

“British Siberians”, Sprint Racing and the Breed Standard

First of all, let's get rid of the ridiculous notion of the “dual purpose” Siberian. There is no dual purpose – Siberians have only one purpose – **to pull light loads on snow over vast distances in arctic conditions** – That's it! There is no other purpose. That purpose, and the blueprint for the kind of dog which can fulfil that purpose, is enshrined within the breed standard. So, logically, the only kind of Siberian which **should** win in the showring under a judge who has studied and understood the implications of the breed standard, is one which is capable of fulfilling that purpose.

Pulling wheeled rigs over very short distances at high speeds in warm conditions is very definitely **NOT** the purpose of the Siberian Husky!

When we first came into the breed 10 years ago, like many “newbies” we got heavily into racing and absolutely loved it (as did the dogs). However, as we researched into the history and origins of the breed, studied the breed standard and started showing, we soon realised something very odd. Our best racing dogs were, by and large, not the dogs which best fitted the breed standard. The faster dogs had, on average, less coat, less stop and longer legs than the breed standard stipulated. It seems very obvious to us now, but was a bit of a revelation to us then, that the original purpose of Siberians and short-distance sprint-racing in UK conditions were completely unrelated activities and the type of dog which would succeed in one would, of necessity, differ greatly from the type which would succeed in the other. Don't get me wrong, I really enjoyed UK Husky racing (too old for it now though!) and I have no problem with the majority of those who do it.

Where some do make a very basic mistake however, is in assuming that “working” Siberians in UK conditions says **anything at all** about their capability as long-distance arctic sled dogs – it does not. In fact, if it does prove anything, it is that Siberians are actually not very good at sprint-racing – a good, well-trained team of German Short-haired Pointers would usually beat Siberians any day. We would never assume on that basis that Pointers are therefore effective working (as opposed to racing) arctic sled dogs, so why should we make that assumption for Siberians? In fact, even as long distance racers, Siberian Huskies aren't very good either – they certainly find it very difficult to compete with Alaskan or hound teams. Which is why, many of the long distance Siberian teams increasingly resemble Alaskans – they are being bred to RACE not to WORK – two very different occupations. As Karen Ramstead said after her team took the red lantern in the 2002 Iditarod, if all the “artificial aids” used by racing teams were banned (coats, boots, belly protectors, straw bedding etc) , then we would see the standard fitting Siberian make a long distance racing comeback. The most impressive thing about Karen's 2002 team was that they looked as fresh coming into the finish as they had at the start – after 1200 miles. That is what Siberian Huskies are about – not winning races, but getting the job done day after day after day **IN ARCTIC CONDITIONS**.

So, let us take the basic argument made by some sprint racers that experience of “working” the breed makes for a better show judge. If they were talking about running a team over long distances on snow, pulling a light load for up to a hundred miles a day, I might agree with them, but UK sprint-racing - no way!

Now let's move on to the current SHCGB Chair's aversion to “pretty” Siberians, or what he describes elsewhere as “chocolate box” Siberians. This is a common theme of his.

Whether it is true or not that “All-Rounders” prefer “pretty” dogs, I don’t know, but there is a good reason why they should (as should anyone who judges the breed honestly). The beautiful "look" of the standard-fitting Siberian Husky is a fortunate "side-effect" of its northern heritage. **None** of the features which make the breed look the way it does (apart from coat colour) are in any way "cosmetic", they all have a very practical function related to **arctic survival and arctic working ability**. Coat, for example is obviously crucial. Many of the "Siberians" we see in the UK show ring or on the UK race trail, would simply be unable to survive in arctic conditions - they have insufficient coat! Many UK sibes have huge ears with insufficient fur on the inside - again, these ears would suffer frost burn in arctic conditions, unlike the smaller, well-set, well-furred ears of the correct Siberian. One of the top-winning Siberians of all time here in the UK was seriously deficient in "stop." In Siberians (and other arctic breeds) the purpose of the stop is to ensure that the freezing arctic air being taken in by the dog is warmed before it freezes the head and brain. The same arguments stand for eye shape, feet, tails etc etc. A Siberian which doesn't have the strikingly beautiful "look" of the breed can be almost guaranteed to have serious faults which give rise to this lack. An ugly Siberian is a faulty Siberian!

Just a comment on the “British Husky” so beloved of many of our Breed Specialists. In April 2003, the SHCGB invited two well respected US judges to preside over the SHCGB Championship Show. Their comments on the state of UK Huskies were damning, but interestingly were never responded to publically by the Club. Carol Nash and John Linnehan are experienced Siberian breeders with close ties to the Don Young’s Black Oak Kennel and Team Stormwatch. They know their Siberians and they know their long distance racing. To remind you, this is what Carol said about the effect of short distance sprint racing on the breed:

*"Once the line in the US Standard about carrying a light load over a long distance is removed, it opens the possibility of an entirely different look. I understand you are focused on running your dogs, & running them as fast as possible over short distances, as those are the conditions you have available. Our goal at Marlytuk is to maintain the Siberian as a working, showing dog that would be recognised as such by the founding breeders. Hopefully they will function well within these limitations. If I remove these limitations I may not still have a Siberian Husky, nor may I be certain what I now do have or where I would then go with it. **Please consider exactly how far from the pioneer Siberians you want to go in this effort for sprint dogs!**"*

She was equally, if not more scathing about the painfully thin state of many of the dogs presented to her:

"Many bitches were actually thin & not simply in condition. I have not seen dogs this thin even at the end of the Iditarod. Does this not do something to endurance even at short distances when they still function on aerobic metabolism?"

John felt also that a great proportion of the dogs he went over had many common faults both major and minor. In particular he singled out tailset, head and eye shape, feet and pasterns for serious criticism.

Finally, a word about the “all rounder” versus “breed specialist” argument. One of the greatest benefits of being an “all rounder” interested in many breeds, is the knowledge one can gain about dogs in general. What many in our breed tend to forget is that the Siberian Husky is a domesticated dog, just like every other breed, with much more in common with other breeds than we “precious” Siberian fanciers would like to admit. We can learn a great deal about our breed by learning about and comparing them with other breeds. To confine yourself to being exclusively interested in one breed is to miss out on the wonderful variety of canine forms. As to choosing which judges to show under, it is a combination of experience and pot-luck. As regards Breed Specialists, we would look at the dogs which they own and have bred. If we feel that they fit with our interpretation of the breed standard, we will give them an entry. If they don't, then why would we waste our hard-earned cash. With All Rounders, if we had no experience of their judging, we will generally give them an entry in the hope that they have studied the Breed Standard prior to judging. If they have judged before we would go by what they have done in the past. This however, is an inexact science as several all-rounders have taken to alternating their placements in order to maintain high entries – ie one show putting up one type and the next putting up another.

Either way, you pays your money and takes your chance!

Mick Brent