

Sled Dogs

By Steve Diller

The world of sled dogs is an interesting one. There are many breeds of dogs that fit into the category of sled pulling dogs. Before we take a look at the breeds of dogs that have been developed over the years to pull sleds, we should also acknowledge that some breeds of dogs were designed to pull other than sleds. There are a group of dogs, many of them originating in Europe that pull carts and not sleds. Carting dogs include such breeds as the Bouvier, the Chow, the Rottweiler and the Greater Swiss Mt. Dog. In appearance, sled-pulling dogs generally do not resemble cart-pulling dogs. While it is safe to assume that a sled dog could be trained to pull a cart, it not too safe to assume that a cart dog can be trained to effectively pull a sled. Even if a Rottweiler could pull a sled, it is not likely that it would have the endurance and fortitude necessary to cross the tundra.

Breeds associated with sledding are the Siberian Husky, the Alaskan Malamute, the Greenland Dog, the Eurasier, the Eskimo Dog and the Chinook. These northern breeds have the coat type to fight off cold and damp conditions. Not every sled dog has a long coat but they do all have undercoats to keep their skin free of moisture and cold. Anyone that owns a dog with an undercoat knows how shedding season never seems to end. The dog sheds in Spring in preparation for the hot summer, lots of tumbleweed around the house. Dogs may also shed in the middle of Winter due to the dry heat we use in our homes to keep us warm. Never ending hair. There may be a lesson in this for someone thinking of acquiring such a dog.

Sled dogs are often perceived as black and white dogs in the Siberian Husky tradition but in the real world any dog that can do the job well gets the work. I have read that in competition sled dog racing, it is not likely that a Siberian Husky team would win because of their size, they are considered too large to run efficiently. The physics of pulling is a science just as pairing the dogs on the team is also a science. Matching the right dogs on a sled harness that might include six or eight dogs is key to efficient pulling. The dog's size, weight and character are all influences to be considered in a racing team of sled dogs.

Breeders of working sled dogs do not care primarily about the breed, they set out to produce a compact body, a cold weather coat, the strength to pull and the temperament to go, go, go. Growing up in the 1960's, I remember watching Sergeant Preston of the Yukon on television. My favorite part was always about his faithful companion King who I believe was a Malamute but who may have been a Siberian Husky, I haven't seen the program since I was a child. Somehow I remember the relationship the officer had with his dog and how his dog saved the day in more than one episode. I have always been fascinated watching sled dogs running like the wind without evidence of where they might stop. Dogs do run, but most run from the living room into the kitchen. Dogs will chase small animals but catch them or not they eventually stop running. Sled dogs run for a living and they are workaholics. I saw a documentary on the training of sled dogs and found it interesting to watch an entire litter of puppies chasing their handler on a

snowmobile through the snow. Running away was not an issue because they were able to run free from the time they were young pups and learned to follow their leader. Eventually, a lead dog takes the place of the human handler and the dogs continue to follow the pack leader where ever they may go. Hard to say if dogs have fun while doing their intended work, but it looks like sled dogs do. Another lesson here if you are considering a sled type dog as your next housedog.

I have met too many Siberian Huskies named Frank. The beautiful blue eyes of a husky puppy are difficult to walk away from when you just happen into some pet store. Sinatra himself didn't have those kinds of blue eyes, as they appear almost electric. So, we fall in love and bring him home to quickly learn about Frank's endless energy and constant mouthing. Sled dogs as pet dogs are not the easiest of choices. Imagine the exercise requirements, the coat care and ongoing training necessary to keep such a dog happy. Over the years I have had the great pleasure to work with sled dog breeds and found them to be highly trainable. Training in and of itself rarely poses a problem for many of these arctic breeds but training is just that, training. Teaching these dogs to sit, stay and down is often easy. Training them to heel and come is another story all together. Preventing a Nordic pup from chewing the house down and eating ones children is yet another timely task. Once we truly consider the nature of these breeds, it is hard to say that they are bad dogs since they are simply following their instincts. The issue is whether we allow the dogs to fulfill their biological needs or not. Frank is going to run, like it or not and he is going to take his opportunities when they come. Allowing your husky a once a month off the lead free period in the park usually results in a frustrating catch me if you can game. Most owners do not even try it twice after struggling for hours to get their dog back after the first time. Many years ago I recall a family in Westchester County losing their Siberian Husky, an escapee from their yard. The family advertised in the newspaper and on the radio frantically searching for their lost dog. The family continually sent flyers to local veterinary hospitals, shelters and animal control officers in an effort to find their beloved pet. Amazingly, six months later they received a phone call, a follow-up to a radio message about the lost dog. The call came from Albany NY. The family retrieved their dog. In my humble opinion, the dog was not lost, the dog left. He could have run the neighborhood and returned but elected to follow I87 north without looking back. Such is the life of an unfulfilled sled dog. We are not talking about trainability but inherent desire. The work ethics are strong in the sled dogs in part because we selectively bred these dogs to behave in this way. Frank may have a cousin working in Alaska somewhere doing a great job, while Frank is always in trouble with the local authorities for being free on the street without a lead or visible owner, and has to be fetched up from the pound attached to a summons.

Problems that I have encountered with some of these breeds include, excitability, food and resource guarding, territorial and dominance aggression, digging holes and jumping fences. If you are considering a sled dog as a pet you should be aware that insurance companies that cover homeowners policies might have your breed choice on a blacklist. One statistic I encountered from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention is that from 1979 to 1989 in the United States, the Husky was involved with 21 fatal bite incidents and the Malamute was involved in 15 fatalities. While Pit Bulls, Rottweilers

and German Shepherd Dogs had greater numbers of fatal bite incidents during that time period, I can guess that there was a larger population of Pits, Rotties and Shepherds registered at that time. Insurance companies use these statistics to single out various breeds to minimize the liability of lawsuits. The dog world generally frowns on breed specific legislation and attempts to educate the public and endorse dangerous dog legislation instead. Owners that harbor dogs with bite histories are often left without homeowners insurance or must relinquish the dog to attain insurance.

There is something splendid about sled dogs and their drive to work for their leader. There is something sad about a dog that is disciplined for doing that which every blood cell in his body urges him to do. Again, I ask you to choose your breed carefully and love the dog that loves you.