

DOGS MONTHLY REPLY

Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to your 'Breed Feature' article on The Siberian Husky in the August issue of Dogs Monthly written by Caroline Kisco and Sheila Luxmoore.

I feel very strongly that the article seriously misrepresents the breed in some respects and certainly does it no favours.

The piece is a very unbalanced and partisan view of UK Siberians from the point of view of the sprint racing fraternity – a substantial proportion of Siberian owners in the UK, but by no means the majority.

Many Siberian owners, like us, both work our dogs in harness and show them in the conformation ring. In this way we try to maintain Siberians which both fit the breed standard and which can work effectively in harness. We race our Siberians for fun and exercise, but do not take it seriously.

Unfortunately, the sprint racing fraternity have yet to grasp the simple fact that pulling a wheeled rig flat out for 2 or 3 miles on grass or gravel is qualitatively different from pulling a sled, on snow for up to 100 miles a day in arctic conditions. Their view is that the two activities are similar enough for them to be able to say that a successful sprint racing dog is a "good" Siberian Husky.

As a result, under those "breed specialist" judges who take the sprint racing line, we have seen, time and time again, top honours going to dogs who simply do not meet the breed standard in certain important respects. The standard states clearly that Siberians should neither be so heavy as to resemble freighting dogs, ***"nor so light and fragile as to suggest a sprint racing animal."*** (Some of the photographs used to illustrate the article make this point for me)

Indeed, many of the more 'extreme' racing type dogs barely resemble Siberian Huskies at all (again, some of the photographs illustrating the article make this point for me!)

The problem for the breed is not, as the authors state, that "all-rounder judges" have "never fully understood the origins of the breed", on the contrary it is those "breed specialists" who confuse "working" with "sprint racing" who do not understand the origins of the breed and who are creating a split between standard fitting dogs and sprint racing dogs. The US style "show dogs" debate, is a red herring which is being used by the sprint racers to confuse the real issue.

What is perhaps sadder than the genuinely held but mistaken view that the 'light and fragile' sprint racer is the "correct type" for the Siberian Husky, is the way in which some owners deliberately keep their dogs painfully thin in the belief that "this is the way huskies should be" as if somehow they might run faster if they are thinner. There is no excuse whatever for undernourished dogs and it certainly cannot improve their performance. We race our dogs for fun and exercise and have no pretensions about being successful sprint racers, but our "trotting show powderpuffs" (as they were described by a sprint racing aficionado last winter) run very well together and last year, we actually won a race (ironically, over more than double the normal sprint distance and in very cold conditions on snow!). We also finished well into the top ten in most of our races last year and achieved a creditable 15th place out of 60+ four-dog teams at the huge Aviemore meeting in January.

The alleged split into 'working' and 'show' types to which the authors refer, is in fact the responsibility of those whose obsession with success in short distance sprint

racing has led to their claims that ‘light and fragile’ Siberians (as long as they aren’t Zero bred – but that is a whole other can of worms) are “correct type”. Nothing could be further from the truth and indeed the photographs chosen by them to prove their thesis do exactly the opposite. Look at the photograph of Ch. Forstal’s Meshka on page 32, Ch Snoshoes Russky of Forstal on page 38, Ch Zima Toaki on page 33 – all beautiful and standard fitting Siberians who bear only passing resemblance to the ‘modern’ type espoused by the authors. It is their views and their breeding which have changed, not the breed itself.

We can, I suppose, all select evidence to support our own point of view, but the photo of the husky in Eastern Siberia 1896 is hardly a sensible choice as a model and while it might resemble some of the more extreme, roach-backed, ill-formed sprint-racing Siberians of today, it can hardly be put up as an ideal specimen of the breed even in 1896! Indeed the major photographic evidence of Siberian dogs available from 1896 is that contained within Prince Alexander Shirinsky-Shihmatoff’s “Album of Northern Dogs” and the vast majority of the dogs pictured do not resemble the example chosen. Interestingly, a search of the internet will also yield ancient photos of sleek, well-fed huskies in Siberia bearing a much greater resemblance to the Meshka’s and Russky’s than to the current crop of sprint-bred dogs. What we should also bear in mind is that the life of the Chukchi was hard and often skated on the very edge of survival and there were, no doubt times when both dogs and humans went without food during periods of poor hunting. Those of us fortunate enough to be living in the affluent West with Siberian Huskies can actually afford to feed our dogs regularly. If we had to hunt for our daily bread there might be some excuse for underweight Siberians.

A good reference for those interested to see for themselves what some of the early Siberian imports looked like is “Alaskan Trails – Siberian Dogs” by John Douglas Tanner Jr. (1998 – Hoflin). Modern day supporters of the so-called “Seppala” strains will be horrified to see just how substantial and well-coated most of Seppala’s ‘Siberian rats’ actually were.

It is also interesting to note that the photograph chosen to illustrate the US style “show dog” is of a nice looking, correctly coated dog standing up to his pasterns in long grass, which just ‘happens’ to give the impression of a much shorter leg length than is actually the case.

If people are actually interested in looking at successful ‘working dogs’ (rather than successful sprint racing dogs), have a look at North American kennels like Black Oak and Fasttrak on the internet. These dogs race long distance successfully and still win in the show ring. Black Oak kennel, for example is home to ‘Monte’ of Team Stormwatch, the only US show champion to have completed the 1200 mile Iditarod twice. If, in Caroline Kisko’s words elsewhere, these US show dogs “just aren’t put together right”, I would be interested to know what better test of working ability she might devise – a 2 mile sprint through Thetford Forest? – I don’t think so!

Even the much maligned (by the sprint racing fraternity) Innisfree Kennel which has produced an amazingly consistent number of extremely successful show Siberians worldwide, actually work their dogs regularly over long distance on snow. Am. Ch. Innisfree’s State Your Case, for example, currently resident in the UK and doing well in the show ring, was a lead dog for the Innisfree Kennel and has probably covered more miles in lead, on snow, in any one year, than most of our ‘top racers’ have galloped on gravel in their lifetimes. Innisfree, however do not race their dogs, they WORK them so in the ultra-competitive world of our sprint racers, any credibility is lost.

The sprint racers are trying to redefine the breed to satisfy the needs of their own sport but this wonderful breed is too important to be sacrificed to the all-too-human need to win races. Siberian Huskies were bred to work, not to race, and racing (especially ultra short distance sprint racing) is not necessarily a good measure of a dog's quality as a Siberian Husky.

Mick Brent

8.8.00