

## What Makes a Racing Dog

Susan Gilchrist

**One can argue that Siberians are sled dogs, but not all sled dogs are racing dogs.**

As we know, the Siberian Husky has been around for centuries and was developed and utilized by the Chukchis of northern Siberia as a working dog. Introduction of the breed to Alaska in the early 20th century as racing dog further developed the athletic performance and retained the working ability of the breed.

For a time the Siberian was considered the premiere sled dog on the racing circuit. Forty years ago you needed one, maybe two 'super' dogs on your team to be in the winner's circle. Some of these dogs were Siberians. In most races today, the Siberian has been relegated to the 'purebred' class and usually separated from the other sled dogs. There are many reasons for the decline of the Siberian as a top racing dog; these are not the subject of this article.

Some Siberians have never seen a harness; are they sled dogs? They are likely capable of pulling a sled but their ability to do so competitively, is highly unlikely. My husband often uses the analogy that you have a better chance of picking a 'Miss Universe' from the Olympic competitors than you do picking an Olympic athlete from Miss Universe contestants. What you see is only a small slice of athletic competence.

The same can be said of sled dogs. You cannot tell what dog makes an athlete just by looking at the dog or having it trot around the ring. Having a frame that works well though, is a good place to start. Structure is measurable and can be fairly easily incorporated into a breeding program. To determine the athletic capability, you must run the dog.

Almost thirty years ago Doc Lombard was questioned at a Canadian National Specialty about the workability of Siberians. Someone made a statement to the effect that 'Siberians are sled dogs, I have a Siberian, therefore I have a sled dog'. Doc was very emphatic in his "No" response. He felt that the workability of a sled dog can be lost in as little as one generation.

Running the prestigious Alaska North American with heats of 20, 20 and 27 miles over three days is a test of the elite athletic sled dog. These dogs could not perform at twenty miles per hour without good structure, a superior cardiovascular system and tough mental attitude. The days of having Siberians run competitively at this level are gone. So few people are breeding for a competitive racing Siberian that the gene pool is very limited.

There are still some Siberians that are considered somewhat competitive in limited racing classes. Our goal is to be within ten percent of the times run by the ISDRA gold medal winners. Sometimes we reach our goal, sometimes we do not. Not everyone has the same goal. If your dog's tugline is tight and you are happy with the speed you are going over the distance you've chosen, then you have a sled dog that meets your needs. For those of you that want to race competitively, obtain a female from proven racing lines. Check race results to see where to go. Often you can get an older, retired female; buy her bred or

go to the best racing male you can find. It will save years of work and increase your chances of being successful in the sport.

## SLED DOG ATTRIBUTES

So, what makes a racing sled dog? Structure is important as it affects gait and thus performance. However, a superior cardiovascular system and work ethic are even more important. The relative importance of these factors depends on the speed and distances.

What constitutes an efficient gait? This may be difficult to determine if you have never seen a smooth gait in a dog. The movement should look easy and the tugline tight, not jerky. The more effort the dog puts forth, the more energy is necessary. We tend to love the hardest working dog in the team for putting forth such effort, but this does not mean the dog is the fastest and most capable. Some dogs look as though they are working harder because they must overcome an inefficient gait. The dog's head should stay fairly low. The efficient dog does not run with its head up. Dogs that run with a head up do not have enough front reach so are usually capable of less speed. I've seen a whole kennel with dogs that ran with their heads up. The breeders felt this was correct because the dogs were working hard. Had they known this was not a desirable trait I doubt they would have pursued that line of breeding. Dogs drive with their rears. Smooth, correct rear movement is critical. A smooth trot does not always equate to a correct lope.

Let's go back to your hardest working dog. You may never see the upper limit of that dog's ability because the rest of your team cannot go fast enough. We have often driven other people's teams to help them evaluate what they have. Seldom has their 'hardest worker' been our favorite. Their 'best' athletes do not become apparent until the speed over distance increases. This usually happens as they learn to become better trainers and more closely approach the athletic potential of their team.

Let's talk about structure briefly. One could interpret the standards (AKC or CKC) to cover the general description of a sled dog. However, for a running dog, some key points are important to note. Ideally we have found a sled dog to be roughly ten percent longer than tall. The scapula, humerus, femur, and pelvis should be equal in length. The average of these four major bones then determines the ideal length of the radius ulna and the fibula tibia which is about 20 and 30 percent longer respectively. The scapula should be roughly 34-38 degrees to the perpendicular (measuring along the spine of the scapula); not the elusive 45 degree layback. An ideal weight for a male Siberian is between 40 and 50 pounds. Females are generally smaller. The dog's leg bones should be oval and not coarse or heavy for the build of the dog. The more oval, lighter bone is also stronger. The dog with the heavier bone has to expend more energy to move the extra mass. A balanced dog with light bone will use less energy, so endurance increases. For an idea of light to medium bone, refer to Lorna Demidoff's 1935 team pictured on page 90 in *The Complete Siberian Husky*, by Lorna B. Demidoff and Michael Jennings. Note the refined, proportional heads in this picture. The most important aspect of structure is balance.

Some people put far too much emphasis on structure. It can be the limiting factor if the structure is poor – particularly short legs and long back. However, a mediocre structure is fine if the dog has the cardiovascular system and work ethic to perform.

Other visible traits that are particularly important in a sled dog are as follows: good feet, adequate but not too heavy a coat, muscling, and eagerness to run.

The faster and further the dog goes, the more important feet are. Think of a cat shaped foot (round) and a hare foot (very long). The dog's foot should be somewhere in between. We refer to it as a modified hare foot. A too-tight/round foot or one too small can be problematic. In addition to the shape of the foot, a balanced dog has front feet that turn slightly out. Poor foot structure can limit the dog's athletic performance.

Good nutrition is essential for a sled dog to perform. A dog that is too thin or too fat is at a disadvantage. Check for weight on the dog's ribs; move your hand back and forth across the pelvis. You should be able to find the spine as well as feel the pelvis bones. There should be muscle/tissue there also. Dogs that are too heavy will overheat more quickly. Dogs that are too thin will not have the energy reserves or the muscling to perform at their best. Your conditioning program will be much more effective if your dog is in correct weight.

Work ethic is important if you want to run close to a dog's potential. If you push dogs beyond their capability, their desire is likely to diminish. Be fair to your dog. If you are training 4 dog distances, do not suddenly enter a twenty miler. Being fair must also take age into account. A dog cannot reach its athletic potential as a yearling. Older dogs cannot maintain the same speed over distance. I was fortunate to race my husband's old 8 dog leader my four dog team. At nine and ten he had 'lost a few steps' but was the best dog on my small team. It was easy for him and he loved it!

Another aspect of a sled dog that cannot be overlooked is personality. Not all dogs have the same personality and some are easier to train than others. We like friendly, confident dogs that love to run. We will tolerate shy dogs if they are talented athletes; they just take more patience and work. We will not tolerate aggressive dogs and do not like meeting them on the trail.

#### TRAINING/CONDITIONING

Even if you are going to race recreationally only once in a while, training and conditioning are important. It is easy to hurt a dog by pushing it beyond its limitations. Running too fast without conditioning can result in things such as soft muscle tissue injuries or damaged feet. Allowing your dogs to run down hills without tight tuglines often results in injuries. Use the brakes to provide them with a means of balancing by leaning into their harness as they go downhill. They are less likely to get scared. They will also learn to go down the hills faster.

Another important aspect of training is dealing with warm weather. You can destroy a dog's internal thermostat by allowing it to overheat. Hard workers generate more heat, so too, the less efficient dogs

that must work harder to keep up. Not all dogs have the same ability to dissipate heat. We do interval training in the fall and stop to give them a rest and a drink of clear water to cool off. Very labored breathing and throats agape indicate a dog that is too hot. If this happens, cool them off by splashing water on their head and on the groin and give them a rest. That is another reason for carrying water in training. At a snow race you can use snow to cool them off.

Dogs not only need to be conditioned, they should be trained to behave. A controlled dog team is a pleasure to drive and minimizes the risks to the driver, dogs in the team and other teams. We usually train 8 to 10 young dogs each year in addition to experienced dogs. We give young dogs the opportunity to learn by exposing them to many different situations. Training young dogs is hard work. Our young dogs always go to the back of the team in fall training. They are crazy and jump around, get tangled and like to chew lines. They want to run! We use a chain centre line and lighter chain necklines for yearlings while on dirt. They might chew the lines once or twice but they soon realize this is not a rewarding experience. Cable ganglines do not seem to be as much of a deterrent, and dogs actually seem to like chewing them. Young dogs always get hooked first to give them time to settle down and allow them to learn patience. We start hooking dogs from wheel, work our way to the leaders, and take our time. In Fall training we always use a dirt hook to string out the gangline to keep it tight since our leaders are hooked up last. As training season progresses, the young dogs settle down and become more manageable.

As I mentioned, we do interval training with water/rest stops. These are as many as three stops in early training, depending on the temperature and distance. As training progresses, water stops are reduced and eventually eliminated, though we still carry water. Early snow training also includes rest stops. It is good to get off your sled and pet the dogs. This is also a learning opportunity; sometimes you need to stop in a race. You have to be able to read the dogs to know when to stop; it should be your decision, not theirs. Do this by assessing how tired and hot they are and stop before they decide they have had enough. Dogs have good memories so do not stop at the same spot or they will anticipate and take advantage of you.

Something else you control is how often you rely on your leaders. Being a lead dog can be stressful so we rotate that duty. In the fall, we pair a young potential leader with a seasoned one. Leaders do not lead two training runs in a row. Not all of our dogs are race leaders but at least nine out of ten will eventually run out front. Young dogs in their first season running do not run lead; they are not ready. Giving young dogs positive experiences back in the team will enhance their chances of eventually becoming a good leader. Just one bad experience in lead can negatively affect the dog, particularly if it is young. During race season, we try to put our race leaders out front only in a race. It allows our other dogs to learn to lead in a less stressful environment. Not everyone can do this but it works well for us.

Learn to read your dogs. If they are not performing, backing off, do not just chalk it up to attitude; try to figure out the problem. A good dog wants to run; your dog may be hurt. Our dogs get four days off for any sign of lameness. If the dog re-injures or is not ready, it is ten days off. Bringing a dog back from this takes a week or two of less intense running. If they are still not ready, that is usually it for the season.

Some dogs will give you signs that you must be able to interpret. This winter we had some dogs back off on one particular hill. The next team had some dogs that did the same thing. It took us a while to realize some of them had the beginning stages of fissures and were experiencing discomfort as they went faster down the hill. Putting on Musher's Secret, a wax based salve will help prevent fissures on cold new snow. Once you have fissures, they should be treated regularly and you may have to put booties on when they run. Make sure you do this in training; do not try it for the first time at a race. It takes some practice to put booties on properly and the dog needs to learn to run with them. Fissures occur with a combination of speed, cold, new snow and dogs that drive hard. Sometimes the right decision is not to run.

You should try to anticipate what the dogs will experience in race situation. Train with other people. Get the dogs used to passing head on and overtaking. In the Fall we often box the dogs overnight to get them used to it before we have to travel to race. Some dogs are nervous when they first travel and may not sleep well, or want to eat or drink. You will feel more confident about how the dogs will behave at their first race if you give them the opportunity to experience travel conditions.

At a race we like to water 4 hours before start time. Dogs get about 3 cups of warm water and soaked Annamaet (1-1 ½ cups per gallon). Dogs are dropped 2 hours later, then again in another 2 hours. Ideally this is race time. If race time will be more than 6 hours from watering, those dogs will get 1 to 2 cups as a 'top-up' at one of the earlier drops. After a run, dogs get 1 ½ cups of baited water. This is enough to re-hydrate, but not so much that we need to drop; we are usually busy with other teams or driving home. Having the dogs properly hydrated is important for performance.

We wait at least one hour after running to feed. Dogs get soaked food plus 2 cups of warm water. Dogs get soaked food plus 2 cups of warm water. We drop 2 hours later, then again in another 2 hours. Ideally this is about 10 pm, the last drop before morning. If there is time we sometimes squeeze in another watering (2 cups) and drop. For example: Heat finishes at 2 pm, feed with water at 4 pm, drop/water 6pm, drop 8 pm, and drop 10 pm. Dogs should be good until 8 am. This watering routine works for dogs and us as dog handlers.

Having your equipment in good working order is a must for safety. Proper brakes on your rig/atv are as crucial as a good hook setup on your sled. If you cannot get off your rig/sled to pet or deal with the dogs, it is not safe for you or your team. You need to be able to tie off your sled/rig to attend to the dogs whether it is in training or at a race. Harnesses that fit your dogs and ganglines that fit to your harnesses are important to allow the dogs freedom of movement. Too often people have ganglines that are incorrect and actually cause the dogs to stop over the neckline and tangle. People and dogs can get hurt if you do not have the proper equipment and take safety into account.

We cringe when we see boxes at a race with tiny air openings. We double our dogs in the dog box. They actually prefer this and are quite comfortable. We have doors with plenty of ventilation, 120 square inches. If there isn't enough ventilation, boxes heat up in the warmer weather and condensation builds up in the winter. Neither situation is healthy for the dogs. When the dogs are curled up in the dog box they need fresh air. Eighty square inches is minimum for a pair of huskies. Shorter coated hounds,

usually single boxed might get away with 30-60 sq. inches in the winter months. Each box is separate, not vented through to other boxes as this creates an undesirable draft. We also prefer interior walls and floors of plywood rather than fiberglass. The dogs need to be comfortable when traveling so they can rest properly.

Learn to pick races to suit your dogs' abilities and yours as well. Some trails are tougher than others. The most important thing is to find a trail that is safe. Some trails are fine for a team that runs 12 to 15 miles per hour. As speed increases, the trail can become very challenging and perhaps even dangerous. Try to get some runs on snow if you do not live in a snow area. Being on a sled for the first time at a race is not a good thing for you or your dogs.

Having a mentor will help you immensely in your training and preparation for racing. Remember we all make mistakes and the best thing is to learn by them. As Doc Lombard told us, "You need to keep learning. You can learn something from anyone, even if it is what not to do!" You do not need to reinvent the wheel. There are enough good dog drivers out there willing to help. Ask questions, be open and share your ideas and experiences with your fellow sled dog drivers – you will have more fun.