

Sprint Racing, Distance Racing, Working Ability and History

"An interesting point concerning distance worked in harness, be it competitively or in a trek format, remains misunderstood."

- so begins Simon Luxmoore's Dog World Breed Notes for August 18th 2000. He then goes on to construct a muddled and badly written 'argument' which, when unpacked from the gobbledygook, simply asserts that the short distances covered in sprint races are somehow more in tune with the natural ability of the Siberian Husky than are the daily distances covered by runners in long distance events like the Iditarod. The "obvious" rule of thumb for working Siberians, he asserts, is *"one mile per dog per team member."*

Now, forgive me if I am mistaken, but I am pretty sure that the Breed Standard of the Siberian Husky states fairly clearly that the breed should be capable of pulling a light load at moderate speed over long distances. Indeed, Sally Leich & her collaborator Sandra Bayliss, in their paper on "The Siberian Husky - Some guidelines to Soundness and Type" referred to **"vast"** distances. One mile per dog does not seem particularly "vast" to me! In fact, says Simon,

"Many did not support the distance to be run when the Iditarod was first established"

- of course not, if they were only used to running one mile per dog, their teams would have been incapable of sustaining the distance. After all, most Iditarod teams number between 12 and 20 dogs, so by Simon's reckoning, should only be running 12-20 miles per day, not the 100 miles + each day necessitated by the Iditarod.

He goes on,

"It should be remembered that the serum run was completed by teams of dogs running relays, and it was only Seppala's outstanding dog Togo who ran two stages, only to hand the serum on to a team led by Bonzo (sic) who led the team into Nome and took all the credit."

Several points about the historical accuracy of this assertion:

1. It was Seppala's **team**, not just Togo, who ran **340** miles in the most appalling weather conditions that the depths of the Alaskan winter could conjure up.
2. Seppala's achievement is somewhat clouded by his unwitting breaking of Simon's rule of thumb for Siberian working as I do not believe that he ran a team of 340 dogs on that occasion
3. No other team in the serum run covered more than 53 miles, but I believe the teams of Gunnar Kasson, Charlie Olsen, Titus Nicolai, John Folger, Jim Kalland, Tom Green and Bill Shannon also broke Simon's rule by having less than 53 dogs in their respective teams
4. Seppala handed the serum onto Charlie Olsen at Golofnin who drove it the 25 miles (with only 7 dogs -tch tch!) to Bluff where it was warmed up in a cabin before being handed over to Gunnar Kasson and his team led by Balto, for the trip to Port Safety and through to Nome.
5. Balto was a dog and wasn't remotely interested in taking credit for anything. It was the press of the day which treated the serum run as a "race" and treated Kasson's team led by Balto (who was Bonzo??) as "winners".

Rather than taking *the "one mile per dog per team member"* proposed by Mr. Luxmoore as gospel, why don't we go back to the earliest examples of the "racing" ability of Siberians to see just what their capabilities should be.

In the summer of 1909, Fox Maule Ramsey imported 70 Siberian Huskies from Markovo on the Anadyr River. In April 1910, he entered three teams made up of these dogs in the All Alaskan Sweepstakes - 408 miles - from Nome to Candle and back. These teams, not previously raced, but regularly worked over long distances by their former Chukchi owners, came 1st, 2nd and 4th in the race and the winning team, driven by "Iron Man" John Johnson completed the race in a time which has **never been beaten, before or since**. When in recent years the race was rerun, even modern-day Alaskan Husky teams with up-to-date equipment could not approach his time. (As a footnote to our present day "Speed Freaks" who consider

the Siberian primarily a "loping" or "galloping" dog, the average speed of Johnson's team was a 'mere' 5.58 mph)

Johnson's achievement was even more amazing if you consider that his team was made up of only 15 dogs and not the 408 it should have been!

Never mind Simon, if you keep telling everyone long enough and often enough that sprint racing is what Siberians are bred for they may eventually believe you (just as long as they don't look too closely at the facts!)

Mick Brent : September 2000