

Siberian Huskies – Working vs Racing

In most countries where sled dog sport is popular, most mushers run teams of Alaskan Huskies - a "breed" of dog specifically produced for racing and characterised not by its appearance and/or construction, but by its speed, attitude and racing ability. Here in the UK, apart from the occasional event, almost all our racing is for pure-bred sleddogs - Siberians, Malamutes or Samoyeds. For the proponents of "open" racing, our concentration on running only pure-bred dogs is seriously inhibiting the development of the sport in this country.

For me, there really isn't, or shouldn't be any argument. Sled dog racing is a great sport and I have the utmost respect (and not a little jealousy) for those who race the snowy long distance trails with their teams.

The Siberian Husky, however, is, and has always been, primarily, a **working** dog, **not a racing** dog and as far as I am concerned, the short distance sprint racing on mud/gravel trails we undertake in the UK is for fun and exercise and cannot seriously be considered competitive sled dog racing. When we run Siberian Husky racing "championships" we are surely guilty of taking ourselves a little too seriously and, incidentally, mistaking the purpose and origin of our breed. As Siberian Husky enthusiasts, we are, or should be, primarily interested, not in winning races, but in trying to maintain the historical characteristics of the breed which have made it such a distinctive and attractive animal - OK, maybe we are a little anal-retentive - but who's perfect? Our main tools for accomplishing this are, firstly the Breed Standard, which is an attempt to crystallise in written terms, the essence of the breed; and, secondly, as far as we are able, given British climatic and geographical shortcomings, to make sure that we have retained the working abilities of the breed by training them in harness.

Sled dog racing is a relatively new innovation in the history of the Chukchi Sled Dog (which we now call the Siberian Husky). For the first 3000 years of their existence (ie. Before they were imported to the US/Canada) they were not a racing animal, and racing ability was not a factor which was considered in the Chukchi breeding programme. Nist and Cornell, in an article originally published in the US Siberian Quarterly in 1981, wrote:

"For what characteristics were early Siberian Huskies selected? We think immediately of desire to work; of some speed and considerable endurance; we think of arctic survival ability (really this should come first!); we think of efficiency of digestion and metabolism (crucial in the arctic!); we think of compatibility in a group of dogs, without loss of natural social order or dominance structure (because that prevents fighting and subsequent blood loss); we think of good social interaction with humans, especially children (it is known now that pets play a psychologically healthsaving, lifesaving role in our society; and thus, probably in all societies); and , of course, the ability to rear sound healthy young. These are the irreducible few really important traits that must have originally influenced the development of the breed."

As they point out:-

"The Siberian was not, for the first twenty or thirty centuries, bred for racing."

If we think about the situation logically, racing ability - ie the ability/willingness to perform at maximum capacity for the duration of the race - actually runs counter to what Nist & Cornell call "arctic survival ability." For the Chukchi, the "race" lasted the

whole winter and a dog which put maximum effort into each and every outing would simply not last the pace of an arctic winter. Recovery time after exhaustion was not a luxury the Chukchi and their dogs could always afford.

Underlining this point, Foley & Thompson in their "The Siberian Husky, Vol.1" (1962) write that in Siberian conditions, raw speed was not a high priority for Chukchi dog teams as their powers of endurance made their "average speed" greater than the competition:

"In general, dogs are inferior in speed not only to horses, but even to reindeer, but they occupy first place, reindeer second, and horses last, when capacity of running long distances with only brief rests is considered."

What is more, say Nist & Cornell, if a Siberian were to be a speedy and effective racing animal, its physical structure as an efficient endurance worker must be compromised. Raw speed and endurance are just not compatible with one another :-

*"Speed for its own sake **IS**, mechanically and biochemically, a luxury in nature, and is always wasteful. The principles of power transmission through the body of a four-footed animal tell us that there is necessarily a compromise of speed for strength, and strength for speed in each body structure."*

It is for this reason that the fastest animals in nature are not by any means those also renowned for endurance. Cheetahs can run incredibly fast while running down game, but only for relatively short distances and the massive amount of energy expended means that they need very long rest and feeding periods to sustain their speedy episodes. Amongst canines also, the very fastest breeds - the sighthounds - can only sustain their top speeds for short bursts and then revert to their more efficient gait - the trot. If Siberians are bred, as some increasingly are, for speed in short distance sprint racing, then they will necessarily begin to deviate from type as, in the words of Curtis M. Brown (US "Kennel Review" - Dec. 1976),

"Dogs with superior speed have muscle and bone structure that inhibits endurance." - this can be evidenced fairly simply by noting the houndlike "sprung" back end in some of the fastest sprint-racing dogs.

We often hear the proponents of racing Siberians refer to the "fact" that the natural gait for the Siberian is the "lope" and that they are naturally a "running" breed. Our own dogs have been derided by one such "racer" as "trotting show powderpuffs" which is ironic as Cornell is of the firm opinion that,

*"for the Siberian""the trot **IS** the proper gait to use when evaluating natural movement."*

If we look at the most extreme examples of endurance canines around today - Iditarod Dogs - we find that even the fastest teams average well under 10 miles per hour and that although there are periods where they lope/run, or walk, the most common gait is the trot of between 5 and 10 mph. This remarkably efficient gait is what makes the Siberian the incredible working dog it has always been and hopefully will remain.

Cornell, for me, puts the whole debate into a logical and sensible context:-

"We are now well past the need to strive to survive in an elemental sense. [and incidentally well past the need to keep our dogs unnecessarily thin in the mistaken belief that this is their "natural" state - MB] We now have a choice. If you want a freight dog, get a Malamute. If you want to race dogs

competitively, get Alaskans, or hounds. The Siberian has been, and is, an exquisite compromise between strength, endurance and speed, a balance between beauty and function, with a delightful, compatible temperament. He is a 'medium-sized working dog'. He performs his original function in harness most capably, carrying a light load at moderate speed, over great distances.' Let's know him that way, breed him that way, and love him that way!" - Fredric Cornell, Artyk Siberians - Article entitled, Consider This : "Natural or Man-made exhibit" - Part of Correct Type is Correct Movement - Originally published in The Siberian Quarterly, Winter 1981/82

Karen Ramstead underlined these points after her recent Iditarod run. She said:-

"I do not believe a Siberian team will ever win Iditarod or [Yukon]Quest. The races have evolved into something that do not suit the strengths of our breed. Good coats and good feet are not necessary to run Iditarod. As long as booties, jackets, sheath protectors, straw, and numerous food drops are available - Alaskans will, in my opinion, dominate the race scene. If we were to select for speed to the extent that the Swingley's and such do, we would stand to lose many of the qualities that make a Siberian a Siberian."

Mick Brent