



The Wolf's Den Kennel

The Howler

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Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.
Winston Churchill

"The harder I work, the luckier I get."

Martin Buser

I think that it is no secret, that I have been a long time Iditarod fan. I've seen almost every tape at least a dozen times, I've read and re-read every book I've been able to find on the subject, and I usually spend a lot of time in the beginning of March online, searching for the best possible Iditarod coverage. Sure, like everyone else I've often hoped for Charlie Boulding to pull off a win, but through the Butcher years, the Buser wins, and the Swingley sweep, there has really only been one musher that I would say I've been a fan of. That, of course, would be none other than, "The Champ" Rick Swenson. However, I must admit that after spending the day with Martin Buser, I was very impressed by him, and I would sincerely like to see

him win another Iditarod.

My visit with Martin was absolutely the highlight of my Alaskan trip. He was by far the most generous with not only his time, but also his knowledge. He has a very natural, common sense approach to dog training, which he seemed more than willing to share. And, very much like the famous chef Emeril Lagasse, Martin has an enthusiasm for what he does which is contagious.

It wasn't long after I arrived at Martin's Happy Trails Kennel that he invited me to go along with him on a training run. We harnessed and bootied twelve dogs, and we hooked them to a Tail Dragger sled*. I hopped on the back of the runners, and Martin got on in the center. He asked me if I was ready, and off we went. We bounced out of the kennel and dashed across a frozen lake. We took a slight curve into the scrub and Martin looked over his shoulder at me, a little surprised that I was still there.** He then reached into his pocket and handed me a Diet-Coke. He produced another one



Buser's
top dog,
Logan

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Buser's Anna

for himself and said, "Breakfast on the go this morning."

There we were just cruising along the expansive, frozen moose-wallow

filled valley, surrounded by mountains, on what felt oddly enough like a winter rendition of a tandem bicycle, fully equipped with runners instead of tires. We were just gliding along enjoying our Diet Cokes, when the dogs spooked a cow moose and her calf. There have been very few times in my life that I've felt that "wish my friends could see me now" feeling, but I have to confess that this was one of those moments. We went approximately twenty miles before returning to the kennel.

Martin then invited me in to what he called, "the clubhouse." The lower level of the Buser home has a separate entrance, and is really well set up for maintaining the kennel, as well as affording mushers with grungy Carhartts and dirty boots a place to warm up and get a bite to eat. Martin cooked up a few moose sausage, which I thought

was a very appropriate lunch, and we talked dogs. The one thing that I couldn't help but notice was that Martin had a hat rack stocked with at least a dozen of his signature red and black checked mushing caps. It must be nice to have a hat rack stocked like that, and I wouldn't mind having my own signature cap either.

After lunch, I thought that my time in Big Lake was just about at its end, when Martin asked me if I had time and would like to go out with another team. Still wondering why I was so impressed with this guy? We hooked up another twelve dogs and away we went.

I was really impressed with Martin's dogs, and it was hard not to buy a couple of the younger dogs he had for sale, but I had promised myself that I was only going to buy proven females for breeding. There were several that I would've loved to buy, but Martin wasn't willing to part with any of them. As it turned out John Hessert Jr., Martin's handler, had a female from Jeff King's (Alberta) for sale, from whom he had already had a litter. I was on my way to Jeff's the following day, so I figured I'd wait until I talked to Jeff about Alberta before deciding if I wanted to buy her.



Buser's Risk

After seeing many of Alberta's relatives, I called John from Fairbanks to let him know that I definitely wanted Alberta. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet back up with Martin and John before leaving Alaska. On my way back down to Anchorage from Fairbanks, I saw the Buser-mobile heading north on the Parks highway, and knew that the weather in the Big Lake area must have went south.***

Here's where things got a little sketchy. My flight was scheduled to leave Alaska in less than



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twenty-four hours, and I needed to pay John for Alberta. I knew that Martin and John probably wouldn't get back before I left, but fortunately with the help of Kari Skogen, I was able to track down Martin's wife, Kathy. She's a teacher at an alternative elementary school in Wasilla, so I decided that the school would be my best chance of catching up with her.

I explained the situation to Kathy, and she agreed to hold, what I think she assumed was going to be a check, for John. However I couldn't help but notice her eyes light up when I produced the roll of cash from my pocket. It certainly felt a little awkward counting that much money in an elementary school, and we made a couple of jokes about it. She mentioned something about how nice it was to hold a lot of cash, especially so close to Christmas, and I quickly said I'd be happy to give her more if only Martin would be willing to part with any one of the females I liked so much. She hesitated a moment before acknowledging that Martin probably knew better what was in the kennel's best interest.

Thank you Martin, you are a true champion. I really appreciate you sharing your time with me and affording me the opportunity to experience a little slice of what it takes to be an Iditarod musher. However, I'm giving you a fair warning, the next time I'm in Alaska looking to buy dogs, the first person I plan to visit is going to be your wife, Kathy.

*The Tail Dragger sled, article on page 5.

**I sort of got the feeling that Alaskan mushers think that driving a dog sled is an ability that only they could ever become competent at. If there is one thing that mushing in Massachusetts requires is sled handling. With its ridiculously tight, steep, winding trails, combined with its wildly varying conditions, and more steel gates to get around than the one thousand meter hurdles, it is certainly in one's own best interest to learn how to steer a sled.

*** "Went south" in reference to the weather in mushing terms means only one thing, RAIN!

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The Geezer Sled

The Trail Dragger sled, or as some mushers refer to it, The Geezer Sled,* was introduced last year by Jeff King. Both Martin Buser and Jeff King successfully completed last year's Iditarod with this new sled, which is designed to allow the musher to sit while driving. Although there are many sleds that already have the capacity for a musher to sit, I think that the Trail Dragger is the first sled designed specifically to be driven from a sitting position.

I tried a few Trail Draggers while I was in Alaska and I was so impressed with the sled that one of the first things I did when I returned was to convert a sled into a Trail Dragger. I started out with a long distance CB sled I had, and using parts from several other broken sleds that were lying around, I was able to fashion something similar to the Trail Dragger sleds that I had seen.

I am very impressed with my new, or at least recently re-assembled, sled. It is incredibly comfortable both while standing and while seated, and the sled actually steers much better than it did originally. I've actually been able to take some fairly sharp turns sitting down. A word of caution, on long, flat, straight trails, it's almost comfortable enough to fall asleep, and unless you have better balance than I do, you probably can imagine how easy it would be to just roll right off the thing. The rumor mill has it that there are actually seatbelts being used, but I have not witnessed that nor have I tried it.

Even though the Trail Dragger was designed to



be used primarily for long distance racing, it wasn't long before I realized that it could possibly, and probably will, replace the practice of double sledding. Caitlin and I have found that it is much easier to double sled with the one sled, and it's great to be able to talk to each other without yelling. Caitlin also found out that it is much easier to see the dogs, because I can sit much of the time. From a practical perspective, it is very convenient for a handler to jump off the sled to fix a tangle, or to correct a dog, and then hop back on, while the driver can either slow down or stop and hold the team.

I also predict that the Trail Dragger will sweep the touring industry very soon. It is an incredible way to give a tourist, or a novice, the thrill of driving a dog team. While I was out with Martin Buser it almost felt like I was giving him a ride. Even though I was fully aware that he was in complete control, with him seated much of the time it really didn't feel any different than having someone in the basket of a conventional sled.

I'm planning to build a couple of sleds this spring with the goal of accumulating all of the features I like from the countless sleds I've seen,



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and for sure at least one of them will be a Trail Dragger.

*Trail Dragger, Jeff King, after having read that I was planning on writing this article, was quick to respond that he is very fond of the sled's design, and that he insisted that the sled be called the Tail Dragger, anything else he considered "blasphemous." So please re-read the article replacing the words Trail Dragger with its proper name, Tail Dragger.

He was also quick to report that he was not a geezer. I met Jeff this past November, and I'm sincerely glad to report that he appeared to be in great shape. Although I do not know what the exact definition of a geezer is, I'm willing to vouch that he is not one.

Thank you

I would sincerely like to thank JP Norris and Kari Skogen, for their very generous hospitality and the pleasure of training with them and their Anadyr open-class sprint dogs.

Kari, I don't know if oatmeal is Norwegian for breakfast, but I seem to be addicted to the stuff. JP, just wondering if you've been able to teach Lev anything about sarcasm.

I would also like to thank Judy and Devon Currier for putting me up and putting up with me. Your bed and sled is first rate, and you have some really good-looking dogs. Good luck Judy on this year's Iditarod.

And a big thank you to Mark and Debbie Moderow for getting Alberta up to Denali.

Finally, we would like to thank our newest sponsors,
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Here at The Wolf's Den

I've heard that in order to be a successful writer one must write about what one knows, and you absolutely, positively must have an interesting beginning. Well, how about we begin this installment of *Here at The Wolf's Den*, on February 21st, at 7:00 P.M., on route 15 in Vermont. Not driving over to the mandatory drivers' meeting of the *Craftsbury True Companion Sled Dog Race* as might be suspected. But rather, lying under the dog truck, eating rust flakes, while trying to reassemble the center bearing of the truck's drive shaft with two ten-inch bungee cords and a ratchet strap. Interesting enough for you?

After approximately two hours of mechanical wizardry, we managed to limp the truck back to our hotel. Unfortunately we missed the drivers' meeting and were unable to contact the RGO (race governing organization) or in other words, Ingrid Bower. Although we were unsure we would be allowed to race, we were determined to keep trying. The following morning Caitlin got a ride over to the race site with Richard and Lorraine Block, and I determined that the only way we were going to get our team to the starting line in time was to have the dog truck towed there.

I dialed the night and weekend number for Marceaux's Wrecker service, and a six-year-old girl answered the phone. I asked her if I had reached Marceaux's Wrecker service and she asked me who was calling. I told her my name as I checked the phone book to verify that I had in fact dialed the right number. This was really beginning to feel a little like the Twilight Zone as I listened to her screaming, "Mommy, Mommy, Mike Santos on the phone. Mommy, Mike Santos on the phone."

I never caught her name but I'll probably be invited to her seventh birthday party due to the fact that her dad not only towed us thirty minutes to the

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Caitlin and the team at Craftsbury

race site, but also came back after the race and towed us thirty minutes back to our hotel. We gave him Sunday off, mostly due to the fact that all of the garages in town were closed, but we had him tow us one more time Monday morning to the local garage to get the truck fixed. All in all I'd say we got acquainted, if not down right friendly.

Oh yeah, the race. Well, pulling into the race staging area with the dog truck on a wrecker is probably as close as I will ever get to feeling like Elizabeth Taylor. There were plenty of spectators, and fellow mushers, taking pictures as the truck was neatly lowered into our assigned parking

space. We made it with forty-five minutes till race time. Did I forget to mention that this was Caitlin's first race, and none of the six dogs she ran had ever been to a race either? Quite the initiation, eh?

Despite all the misadventures, I'm proud to report that Caitlin did a remarkable job. The trail was quite icy and apparently was not well marked. Many teams got lost and some teams scratched after getting lost repeatedly. Caitlin not only managed to stay on the right trail but also finished 5th out of 17. She was the second highest placing purebred team finishing only eight minutes and six seconds behind veteran Sue Ellis.

January had its more somber moments as well. Fleo, the matriarch of our kennel, mother of almost all of our dogs finally succumbed to old age and we were forced to put her down. Caitlin expressed that it was a real life lesson for her, having hoped that perhaps Fleo could've just gone peacefully in her sleep, as might happen in a movie, so that we wouldn't have had to make the final decision as to when the time was right. There is a sentiment that I've felt often over the years when losing a long time companion and friend; it always seems harder to feed one less dog, than it does to feed one more.

Tinkle, Tinkle, little star, how we had wished you had a litter size that could have populated, I don't know, maybe Mars. That's right, a single male pup, my first ever one pup litter. I guess it

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would be fair to say we were a little disappointed, but only because we've become quite impressed



Hook 3 weeks old

with Tinkle. However, we're content reassuring ourselves that quality is better than quantity. The puppy, Hook, looks just like Tinkle and we are hoping he will grow up to be as amazing as his mother. We're already

anxious for Tinkle's next litter, and we get really excited thinking of all the possible studs we might breed her to next.

Since we're on the subject of breeding, January also saw Caitlin returning to Alaskan Airline's Gold Streak office at Logan Airport to pick up our next brood bitch, Alberta. (This could become quite habit forming, if it weren't so expensive.) Alberta is also originally from Jeff King's kennel, however I purchased her from John Hessert Jr. John is currently handling for Martin Buser and running the Iditarod with Martin's puppy team. John bought Alberta last year to start his own kennel. He had a very nice looking litter of nine out of Alberta and Martin's main stud Logan.

Because I really liked Jeff's main stud Uksi so much, we determined that we should breed both Tinkle and Alberta to him, just in case one of the breedings didn't take. Since Alberta's arrival she has quickly adapted to her new home and we are looking forward not only to her upcoming litter, but also her help in training puppies next fall.

I'm really excited to have been a part of the inaugural 100-Mile Wilderness Sled Dog Race in Greenville Maine. I finished last



Uksi

out of the eight teams that finished, but I'm very pleased with how my team performed. I was running a very young team with seven yearlings on it. I had ten females and two males. Six of the dogs on my team were the six that Caitlin ran at Craftsbury and the other six had never been to a race. There was only two hours and fifty-five minutes separating my last place finish with Andre Longchamps' first place finish.

The real story here is that the Northeast has finally got a second, world-class long distance sled dog race. Everything about this venue was top notch. The two towns, which hosted the race, were absolutely perfect for holding this type of event. Many amenities were within walking distance of the two staging areas, and all others were only a very short drive away. The people were incredibly hospitable and supportive, the scenery was incredible, and the organizers, trail crew, volunteers, and race marshal put together a race which was run with the precision of the finest Swiss watch. Not too shabby for a first year race that received two plus feet of snow on the night of the drivers' meeting.

Because the Greenville race was the last time I plan to race a pure-bred Siberian Husky team, I'm especially glad it was such a positive experience that I can look back on for years to come.

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Back at home, we are currently running our 7-month-old puppies. They are doing great and I am



really impressed with their ability. We are also trying to keep our main team running long miles. Our trail here has literally been cut down to approximately sixteen miles due to some logging. Fortunately, there are several locations relatively close by where we can train 60 plus miles. Unfortunately, we are still having an absurd amount of truck troubles. (Any readers who might either own or work at a car/truck dealership we really need to talk.) Anyway we're doing the best we can to fit eight dogs, the sled, and all of the necessary equipment into Caitlin's Subaru Sport.

Alberta

We are very pleased to report that this, our second edition of The Howler, is being sent out to over two hundred email addresses. We are hoping it continues to grow and are still seeking the email address of anyone who might be interested in receiving this e-newsletter.

As always, I hope you are all having as much fun with your dogs as we are with ours.

Mike

2005 Yukon Quest Notes

The Mackeys certainly seem to have a flair for dramatic finishes. Eight minutes is a slightly larger margin of victory than a whisker, (Dick Mackey 78 Iditarod,) but it still makes for an exciting finish.

I'd really like to know everything that Dave Dalton seems to know about caring for a dog team. Last year he finished the Quest 3rd with all fourteen dogs, and this year, even with its rather high number of scratches, he managed to finish 4th with all but one. VERY IMPRESSIVE!

William Kleedehn certainly seemed to have plenty of power under the pedal, as the race came to a close. He left circle in 5th place, and, well, I guess we all know how close it was.

The Howler

Mike Santos and Caitlin Brady

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