



# The Wolf's Den Kennel

Vol. 1 No. 1

## The Howler

January 2005

Mike Santos and Caitlin Brady

### Welcome to The Howler

*Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails.*

*Explore. Dream. Discover*

Mark Twain

Welcome to the first edition of The Howler. Believing that the journey through life is immensely more interesting than its accomplishments, we've decided to chronicle our adventures as they happen. Join us as we passionately pursue our dream of breeding, raising and training an Iditarod dog team. We are very determined to accomplish our goals, however, the trials and tribulations of achieving them are uncertain, perhaps a little scary, yet absolutely exciting.

The Howler will be published bi-monthly, and will include a description of current events, tips on training, dog nutrition and care, equipment reviews, Q+A section, sponsor profiles, fun photos and more. Don't miss it!



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#### Next Issue

Mike's visit with Martin Buser  
Egil Ellis' Hand Rope  
The Geezer Sled

## ALASKA



For many years my Saturday nights were spent with my good friend Steve Sarafin, in places like The Cozy Spruce, The Bonnie Rig, and The Knox Trail Inn. Once the snow finally came to Mooseachusetts\* I would spend so much time at Steve's that I used to refer to his place as my home away from home. Karaoke was the popular choice of entertainment in the area, so after mushing all day we'd head out to one of the afore mentioned honky tonk establishments to have a few beers and listen to the locals sing all the hits of yesterday and today.

Steve was always a little reluctant to sing, but after just the right amount of liquid encouragement,

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he was usually convinced to share with us his

rendition of the timeless classic, "North to Alaska."

This quirky, two-verse Johnny Horton tune has got it all, gold, huskies, northern lights,



mountains, and big open space. Easily the top choice as an anthem for those who have, and those that will, fall victim to the lure of the great North's spell. As my Alaska Airline's flight made its final decent into Anchorage, I swear I could hear Steve singing.

Going to Alaska has been something I've wanted to do, perhaps even dreamt of doing, for a long, long time. Alaska not only met all my expectations, it absolutely exceeded them. How? Well, everything "Alaska" is big. Its mountains are bigger, its rivers are wider, its weather is wilder, its wildlife is more robust and abundant, and its characters, famous and infamous, are all larger than life. Alaska truly is a remarkable state.

I went to Alaska specifically to look at as many Iditarod dogs as I could. Prior to my departure I contacted all of the top Iditarod kennels, and this is an excerpt from the email I sent out.

*We are looking for two, possibly three proven brood bitches.\*\* We are specifically looking for older females that have had good racing careers, whose littermates have had good racing careers and that have produced offspring that have made your team. We are not too concerned whether or not they still have much of a career ahead of them. We are much more interested in starting with the best possible pups that we can get.*

The response I received varied tremendously, however, I was very pleased that most of the mushers I contacted welcomed me to call them when I got to Anchorage to arrange a visit. I did

receive a few responses from mushers, which made me believe that dog mushing could be a prerequisite for selling used cars. However, we were very interested in one particular response we received from the "King of the Hill" ("King" as in Jeff, "Hill" as in Denali). Jeff responded:

*Tinkle is the dog I have considered that fits your request. She is 4yrs old. She finished in lead my Iditarod team last year. Her littermates are the best dogs on my team. In the Kobuk 440 she injured her shoulder and I believe she will never race competitively again. We have raised 2 litters out of her already. Tink led my daughter to 1st place on the Jr Quest last year as well.*



*Tinkle*

At first I was very skeptical. Tink's description did sound exactly like what we were looking for. So much so that I was worried that perhaps Jeff, thinking I was a fan not a musher, was going to try and sell me a dog that possibly never left his kennel.\*\*\*

We quickly checked the links Jeff had told us would have Tink's pictures. We then proceeded to scan the video of the 2004 Iditarod, pausing every time Jeff's team shot onto the scene. We closely studied each frame, comparing the two lead dogs with the pictures we had printed from the internet. We were very certain that Tink was in fact up front for most of the race. We then proceeded to search

the Internet for references to Tinkle, and we were further impressed by what we found.

From the Fairbanks Daily News Miner newspaper, Feb 9, 2004.

*King's enthusiastic team, led by 3-year-old females Tinkle and Concord, registered a 4-hour, 57-minute run on Sunday's return from the campground, the halfway point of the race.*

*"The leaders were very energetic, and Tinkle loves passing, whether it's head-on or from behind," said Tessa King. "On the first day, we passed three teams, and when she saw a team in the distance, she would get excited, and the rest of the team would pick up on that and prepare to pass."*

<http://www.news-miner.com/Stories/0,1413,113%257E30944%257E1944995,00.html>

From Jeff King's Newsletter describing Jeff's team at the Ruby checkpoint, March 12, 2004.

*He reported that all 13 dogs had already eaten twice by the time he called at 7:00pm. That puts a smile on a musher's face. The crew is all very healthy and free of any soreness. Tinkle has been a super-star along with Texas and Rumba.*

[http://www.huskyhomestead.com/jeff\\_king\\_dog\\_team\\_newsletter.htm](http://www.huskyhomestead.com/jeff_king_dog_team_newsletter.htm)

Well, against my better judgment, we bought Tink sight unseen. We were both very excited, and I was still a little nervous.



I finally made it up to Jeff's Husky Homestead after spending a surprisingly delightful Thanksgiving at the Cantwell lodge.\*\*\*\* Jeff wasn't back from Fairbanks yet, but I found one of his handlers who showed me around the kennel and pointed out Tink and her relatives. It was very

obvious that Tink had a limp, and I doubt that we will ever be able to know first hand exactly how good she truly is.

Jeff's dogs on the whole seemed to be a little finer boned and some were slightly smaller than most of the other husky type dogs that I had seen. He did have several big tall males, but they were all slighter in a way that looked very efficient. What intrigued me the most about some of his dogs was their attentiveness. Unlike the blank expressionless stare a great many Alaskan Huskies seem to possess, Jeff's dogs had personality; a trait that I have grown to look for in dogs.

The other aspect of Jeff's kennel that impressed me was the way

the kennel functioned so well without him. The place sort of reminded me of Santa's workshop. There were a lot of toys:



snowmobiles, ATVs, (both the *One of Jeff's dogs on a carousel* type and the six wheeled variety, complete with snow tracks) dog carousels, dogsleds of all types, and more. The place even seemed to have elves; I met two handlers, a couple of young ladies cutting meat, and a carpenter working in the dog barn probably on Jeff's next innovation, (can't even imagine what.)

Jeff got back from his Thanksgiving holiday the following morning, and I met him coming back from his morning walk. He led me quickly through the kennel, and before long he said that he had some dogs he needed to run and asked if I'd like to go with him. Theoretically, there are no stupid questions, but I felt that this one was on the verge of being the first one. After all, the whole point of me going to Alaska was to see as many dogs as I could, and the only way to see dogs is to see them run.

Jeff put together a team that would highlight

for me Tink's relatives. We harnessed up twelve dogs, hooked the team to an ATV, and off we went. There were several dogs on the team that impressed me, but the two that I thought really stood out were Uksi, Tink's sire, and Spaniel, Tink's daughter. A couple of others that impressed me were, Rumba, a son of Uksi, and Texas, a brother of Tink's.

I singled out Spaniel during our run. She had her head down driving at a lope for the entire run. Jeff said that she had her mom's drive and movement.



*Spaniel*

He continued to tell me that she would run like that for four hundred miles and then she would trot a little, and then pick it back up to a lope. Jeff then said, what I believe was the most insightful statement I heard throughout my entire Alaska trip. He said that he preferred lopers, saying that he felt that trotters were much more likely to get injured. I was totally blown away by this revelation. I've always believed that trotting is the more efficient form of canine movement, but who am I? Jeff has certainly got a whole lot more experience than I do. Anyway, it's something to seriously think about.

Tinkle was just beginning to come into season and I left her at Jeff's kennel to get bred. Since my return I've gotten a conformation that we will have a pregnant Iditarod leader just in time for the holidays.

Happy New Year, Bonne Année!

\*Mooseachusetts: a term my friend Pete Johnson coined and uses quite "liberally" to describe the hill town section of Massachusetts west of the Connecticut River.

\*\*Proven brood bitches: There is an old saying that I've read that I think pretty much sums up the

way I choose breeding females.

"It is far better to marry a good maid from a clan of good maids, than to marry the exceptional maid from a clan of poor ones."

\*\*\*After spending the better part of the day with Jeff, I can assure you that all my worries were the product of my untrusting nature. Jeff is a very straight forward, right to the point kind of guy, and it was a pleasure meeting and doing business with him.

\*\*\*\*I would sincerely like to thank the folks of the Cantwell lodge. I was just looking for a place to spend the night, and even though they were officially closed, they said that it would be no problem for me to stay. I was instantly asked if I had eaten, and then treated to a fantastic Thanksgiving dinner, followed by free beer and football on the big screen. What a treat!

I would also like to take this opportunity to say hello to my new friend Caribou Dundee, and of course, his mule Nyla.

## Check out some great photos of Tink in the 2004 Iditarod.

[http://www.cabelasiditarod.com/coverage\\_2004/photos\\_04\\_p9\\_king\\_unk.html](http://www.cabelasiditarod.com/coverage_2004/photos_04_p9_king_unk.html)

*(Tink in lead on driver's left)*

<http://www.adn.com/iditarod/news/photos/v-30/>

*(Tink and Jeff in Ruby)*

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## Pack Member Profile

### The Wheeler Family

I met Jim Wheeler quite a few years ago, when I spotted a dog truck parked outside the local medical clinic. As we introduced ourselves, I realized that I had previously met Jim's wife, Joy, at the Sandwich Notch 60. Jim and Joy who are both EMTs were there, volunteering their expertise. Early in the race, a dog bit me, and Joy was the medic who tracked me down and treated my injury.

That following weekend Jim and I headed up to Savoy, MA to do some mushing. Since Jim hadn't been on these trails before, I told him I'd wait for him just before each turn so he would know which way to go. As I approached the first turn, I stopped my team and looked over my shoulder. I saw Jim's team quickly approaching, however Jim wasn't with them. I prepared to catch his leaders, when up from the snow he appeared. He shook himself off like a grizzly bear, and hollered, "whoaaa." I then witnessed something I was certain only worked for Sergeant Preston. His entire team not only stopped but they sat down and all looked back at him as he walked to his sled. I figured that I should probably get to know this guy better.

Jim has a very unique team. He has a few registered Airedales, a few Husky crosses, and quite a few predominately hound mutts, all of whom were adopted from the pound. Jim does obedience training, mushing, packing, and he uses his dogs as a part of his emergency medical rescue business.

Over the years Jim was always around for me whenever I needed something. He would fix things almost as fast as I could break them. Jim would always go out of his way, taking time from his own busy schedule, to ensure that I would be able to train my dogs.

The Wheeler's continued friendship and support of our team means a lot to us.

**Place your ad here!**

[howler@wolfsdenkennel.com](mailto:howler@wolfsdenkennel.com)

## ManMat Mania

### Sweeps Fairbanks

During my recent visit to the Two Rivers borough of Fairbanks, I was surprised by how many mushers have switched over to the new ManMat short harness. Apparently, Jeff King created a significant stir when, shortly after completing the 2004 Iditarod, he proclaimed that the new harnesses were a major factor in allowing him to finish with such a large team.



Egil Ellis and J.P. Norris, both sprinters, were the only two mushers that I visited that didn't have the new short harness. The comments from the mushers that did have the ManMats were very inconclusive. Some were very pleased, some were uncertain, and others were contemplating switching back to a more traditional harness. Aliy Zirkle\* expressed concern because several of her dogs were getting minor rubs bellow their throats, just above their chests. I hadn't noticed any rubs on Jeff's dogs when I was at his kennel, but I did notice that in a lot of the racing footage I'd seen, his team was wearing T-shirts under their harnesses.



What I thought was really surprising about the

big switch, was that I believed that Jeff King always seemed to finish with a relatively large, powerful team, and I don't ever remember him blazing down the trail way out in front. I always thought that Jeff was a very conservative, calculating musher, who always seemed to win by running smarter than his competitors.

When I returned home, I decided to compare the statistics. Because trail conditions can vary from year to year, which can directly affect the number of dogs finishing, I decided to compare the number of dogs Jeff King finished with to the number of dogs that Rick Swenson finished with. I choose Swenson as a measuring stick, well, because I guess that is what he is. Additionally, he does not use the ManMat harness. Here are the numbers from the last seven Iditarods.

2004		
King	12 dogs w/ ManMat	2nd place
Swenson	14 dogs	7th place
2003		
King	11 dogs w/ ManMat	3rd place
Swenson	10 dogs	11th place
2002		
King	10 dogs	6th place
Swenson	8 dogs	19th place
2001		
King	8 dogs	3rd place
Swenson	11 dogs	4th place
2000		
King	9 dogs	3rd place
Swenson	9 dogs	8th place
1999		
King	8 dogs	7th place
Swenson	10 dogs	4th place
1998		
King	6 dogs	1st place
Swenson	9 dogs	11th place

The statistics intrigued me in two ways. First, I was surprised that the number of dogs that Jeff finished with does in fact seem to be higher after switching to the ManMat harness. However, because Swenson's finishing team size is also larger, I am not sure how much the harness choice of



either musher affected the results. Second, I think it is interesting how each year, the size of King's and Swenson's teams were very similar to each other.

Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to try the ManMat harness for myself, but I did purchase one at Cold Spot Feeds\*\*, and plan to try it soon. However, I really believe that there is a lot more to finishing the Iditarod, or any dog sled race, with a large, healthy, strong dog team, than the type of harness you choose to use. I'm convinced that the hysteria concerning the short harnesses is more hype than bite, and all too often many mushers, myself included, are looking for a magical quick and easy formula for success. Although Martin Buser was not referring to the ManMat harness when he told me that what it takes to be a successful musher is a lot of hard work, I believe that hard work certainly has a lot more to do with getting a large number of dogs under the burled arch in Nome, than the type of equipment used.

There may or may not be advantages associated with the short harness, however I am certain that we as mushers could all benefit from feeding our dogs better, training smarter, and just spending as much time as possible with our dog teams.

If you have any experience with the new ManMat harness, let us know what you think.

\*Aliy Zirkle, in my opinion, is one to watch out for during upcoming Iditarods.

\*\*Cold Spot Feeds is not a good place to be if you are a musher on a budget. They really got it all.

## References

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## Here at The Wolf's Den

The snow started to fly on the 1st of December, and hasn't let up since. After approximately thirty-six inches of accumulation, I quit keeping track. It seems that for every hour I spend behind a team of dogs, I spend three hours keeping the trail clear of "headhunters," small birch and aspens that with a little snow always seem to arch across the trail at exactly chin level. I spend another two hours grooming trail, however, we've finally acquired a Ski-Doo\* that starts without significant persuasion, and I've found out that a helmet has more to do with keeping your nose from falling off due to frostbite than it does to insure that your head doesn't ruin a perfectly good tree. I spend at least an hour thawing out Willie, the



beagle, after he concedes to go outside to relieve himself. Another half an hour digging out my sled and equipment, and I hardly have time to miss Hockey Night in Canada. Don't get me wrong, I'm certainly not complaining, it definitely beats Massachusetts mud mushing.

On a serious note, the mushing has been fantastic, we are currently running fifteen miles almost every day, and I just went out to break open a couple of longer trails. The dogs look great, and are in seriously good shape. We are currently training thirteen dogs: seven yearlings, one three-year old, and five adults. We've been doing a lot of leader training, and are currently working on passing. I'm also spending a lot of time teaching the dogs to hop off the trail on command. This has been perhaps the most exciting part of the training for me. I love the confusion this creates within the team. They all get so nervous, the trail has become a big part of their daily existence, and asking them to get off of it is perhaps like asking them to jump off the planet. Once they realize that a break and perhaps a snack is coming to them, they quickly begin to look forward to our off trail adventures. It is also great for them to learn that they can overcome stressful situations. As a bonus, they have a little greater appreciation for the trail once we get back to it.

We are very pleased to report that the dogs we sold this past fall are all doing well for there new owners. Len and Missy Daigneault, who bought Dagger, Dixie, and Moon, called me a week later to report that Len shaved off four minutes on the second day of a two and a half mile, four-dog rig



*Grits and Glock's second time in harness*



race by putting Dixie up front. Her brother Dagger was in wheel, and is an even harder driving leader than his sister. Congratulations Len.

Loranne and Richard Block, who bought Dakota for their son Brendan, are also very pleased with him. Unfortunately, Brendan mushed into a porcupine with Dakota in lead, ouch. Dakota is recovering from the incident, and I'm sure he will be leading Brendan's team again very soon. Good luck you all.

Melinda Shore bought Cinder to add to her small skijoring team, and she has reported that Cinder has adapted well to living indoors and that she is strong, fast, and really does love to run. Thanks Melinda for giving Cinder all the extra love and attention.

We still have a couple of dogs for sale, more will be available in the spring, and we are looking for a loving home for Elvis. He is a very sweet dog who loves to work, because of a puppyhood injury will never make a serious sled dog, but would do great on a recreational team.

Caitlin just got back from Boston's Logan airport and we are happy to report that Tinkle is here in our kennel and doing well. Perhaps a little wishful thinking on our part, but we think she already looks pregnant. We are very pleased with her. She exhibits many of the characteristics I consider essential. She eats really well, she has very good feet, a nice coat, and most importantly she



*Tinkle and Caitlin*

has a great temperament. She seems very eager for our attention, yet not a bit over excited or hyper. She is very attentive and has adapted very comfortably into our kennel.

Well I've got to go, my frostbitten cheeks are beginning to burn so I better get back outside before they really start to thaw. Until our next edition, good luck to all of you this racing season, and as always I hope you are all having as much fun with your dogs as we are with ours.

\*Ski-Doo, it actually is a brand name made by Bombardier not just Canadian for snowmobile.

## The Howler

Mike Santos and Caitlin Brady

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