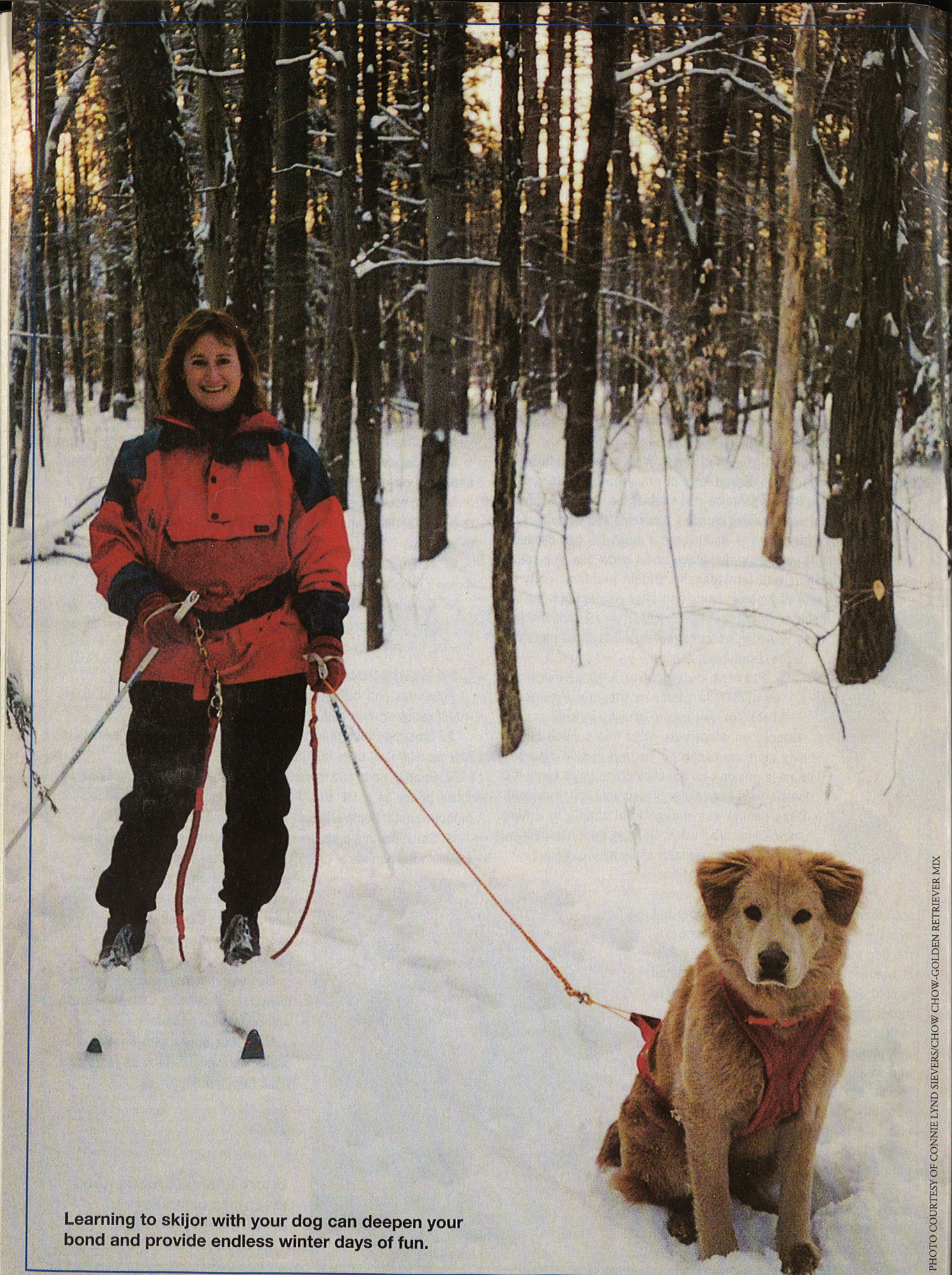




Learning to skijor with your dog can deepen your bond and provide endless winter days of fun.

ATTACHED AT THE HIP

By Connie Lynd Sievers

Annie, my Chow Chow-Golden Retriever mix, loves the snow. She runs in it, sticks her nose in it and shoots me a stare before shaking off her frosty-white face.

As a cross-country skier, I had dreamed of spending days with Annie on the ski trails near our home in Willoughby Hills, Ohio. But that seemed impossible after the first time I took her out. She blocked the trail by running back and forth in front of me, screeching to a halt in the middle of the path to sniff and trying to bite my poles. And she wouldn't come back into the car when I was finished — it seemed the half-hour I'd endured wasn't enough for her. In fact, a passing utility worker had to help me lure her back into my car.

I resigned myself to simple walks on a leash for the rest of the winter. Then a co-worker told me about skijoring — a sport in which a harnessed dog tows a skier whose belt is attached to a seven-foot line made of shock cord and nylon rope — and handed me an equipment catalog. I contemplated skijoring all summer.

When the first snow fell that following winter, I decided to try it. Training began slowly because I didn't want a harness to scare her. I learned not to face her, but to stand behind her when putting on the harness. She pranced around, looking regal in the red padding, excited with her new look.

Once she was comfortable wearing the harness around the house, she was ready to act on her natural instinct to pull — and I was ready to nurture it. Following the directions in *Skijor With Your Dog* (OK Publishing, 1991), I attached a small, light car tire to the harness line and said, "Come." She looked puzzled.

I started to run and she chased me. She learned the harness equals fun and, unlike a collar, pulling on it was all right. After a few times pulling the tire, she seemed comfortable. Next, I hooked her to my waist and began skijoring.

I was afraid she wouldn't stay on the trail or she'd go wild and drag me, and I wouldn't be able to stop. But she knew instinctively what to do. I skied faster and she ran. And she stopped when I did. Annie wanted to please me and have fun. Skijoring let her do both.

We careened down hills, crossed ridges and navigated icy patches. Our bond deepened with each adventure. Our communication also improved. Annie learned a new set of commands — "Straight," "Whoa," "Gee" (right), and "Haw" (left).

I could ski twice as long with her along. She trotted with her head tucked in concentration, tail straight with intent, until her black tongue panted for relief and we immediately stopped. Our teamwork strengthened and within weeks we were enjoying longer days on the snowy trails.

I make sure Annie stays in good shape by getting proper nutrition. A skijoring dog needs to be well-fed all year long with a top-quality dog food appropriate to their breed, size and age, with at least 20 percent fat. I also ensure she's well-rested by providing a comfortable place for her to sleep.

In return, she rewards me with great skijoring I remember fondly all summer long.

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Skijoring and Nordic Mushing

Unlike mushing, skijoring — a sport in which you stand on skis rather than a sled — requires only one dog. The sport is now gaining popularity among dog owners, but Carol Kaynor learned to skijor when she moved to Alaska 22 years ago. "I went skiing with a friend," she said. "His dog pulled him and he asked me if I'd like to try it. He handed me the line, and from then on, I was hooked."

Kaynor bought a mushing harness when her adopted mixed breed Willow was about 1 year old. "I got a leash and clipped it to the back of the harness, and Willow looked at me as if to say 'What am I supposed to do with this?'" Then she started jumping. Eventually she started pulling."

Soon they enjoyed camaraderie on the trail. "I fell down a lot," she said. "But Willow learned to take off gently to keep me upright and stop if I fell down, if I shouted 'Whoaaa!' [or] if I said 'Erk!' We taught each other."

Kaynor, who co-authored *Skijor with Your Dog* (OK Publishing, 1991), does not recommend the trial-and-error method of skijoring training. "Some dogs are too sensitive," she said. Instead, find someone willing to teach skijoring or get involved with other skijorers. Many mushing organizations, including the International Federation of Sled Dog Sports and ISDRA, support skijoring.

"It's great fun for both the dog and you," Kaynor said. "It enables you to bond [and] improves your relationship with your dog."

You don't have to be a great skier, but you must have control. Your dog needs to know "Come," "Lie down," "Stay," "Stand" and "Sit." You also will add "Hike" (go forward), "Whoa" (stop), "Gee" (go right) and "Haw" (go left) to its repertoire.

You will need ski equipment (use either cross-country or downhill skis) and clothing. Use skis without metal edges. A metal ski can slice into a dog. If you fall or go one way around a tree and your dog goes the other, a quick-release snap attached to your skijoring belt prevents injury to your dog. Skijoring belts, available from sledding outfitters, cost between \$25 and \$50. X-back and H-back harnesses cost \$10 to \$25 and lines with quick-release snaps cost \$10 to \$20.

In Nordic-style mushing, or pulka, the dog pulls a small toboggan called a "pulk" while its owner follows on skis. The owner wears a skijoring belt attached to the pulk and the dog. Nordic-style harnesses are different because the toboggan attaches to the dog with semi-rigid poles rather than flexible lines.

The Nordic kicksled, which looks like a