Sustainable Sleddog Sport

The ecological and economic impact of dogsled sports

IN A WORLD THREATENED by rapid climate change, out-of-control population growth, gross environmental pollution, increasing economic dislocations, and the rapid exhaustion of natural resources, our hobbies and recreational pursuits *should be* modest and sustainable, if we are at all wise and care to leave behind ourselves a livable world for our grandchildren.

The dog mushing community, therefore, ought to explore how and to what extent dogsled sports conform to the ideals of sustainability, to identify the areas in which they do not, and to determine what we can do to make them *more* sustainable.

The use of internal-combustion engines

One of the first areas to look at is our consumption of fossil fuel and our support of the vast, overblown internal-combustion-engine sector of our world's out of control "growth economy." Too many dog drivers now take it for granted that their main sleddog training vehicle, apart from a dogsled, should be a big, powerful 4-wheel All-Terrain Vehicle. The ATV has replaced the modest 3-wheeled training carts and stripped-down small-auto chassis that were once the norm in the 1960s and 1970s. This is a short-sighted (I'm tempted to say brainless) development that has many negative consequences for the dogs in training. The misuse of ATVs -- and misuse is easy and virtually universal -- results in sleddogs acquiring unintended bad work habits. (I won't go further into the topic here, as it deserves a full article unto itself.)

The big, powerful dog truck is another major contributor to fossil fuel consumption. Some mushers think nothing of throwing the team in the dog truck and driving for two hours one way to get to a choice training area! Day after all, all through the fall and winter, that adds up to a whole lot of mileage. Some of the same mushers, and others as well, then hop in the same dog truck and drive the team 500, 1000, or maybe even a whole lot further than that, to get to major race venues. Think of the midwest and eastern mushers who drive each year to Alaska for the Fur Rendezvous or the Fairbanks ONAC! Their individual contributions to the exhaustion of fossil fuel reserves, to atmospheric pollution, to the production of greenhouse gases, is far from negligible!

At this point some of you are saying, "where's this nitwit tree-hugger coming from, anyway? Mushing's nothing compared to commercial trucking!" Fair comment in a way. Yes, dogsled sport as a whole is small potatoes compared to shipping fresh produce from California to all other points in North America, for example. Or compared to travelling by jet airplane all over

the world for relatively petty reasons. Or compared to a host of other profligate practices whereby the Great American Growth Economy is engineering a horrendous future for our grandchildren. But pointing the finger away from ourselves only guarantees the continuation of the problem. A sustainable lifestyle doesn't start with reforming George Bush and the Seven Sisters -- it starts in your own backyard.

Sustainable training is simple enough. It means fall rig training is done with a three-wheeled cart and/or a stripped volkswagen or similar auto chassis. It means you find a place to live where you can train right out of your dogyard on adjacent trails. It means you are content to attend local area races, if you race. Simple as that.

Overbreeding, selecting and culling to the curve

Another area we can look at is profligacy in breeding and culling of sleddogs. Joe Runyan in his book on how to succeed in long-distance racing advises that the aspiring winner should breed ten litters a year, should have a time horizon of five years in which to arrive at or near the top of the competitive heap. With regard to the issue of "culling" the resulting fifty to eighty yearlings per annum, he simply says, "think of yourself as a farmer." The dogs, in other words, are a crop. You harvest the crop. You keep what meets your standard. You get rid of the rest. And let's don't kid ourselves by saying you are going to find homes or sell to other mushers (who are presumably trying to do exactly the same thing) the 45 to 75 unfortunate dogs who don't "make the cut." Runyan says you're a farmer, you do whatever you have to do, they are your dogs after all, and it "ain't nobody's bidness but yo' own" if you shoot them by dozens every fall.

Because world-class elite racing competition is founded on "culling" to the upper toe of the standard-distribution curve. Back in the mid-1990s I wrote an article in Seppala Network which defined the World-Class Alaskan Husky as promoted by Stirling Campbell (we had an interesting controversy going in the pages of the bulletin at the time) by the equation: **WCAH = >+2σ**! Meaning, the World-Class Alaskan Husky is represented by that fraction of the AH population whose speed is greater than two standard deviations above the mean. In plain English, the top 2.5% of the population, evaluated for speed. This contention was supported by Dr. Roland Lombard's description of typical championship-level Alaskan teams as consisting of sixteen fine dogs that would be selected from among 500 adults, the puppy base of which group might be on the order of 1500 animals, and by Grant Beck's statement that he had to breed 200 dogs to obtain 5 or 6 replacements for his team.

Breeding and culling practices of this kind are indefensible. They are profligate of resources (think of the food, vaccines and dewormer, veterinary care, time and money represented by raising 200 dogs, and then of assuming that you will simply trash 97.5% of the end product produced by the use of those resources). **And they are simply inhumane.** Actually, I think Runyan's advice is a calumny against *real* farmers; none of the farmers I knew when I grew up in farming country ever did anything as wasteful as what he's suggesting. Just like using ATV's for training, culling to the curve is a stupid, brainless practice.

Sustainability in breeding, selecting and culling is also fairly simple. It means you breed not with a view to producing the best *isolated individuals* you can; rather, you breed to produce

the best *litters* you can, such that every single pup in the litter has a very high probability of becoming a competent sleddog. Rather than passively picking the top five out of every two hundred dogs, you regard each individual dog as a challenge, doing all you can to make each individual into a satisfactory performer. Okay, you won't always succeed if you aren't a very skilful trainer. But that should nevertheless be your ideal, and each dog that fails to "make the cut" is YOUR failure. And culling is something that ought to be done sparingly and only as a last resort. If a dog has serious veterinary problems or behavioural traits that prevent him from being a candidate for pet status, then probably it's best to put the dog down. Remember that as a musher and kennel-keeper you are perhaps more subject to public scrutiny than you realise. If you do not manage your affairs in a humane and sustainable way, you do great damage to the entire sport, and ultimately you will be one of those responsible for the passage of restrictive and repressive laws resulting from pressure from humane and animal rights groups.

Hypernutrition and sensible use of resources

Modern dogsled racers expend great energy and attention and huge amounts of money on sleddog nutrition. One has only to listen to the conversations in evening elbow-bending sessions among mushers, or sit in on the online mushers' forums, to realise just how much store today's dog drivers set by the concept of gaining a competitive edge through minor improvements or refinements in canine nutrition. Nutritional supplements and additives are ceaselessly tried, tested, discarded and new formulae sought. The highest levels of protein, fat, vitamins and minerals that the dogs' digestions and metabolism will tolerate are considered to be the norm during training and racing seasons, and of course sleddog selection continually takes place on this basis, thus ensuring that future generations will both tolerate *and require* those and higher levels. I call this hypernutrition.

Sleddogs originally had to function on what was available. Yes, racers in the days of the Nome Sweepstakes attempted to feed their dogs for success, but that was mostly in practice a question of feeding them as much ground beef and eggs as could be obtained, and in Nome towards the end of winter, I shouldn't think the supplies would have been endless. It is true that Siberian dogs and other arctic breeds evolved where their main feeding resources would have been salmon, seal and walrus. They have a legitimate, inbuilt need of high levels of omega-3 and -6 fatty acids and of fats generally, and of quality animal protein. But in day-to-day hard freighting work in Alaska, they also had to put up with a diet of bacon, oatmeal and/or cornmeal mush. They had to be able to endure a low-quality diet for extended periods. Hypernutrition as a continuous and routine thing was unknown to Gold Rush dog teams.

Again, it will only cause resentment if I should suggest that dog teams consume large quantities of foodstuffs that either would never be produced in the first place in poorer countries, or that would be considered as part of the food supply for humans. In the so-called "developed world" we routinely grow huge quantities of grain that we do not require for human consumption and which we feed to animals. Also we routinely *waste or discard,* throw into the garbage, approximately half of all the foodstuffs we produce. Just remember, though: the day is coming when we shall pay for such profligacy, when we shall no longer be able to afford these practices, and when the rest of the world will exact repayment for all this in its own way.

Sustainability, as well as the ultimate good of our sleddog populations, means that we refrain from excesses of hypernutrition. It means that we look for food sources that would otherwise be wasted or discarded, where possible. It means that we take steps to assure that our dogs can continue to survive on rations of lesser quality, rather than always feeding the highest tolerable levels of all nutrients, causing our bloodlines through evolution to come to depend upon hypernutrition. Seppalas, in particular, have a deserved reputation of being able to get along well on one-third of the nutrient levels required by most highly-bred lines of racing mongrels or crossbred sleddogs. It would be a shame to see those qualities of metabolic efficiency disappear.

Hyper veterinary care *versus* human health care issues

Veterinary care and the cost of it have now achieved levels within sight of those associated with human medicine. Those who own single pets seem to accept this as appropriate. Those with kennel populations of a dozen or more tend to cringe at the very thought of a trip to the vet clinic. Caring for a kennel on a level considered reasonable by the veterinarians themselves and the single-pet owners creates a financial liability second only to the national debt. This is a manifestly unsustainable situation for the kennel owner, unless he happens to be at least a multimillionaire.

Curiously, this has happened at more or less the same time that the squeeze on human health care has tightened in response to the aging Baby-Boomer population and the corresponding shortage of new medical personnel in younger generations (and, in Canada, to government cuts in health-care funding). I think it is at least arguable that many young aspirants may be going into veterinary practice because it costs less and takes fewer years out of one's life to become a veterinarian than it does to become a doctor; nevertheless, those same aspirants take with them the aspiring doctor's desire for a huge annual income. (The old "horse-doctors" of generations past used to display a greater love of animals and much less concern for personal wealth than seems to be the case with many vets today.) It is also arguable that veterinary care may be siphoning off resources that should perhaps be going into the human health care sector. This is another sustainability aspect that could become an issue in the future.

Just as in the case of hypernutrition, hyper veterinary care tends to create a sleddog population that is dependent upon more of the same. It is logical to conclude that if you take a dog with problems and patch him up with sophisticated medicine, he may survive to reproduce whatever qualities led to his problems in the first place. For example: sophisticated reproductive support -- artificial insemination, lab testing to pinpoint ovulation, caesarean section deliveries -- allow some dogs to reproduce who would physically not manage it otherwise. Their progeny have a certain probability of having similar problems. Thus repro-tech can create bloodlines dependent upon such technology for their very existence.

Economic sustainability in this instance may mean accepting the dictates of Mother Nature with regard to the survival of afflicted dogs. Meaning that a dog either learns to live with his problem or, if he cannot, he either dies of his problem or is put down. This may seem a brutal attitude, but it is consistent with the orientation toward survival values that was a major characteristic of arctic dogs' original environment. This attitude, at any rate, does no harm to

future canine generations, whereas sophisticated extensive veterinary support brings right along with its supposed benefits the certainty of escalating problems in the near future. So on this head, economic and genetic sustainability go hand in hand.

Driving large teams

This one is a no-brainer. The bigger the teams you feel you must drive, the larger the kennel must become to support them. Also the tougher and more expensive the equipment must be to stand the gaff. The bigger the dog truck must be to transport them. And so on. Moreover, the bigger the team, the more strong and skilful the driver must be just to control the whole thing; the bigger the team, the greater becomes the physical risk incurred in driving and handling it; the bigger the team, the greater is the stress upon driver and lead dogs, increasing the likelihood that either or both may suffer nervous breakdown! Worst of all, the bigger the team, the more difficult it will be to find a leader mentally capable of handling the pressure and staying out there in front of the mob. It should therefore be pretty obvious that small teams are more sustainable than 16 or 20-doggers.

High turnover of team dogs

Competitive dogsled racing, with its emphasis on big teams, high speeds, intensive conditioning and pressure to perform, leads inevitably to a high rate of turnover among team dogs. Leaders, especially, are seldom useful in this context much past seven years of age, and many racing leaders sooner or later suffer "burnout" and develop mental quirks and/or get-out strategies. The tendency of racing to emphasise "attitude" to the extreme of producing dogs described as "crazy to go" carries with it tendencies to mental and temperamental instability.

The other factor in turnover rate is simply the racer's ceaseless quest for better performance, faster speed. To get rid of your slowest dogs and replace them with faster ones is a simple and sure formula for improving your placing at the races. When that has worked and the team is going two miles an hour faster than it did last year, you are likely to find that your old leaders and point dogs are having trouble staying ahead of the new dogs, so they become part of the turnover, too. Also, dogs that were all right with the old basic pace may find the new faster basic pace causes them physical or mental problems -- more turnover.

If your turnover rate becomes too great, you simply can't train new leaders fast enough to keep your team operational -- you are then forced to resort to the purchase of trained leaders from others, which is super-expensive these days. If you don't mind paying ten or fifteen thousand dollars for a leader, then go ahead, especially if you are well aware that this expensive dog may not necessarily perform for you in the same way he did for his previous owner with his previous teammates. Have I convinced you that a high rate of turnover of team dogs is yet another unsustainable situation?

What is sensible and sustainable?

It should now be obvious that "sustainability" in terms of sleddog sport is more than a green-party buzzword! Very few mushers have the annual incomes of brain surgeons or NHL hockey stars (anyhow, the latter have their own sustainability problems these days). Dogsled sport, racing in particular, has the potential to get completely out of hand in an economic sense in very short order, between the high costs associated with hypernutrition and hyper veterinary care, the large numbers associated with breeding and culling to the curve, and the turnover factors associated with big teams, high training pressure, and drive to improve performance.

There is one very easy way to improve sustainability dramatically: that is to renounce the competitive drive! As soon as you lose the ego-driven compulsion to prove to the world that your dogs are better, faster, than somebody else's, you have shed a great many of the sustainability problems described above. You are no longer running big teams, replacing dogs at a high rate, driving across the continent to major races, breeding a dozen litters each year, and feeding the most exorbitantly expensive rations.

The rest of the sustainability equation is largely a matter of common sense. You attempt to do things in as natural a way as possible. You manage your stock so that you do not compromise their genetic viability for the future. You get the best out of each individual dog by working individually with those that need special training or remedial work. You live in a place where it is easy and convenient to train. You work with your teams using the same dogs year after year, letting the old experienced dogs help you train the youngsters, instead of turning entire teams over every couple years. You try to do things in a non-stressful way both for yourself and for the dogs -- so that it is all so enjoyable there is no reason why you should not carry on breeding, training and driving sleddogs until you are at least eighty years old. Does that sound attractive to you? It does to me.