

HISTORY OF SLED DOG RACING

By Ann Cook

Story taken in part from "the New Complete Siberian Husky" by Michael Jennings

Sled Dogs have been used for transportation of freight for centuries, but the sport of sled dog racing began as an outgrowth of the Alaskan gold rush. At the time, the atmosphere was right for the spawning of a new sport. Prospectors, gamblers and adventure seekers populated the small outposts of the territory. They encouraged information competition between local "dog punchers" who brought mail, passengers and supplies from town to town. Eventually, more formal races resulted, culminating in the first running of the All Alaska Sweepstakes in Nome in 1908.

Sled dogs imported from Siberia made their racing debut the following year in the 1909 All Alaska Sweepstakes. Initially their smaller size and tractability made onlookers sceptical of their ability to win races, but it didn't take very long before the Siberian Huskies proved the sceptics wrong. Demand for the breed increased in the next decade when John Johnson and Leonard Seppala won the sweepstakes with their Siberian Teams. Then, in 1925, the Serum Run, the great race for life focused public attention on sled dog teams and introduced both racing and the Siberian Husky to the entirety of North America.

During the 1920's, the sport of sled dog racing spread across Alaska, reached both north western and eastern Canada and took hold in the eastern, western and north central states of the US. Maine, New Hampshire and New York joined the growing list of states holding races. While Arthur Walden and his team of Chinook dogs dominated New England races held between 1922 and 1926, in 1927, Leonard Seppala, on tour with forty-four Siberian Huskies (as a result of the Serum Run publicity) accepted Walden's challenge to race at Polar Spring, Maine. Seppala defeated Walden, and this upset created interest in Siberian Huskies on the part of eastern team owners.

Many early Alaskan teams were owned by explorers, mining companies, and other commercial concerns. The dogs were trained and worked by hired drivers. Freight, not

racing, was the reason for keeping dogs. When entered in a race, teams were sponsored by their owners. Perhaps a high placing in a race had some favourable reflection on the company, but racing was simply a pastime, something to gamble on. In the eastern US and Canada, team owners were often innkeepers, like Mrs Ricker, and teams were used to give tourists rides. The beautiful and exotic Siberian Huskies were a better lure for tourists' dollars than the mixed-breed dogs. In addition, the Siberians were faster than the later freight-type dogs common to the east at the time and so were an ideal breed to race. It wasn't long before sled dog races became a part of May winter carnivals and spectators brought up pups from team owners, only to find themselves becoming involved in the sport.

In the last 30 years, the sport of sled dog racing has continued to grow. There are over 200 sled dog clubs and race-giving organisations throughout the world. Some organisations such as the New England Sled Dog Club or the Mid Atlantic Sled Dog Racing Association offer a full slate of races throughout the winter season. Other organisations only hold one race, such as the Lakes Region Sled Dog Club, who's famous World Championship Sled Dog Derby has provided world class races with seven decades of competition.

Small clubs offer races with classes limited to 2 to 8 dogs. These races attract novice or recreational drivers. Anyone who can manage a team of dogs is welcome, and there are often "how to sled" clinics and junior events for children, so a family can have a full day of fun. In regions where snow is scarce, many enthusiasts race their teams on sandy or dirt trails using a 3 or 4 wheeled cart known as a "rig". So no matter what country one lives in, everyone can experience the world of sled dog racing.