

## SKIJORING by Pat Wolfe



Fjords have a nature that is quite suitable for this sport invented by the Norwegians and practiced in many cold weather countries. You need a well trained and well-mannered quiet horse. What I mean by well trained is that your horse must be able to stand quietly when asked, and definitely have a quick and strong WHOA in him. If you are skijoring along and you fall, you want your horse to stop immediately and stand quietly until you get back on your feet. If he doesn't stop you could be dragged or your horse could head for home without you. Trying to ski home without ski poles is a bit of a challenge, especially if he leaves you several miles from the barn.

Your horse has to respond to voice commands because you don't carry a whip when skijoring. The voice commands I use are "walk", "trot", "steady" (which means slow down), and, of course, "whoa". Whoa means stop and stand still. I don't canter when skijoring because with a lot of horses it's a problem getting them back to a trot and you don't have any leverage to pull back. You can try snow ploughing with your skies but in heavy snow that is difficult. If you are in a sleigh or carriage, you can place your feet on the dash board and pull. That doesn't work on skis. It's definitely safer not to canter.

For equipment you will need skis. I

find short downhill skis work best. I have the safety harness adjusted to my weight. If you take a bad fall when skijoring you want the safety harness to work and your skis to come off. Maybe cross country skis would work too, but I find them too long. Their length makes it difficult to turn quickly if necessary.



There are several different types of harness you can use. The one I really like is my Norwegian harness. It has short tugs from the collar to the D rings on the outer belly band. (See above) I attached ropes to the D rings with snaps.

The rope should be long enough so the tips of your skis are about six feet from your horse's back legs. You will need two ropes, one on either side of your horse. Each rope has a snap on one end attached to a D ring. The other end is attached to a handle.

The handle should be about 14 inches long. The handle can be made from an old broomstick or a one inch piece of dowel. Plastic chain also works well instead of rope. I attach each rope or chain to the handle with a wood screw in the end of the handle. The left chain or rope will be attached to one end of the handle and the right chain or rope will be attached to the other end of the handle.

Another type of harness you can use is a common driving harness. All you have to do is extend the length of the tugs with ropes so again the tips of the skis are about six feet away from the horse. You do not

need a breeching on a harness to skijor. If you leave the breeching on, use trace hangers that keep the ropes or chain up off the ground and not under the feet of the horse. Whatever harness you use, your lines have to be long enough to reach from you to the bridle of the horse. Light rope lines work well.



For your first few skijoring attempts, have someone ride your horse and tie tugs directly onto the saddle. My Australian saddle has a strong D ring on the back of it. This D ring is normally used to attach a crupper to the saddle. If you can't connect directly to the saddle, connect to the cinch. Use straps with rings, on both sides of the horse. You will need two tugs. The straps go around the cinch and the rope tugs are snapped into the rings. Hame straps with rings work well. (See photo) A hame strap is the leather strap you find on the top and bottom of the hames on a work harness.

When driving a horse while skijoring, you have to drive with one hand because the other hand is holding on to the tow bar. In my case, with my right hand being the driving hand, the left rein goes between my index and middle fingers and the right line goes between my baby and ring finger. My left hand is holding the tow bar but it is also holding the ends of the lines. The ends of the lines go over the tow bar and under my left thumb. If I have to adjust the lines in my right hand, I can hold the lines with my left thumb while I make the adjustment. It sounds a little tricky but you will catch on quickly.



When you are ready to start, put your RIDING HELMET on and be sure you have someone leading the horse. It is a good idea to start on a flat surface because you don't want to ever glide forward and hit your horse's legs with the skis. This could end up with your horse kicking and maybe even a runaway. When you are skijoring and your horse stops suddenly, you must turn quickly to avoid hitting him. If need be, just fall and you will stop quickly.

Once you are accustomed to skijoring it can be a lot of fun. Driving down a laneway or on a lake in fresh snow is something special. To test your driving and skiing abilities, set up a cones course in an open field and have a blast. If you are really good, set up a jump. Be safe and have fun.

