Sleddog Ethics

Responsible Sleddog Breeding, Training and Ownership

"Responsible" -- to whom or what?

Responsible to the dogs themselves, the *individual sentient beings,* above all. You don't think of them that way, you say? You still subscribe to the Cartesian philosophy that animals (thought of as something distinct from "Man" who in this philosophy is not regarded as an animal) are mere biological machines with no thoughts and no feelings, machines that cannot even feel pain? OK, you might just as well stop reading and get on back to the seventeenth century where you belong, along with René Descartes. You'll get in trouble in the twenty-first century with an attitude like that, and besides, you won't understand a word of what follows.

Now, where were we? Oh yes! Responsibility to the dogs themselves, as individual sentient beings with their own thoughts, feelings, desires, emotions and sensibilities. This is where responsible sleddog breeding, training and ownership start, in my book. After all, they didn't ask to be in your dogyard, they never got to choose, you chose for them. More about that in just a bit.

Responsible to oneself, next, to one's own integrity and morality, that is. I say that because some folks think they are responsible mostly to their own convenience or their laziness! There are a lot of lost souls wandering around these days without a moral or ethical code, basing their actions on their own desires, their own greed, their own whims. I don't know just how they can live like that, but that's apparently how it is to live totally without awareness. If a person doesn't know himself at all, then there's no such thing as conscience for him; it makes him a dangerous person, since he doesn't know right from wrong, only "this is what **I** want." I only hope that very few such people are attracted to dogsled sport, because it's a sport that demands a strong sense of personal morality.

Responsible, too, to one's neighbours, to other mushers, to "society" and its laws. This is a sport which can impinge upon the interests of non-participants. It's a good idea to keep in mind that your "rights" end where the other fellow's nose begins; that is, you have no right to damage the interests and enjoyments of others in the pursuit of your own.

To the future, finally -- to the environment, to the dog breed you are working with, to the sport -- so that others to come may also enjoy this thing that you are enjoying now. People with strong egos often tend to adopt an *"après moi, le déluge"* attitude, as though they had no responsibilities to the future. I never know what to say to such persons, other than, "you had better hope that all the world's religions are wrong and that your death is a final, permanent snuffing-out of you -- otherwise you will eventually regret your short-sightedness."

One prominent Seppala breeder -- yep, the *most* prominent one of all -- once wrote to me, "maybe Seppalas will eventually fail from genetic problems, but I won't care, because while I was around, *my* Siberians were the best." *("Après moi, le déluge.")*

Responsible breeding

Don't breed dogs you are not prepared to feed

What I mean by that statement is simple: if you breed, you are ready, if necessary to keep and raise the entire litter. Otherwise, you are a dog-seller, a puppy mill, and your main motive for breeding is to make money. Why else would you breed a litter of pups that you had no intention of keeping? Now I don't mean to say that you can't sell stock when people are begging you for it, or that you can't sell a few dogs to make kennel room for a new generation. But I see a lot of buyers out there who apparently assume that a sleddog kennel is automatically going to sell puppies and/or adults "off the shelf" to all comers. I think that's a bad sign, because if the buyers believe that, it's probably because they have found most sellers to hold such a policy. Personally, I don't see sleddogs as a superstore or discount house commodity. Those who do see it that way are usually cutting a lot of corners and operating on a questionable ethical basis.

Motives for breeding

All right then, what are the legitimate motives for breeding? Two major ones come to mind: to raise replacements for your team, and for the continuation and support of a valued bloodline. Those two, I think, are unimpeachable as long as you are prepared to behave responsibly toward the dogs you produce. What about to "improve your stock?" I think that has to be a subsidiary motive, despite the fact that it's usually the first one people mention. You have absolutely no guarantee that any particular mating will represent an improvement over the dogs you now have, which makes this a BS motive really. No, I think if you aren't breeding for replacement stock or to continue a valued bloodline, your motive is probably to make some cash, and you already know how I feel about that.

"Backyard breeders" often say they are having a litter "so the kids can witness the birth of puppies" or "so my bitch can have pups," and every so often you'll meet up with some yobbo who'll tell you he's looking for someone who has a bitch, because he wants puppies from his male -- you have to laugh at the guy, because he obviously hasn't the first notion about how things work in the dog world! I don't think much of any of these motives. They just don't stand up to serious scrutiny and they are very likely to result in more unwanted dogs, of which there are already too many almost everywhere.

Breeding for dogsled racing

Well, you say, how about breeding for racing? Oh, doesn't this question open a large can of worms, though! Now we must confront "the numbers game"! What's that? In an address to the Garden State Siberian Husky Club in the 1980's, famous dogsled racer Roland Lombard, DVM, described what he called the "numbers game" of Alaskan breeding, and stated that a single top Alaskan 16-dog team might well be selected from over 500 fine dogs, and that the

puppy base of those five hundred candidates would probably be over 1500. Well-known long distance driver Joe Runyan advised in his book on distance racing that aspirants should be prepared to breed ten litters a year to have sufficient yearlings from which to select. Mid-distance driver Grant Beck was quoted by Anneliese Braun-Witschel in "Racing Siberian Husky" magazine as having told her he needed to breed two hundred pups to get five or six replacement dogs for his team. That's what's meant by "the numbers game" or "culling" in racing circles.

There are a number of good reasons NOT to do it! First, it is an enormously expensive and wasteful process that involves the driver in a great deal of hard work as well. Second, it marks you as a cruel, inhumane, hard-bitten SOB. Third, it gives dogsled sport a bad name and will eventually result in the death of the sport through repressive legislation, unless mushers wake up and control the situation themselves. Fourth, you will find it increasingly difficult to get away with it any longer, under the watchful eyes of the humane movement. Finally, it is the worst sort of irresponsibility on all four fronts -- responsibility to the dogs, to your own ethical integrity, to other mushers, to the future of the sport.

Most racing drivers will tell you they don't do that, don't practice the numbers game. What they really mean is that they try not to be too obvious about practicing it. They don't breed ten or a dozen litters a year, just five or six. Or they don't practice it themselves, they just tend to buy a lot of team dogs from others who do! A few will even try to convince people that Grant Beck and others actually find homes on novice teams for the 194-195 "washouts" they produce each season. The bottom line: people who lie to themselves sometimes think they are also convincing others.

Responsible training

Sleddogs need *training* and *conditioning* in order to work well; maybe I'm stating something that's already obvious when I say that. But sometimes novices just assume that they should be able to throw harnesses on their newly-acquired dogs and go ten miles -- or fifty -- right off the bat. Actually, sometimes experienced drivers who ought to know better do that, or something very similar. (One well-known Seppala mid-distance racer -- yep, the same one whose dogs were the best while he was around -- makes a practice of throwing the dogs of unwitting younger drivers into his hard, conditioned 16-dog team in front of an ATV in the summer to "see how they stack up against the best." I know -- because he tried to pull that one on me, and threw a temper tantrum when I politely declined. That was in August, when my dogs had been idle all summer and his hadn't, mine had spent a week on the road in the dog truck and his hadn't, and his had been running mid-distance races at a pace that was several mph faster than my trails and training would support. Know what? That's a good way to ruin a dog. One of his previous protegés later told me how one of his dogs was ruined in exactly that way by the same person.)

You may do permanent damage in a single run, if you put dogs into a team that is too fast for them, or force them to run a distance for which they are not adequately conditioned physically. Realise that, before you hook up your dogs to go whatever distance, or before you let somebody else hook them up. Green dogs or half-grown pups need to be introduced to work in harness in a very careful, controlled manner. Dogs already harness-broken still need

regular, sensibly graded conditioning runs before they will be physically ready to go more than three or four miles. I'm not going to make this article into a detailed treatise on sleddog training, but let's look at several areas from the viewpoint of our responsibility to the dogs.

It all starts with breaking pups to harness -- RESPONSIBLY. I watched one young Yukon musher, who arrived up here with Siberian Huskies from Alberta, hook four green 4-month-old pups into his trained, conditioned main team in a twelve-dog hookup and take off at full speed. A couple of the pups got dragged, the other two got their little legs practically run off. Needless to say, it didn't amount to a positive introduction to harness work for those pups. Why did he do it? I don't know. He knew how to train, had in fact trained his own command leader. He came to sleddogs from dirt-bike racing, and shortly thereafter he sold the dogs and went back to the dirt bikes. Maybe he just didn't give a damn. I hope whoever bought the pups from him didn't expect them to like working in harness.

Chaotic training scenes like that one are more common than need be. That one was on snow. More often, it happens in front of an ATV. I recall an account of an incident in which a supposedly experienced driver (three or four years driving sleddogs) hooked an ATV team as follows: "two veteran leaders up front, two veteran wheels in the rear, two promising young leaders in training at point, three yearlings and three pups in team for a total of 12 dogs (our usual training run size)." The yearlings, two of which were "newly acquired," were much less conditioned than the six experienced dogs; the pups had not been in a team before. A couple of things went wrong, of the sort that can be expected with unfamiliar or green dogs, and the run soon degenerated into a chaotic shambles with dogs getting dragged, the gangline cut by a dog, half the team escaping on a free-run -- the situation entirely out of the driver's control. Surprised and indignant when taken to task for going about his training in that way, he apparently thought that he deserved sympathy. The DOGS deserved the sympathy -- the driver is not supposed to need it, because **he should be in control of a training run at all times.**

There were several basic principles violated on that fellow's run. One is not to put green pups in a large team. Another is not to put green pups in a team with adults or yearlings that are an unknown quantity. Another, not to put green pups in any situation in which the team can get going too fast and drag them if they are reluctant, slow, fearful or confused.

It seems like every musher has a 500cc 4-wheeler ATV these days. In my humble opinion, very few mushers have any real need of such a machine. When there's no snow, a stripped-down Volkswagen chassis is a better choice for training twelve dogs -- if you must insist on training twelve dogs at once when there's no snow, which may well be a mistake in itself. The auto chassis is heavy enough that they can't make much speed, and when you want them to stop, you put on the brakes and they have to stop. You have nearly absolute control, and the dogs quickly realise that and stop trying to get away with foolishness. With an ATV, almost invariably the musher uses the engine to take nearly all the weight off the dogs, so that they are "floating" in front of the roaring machine, pulling no weight and running to beat pat. (And dogs aren't stupid: they quickly realise that the engine can do the work, and they adjust their work habits accordingly. Some dogs, too, may get frightened. Some dogs may not be quite able to handle the speed. Most of the dogs may not be pulling a load at all, but only floating. The driver may not have control of the whole mess. This is NOT the way fall training should take place. There is no need for speed until the snow flies; until then, the dogs should be building muscle and aerobic conditioning by hard pulling at slower speeds. That's the RESPONSIBLE way to do fall training.

Just a footnote: shortly after writing this article, I ran across a laconic news item from the web headlined: "Yukon Quest musher David Armstong dies in tragic 4-wheeler accident near his home." The text just read: "On June 17, 2004, David Charles 'Yukon' Armstrong died in the hospital at 5:00 AM. The night before he was out on his four wheeler on his property off Shrock Rd. [Wasilla, AK] when it toppled over. David's skull was crushed on impact." ATVs really do represent a needless risk to the musher as well as to the dogs.

The INVARIABLE RULE should be: never hook more dogs than you can control. That's the responsible way to go about it, responsible to the dogs and to your own personal safety. The year I arrived in the Yukon, Bruce Johnson, an experienced musher and winner of the Yukon Quest, died in November when a seven-dog team of green dogs suddenly left the trail and veered out onto a newly-frozen lake -- straight out onto the lake, and through the ice. End of dogs and musher. **SEVEN green dogs were more than he could control in those conditions, and he paid the ultimate price -- his life, along with the lives of seven dogs.** That same year, the Olsons in Northwest Territories lost their entire Iditarod team, training as two ten-dog teams on the coast. **Both teams broke through bay ice, all the dogs were lost, the two drivers barely got out alive.** Another early-season Quest musher, Peter Zimmerman, was training his 14-dog Quest team, hooked down to correct a tangle, the hook popped, the sled hit him wrong -- after that run he was paralyzed from the neck down for life. Some people who think they know what they are doing, violate this basic rule; some of them don't get away with it. **DON'T HOOK MORE DOGS THAN YOU CAN CONTROL,** particularly in the early season when conditions are icy, lake, river or bay ice thin, dogs unruly. Until the snow flies and there's plenty of it, small teams should be the rule. I mean like six dogs, or sometimes just four. And even then, avoid driving dogs in risky conditions or dangerous areas when you aren't sure you have full control at all times.

Make success easy, then build on success; that's the best way to manage breaking pups or green yearlings to harness, as well as their subsequent training. Make their introduction to work in harness as non-threatening and relaxed as possible. Hook pups with their mother, if she'll lead, or even if she won't, put her at wheel. They will feel better with their mother there. Don't hook them with dogs they don't already know. For maximum control, use a six-dog team in which only the points are puppies, the leaders older and dependable, preferably not too fast. Let them pull a chunk of snowmobile track around the yard at first, individually, till they get used to the feel of the harness and the drag of the tugline. DON'T HOOK PUPS, GREEN YEARLINGS, OR NEWLY-ACQUIRED ADULTS IN A HOWLING, SCREECHING TWELVE-DOG HOOKUP, and go roaring off out of control! Not only is that irresponsible to the dogs, it's wasteful of your own investment in them, because the odds are high you will ruin some dogs, just through laziness and impatience.

I've found that litter-teams work out really well. If you have a litter of five or seven, you can hook them with their mother, if she will run lead, and train the entire litter as a team. Train them together routinely, and you'll find they shape up into a team with superior rhythm and manageability, because you've eliminated the constant uptightness and apprehension of unfamiliar running-mates or older partners who are socially dominant to the young stock. I've done this over and over, always finding that littermate teams tend to make for a really pleasant experience for the driver. Few drivers do this, because few of them keep entire litters. Too bad, it's their loss.

Be sensitive to leaders, to their pressures and problems. Believe me, it's no bed of roses up there at the head of the team. The leader gets yelled at ten times more than any team dog

ever does. He feels the pressure of the eager dogs behind him. She feels the pressure of the other dog beside her. They feel the pressure of the demands made by the driver. It's no wonder racing leaders who must lead 16-dog teams, often go "flakey" after a few seasons or experience nervous breakdowns. Watch your leaders for signs of too much pressure. One dead giveaway is when a leader starts looking for a get-out -- a spot or a situation in which he can turn the team and head back for home; watch also for the leader who deliberately plunges off-trail into the snowbank. These things mean the dog can't handle the pressure. There's no remedy for it, other than to reduce or eliminate the pressure. Put the poor dog back at point, or cut the team size in half, do whatever you must for the dog's mental health, or soon you will no longer have a leader at all, and in the interim, you'll have some nasty team experiences as the inventive dog under pressure tries every trick he can think of to get out. The same dog, put back at wheel, may work happily for the rest of his life, giving it all he's got.

Let me emphasise that SMALL TEAMS best satisfy the conditions for responsible training and conditioning. Control is maximised, the potential for high speed and chaotic situations is lessened, all the dogs have to PULL instead of some of them just floating with their tuglines barely taut, and pressure on the leaders and the younger uncertain dogs is at a minimum. A six or eight dog team can do just about anything the normal musher would want to do, including carrying a passenger for long distances or hauling firewood or other freight. Twelve and sixteen dog teams are mostly symptomatic of big egos, if you ask me. Small teams make it easy to drive dogs responsibly.

Responsible ownership

Nature of the owner/dog relationship

It should be quite obvious: if you OWN a dog or dogs, you are RESPONSIBLE for it or them. That means it's up to you to provide the basic amenities of proper food, decent shelter, clean water, exercise, a healthy environment, freedom from cruelty, fear, abandonment and the like. And that's not just when you feel like it or when you happen to think about it, it's a 24/7 responsibility, full time, for the life of the dog.

There's some moral philosophy behind this: DOGS, EVEN TODAY, ARE CHATTELS. Society and the law considers them to be "things" which you own, objects if you like (or even if you don't). Let's not mince words about this: essentially the relationship of owner and dog is a master/slave relationship. Dogs do not necessarily *choose* to be with us, we have taken that decision away from them altogether. The dog cannot choose his owner. That makes the owner ABSOLUTELY reponsible for the lives and welfare of his dogs. It DOES NOT, however -- no matter how things may have been in the past -- give him the right to treat dogs as inanimate unfeeling objects to be used or abused at his whim. Their chattel status does not justify such abuse, on the contrary it makes it *absolutely inexcusable and unjustifiable.*

Postmodern philosophy of canine status

DOGS ARE SENTIENT BEINGS who have *conscious awareness,* *emotions* similar to our own, who *feel pain,* have *legitimate expectations* of us, *know betrayal,* who in essence are

persons in their own right, in their own canine way. The ABUSE of persons who cannot defend themselves and who are not free to avoid us is *criminal.* Humane laws today by and large recognise this, although their enforcement is often woefully inadequate. Dogs, therefore, *cannot, must not* be treated as mere objects, possessions similar to a bicycle or a boombox that we can discard or obliterate at will, or trade in on a new model.

There are still areas where these principles are flagrantly abused. Medical and veterinary schools' animal resources centres, the pet farms that supply pet shops -- and some large sleddog kennels, unfortunately. Nevertheless, the principles are clearly established, and those who are unwilling to concede personhood and the minimum requirements thereof to sleddogs probably shouldn't own them, for the sake of all concerned.

A few implications of canine personhood

The owner of sleddogs has a certain obligation, standing as she or he does more or less *in loco parentis* to them, to safeguard them even from the consequences of their own desires and drives. In the case of many sleddogs -- *this is particularly true of Seppalas* -- they cannot be permitted to run free without a surrounding enclosure. Such are their desires to explore the countryside and to go hunting, that they will all too frequently take any attempt on the owner's part to grant them what would be normal liberty for some other breeds, as an opportunity to take off at top speed for an eight to twenty-four hour hunt, and woe betide both dogs and owner if they should happen to hunt the wrong creatures. Sleddogs must take their exercise either in a securely fenced good-sized exercise yard, or in harness.

Sleddogs have a strong need for personal attention, affection and approval, even though they may live in a fair-sized colony in association with many others of their own kind. This is particularly true of Seppalas, many of whom bond to their owners and seek affection from them in a way not characteristic of most northern breeds, Siberian Huskies included.

Sleddogs serve their owner/driver wholeheartedly and loyally through their working lives. When they grow old and start to slow down or to become frail and elderly, they deserve the consideration of an honourable retirement in the same kennel where they have spent their working lives. To put a healthy seven, eight, or ten-year-old dog down because its usefulness as a racing dog is past, is reprehensible. To sell an aging leader, on the pretext that he will be valuable to someone as a stud dog or to lead a novice team, is heartless -- yet it happens all the time, including to Seppalas. Dogs that "don't make it" on the team deserve the effort to find them a home where they can be appreciated as pets. Put it this way: you don't sell or put down your children once your initial fascination with them has passed. You don't put down your wife or your husband because that person's ability to keep house or earn a living has diminished. You cannot treat other persons that way. Well, dogs are other persons.

Conclusion

The bad old days when dogs were treated like disposable possessions or unfeeling objects are on the way out, thank goodness. To treat loyal canine friends in the callous brutal way that in past times was considered normal, brutalises and degrades the very person

who treats them thus. Nobody benefited by these outmoded values; we should be glad they are dying.

Realise that, as a dog owner, particularly if you are a musher, you are visible and closely watched these days. If sleddog owners don't treat their animals ethically, organisations such as PETA and HSUS will eventually manage to force the issue with legislation. In any case, if you are an irresponsible owner, it will catch up with you one day, one way or another -- and you will surely suffer as you have caused suffering. The perfect balance of the universe, the law of karma, makes that a certainty.

Therefore it is up to the owner of sleddogs, whether she or he owns just one, or a large kennelful, to be sensitive and sensible of their personhood, of their status as sentient beings with conscious awareness, who see the owner as a person greater than themselves and consequently have great expectations of that owner. Don't disappoint them.