

Vargevass kennel of Karsten Grönås

Interview by: Sylvia Roppelt, Siberian Husky Club of Germany
Published: February 2006

1. How would you describe the nature of the Vargevass dogs?

It is of course difficult to make general statements on a strain's nature, but I experience the dogs in my kennel as very friendly to people and other dogs. An example is that I can have all 28 dogs loose together. Even unrelated dogs who join the kennel at an adult age are being accepted by the pack. In harness, the dogs show eagerness and drive, some are tougher than others, but they are easy to handle and pleasant to work with.

2. Which physical and mental features or natures do you prefer?

Endurance and speed are elementary in a sled dog, I feel. They have to be mentally strong so they can handle the great amount of training which is put on them. I like dogs who are calm, but yet happy to go out on whatever trip I take them. They should be able to go on even when the going gets tough. Be brave and have perseverance, meaning; no hesitation in crossing open waters, breaking trail and traveling over vast open areas in the mountains during bad weather. Conclusive; they should be doing what good sled dogs are able to do under sub arctic conditions.

3. Which dog(s) is or was your favorite (in training or breeding) and why?

That question is not so easy to answer because there have been many favorites, but maybe Kermit has been my best dog. He was all what one could wish for in a sled dog; a super leader with good built, endurance, speed and a perfect temperament; always happy, ready to go and extremely open to humans and other dogs.

4. Which dog(s) was/were most important for your kennel and why?

There have been different periods of time, so also different dogs. In the '70s my own bred male Peik and import female Talitta of Kolyma were of great importance as I founded my kennel with them. In the '80s I imported dogs from the USA which completed my basic stock. They were Yeso Pac's el Diablo and Arctic Trail's Fang. Fang was one of the most proven sled dogs in New England at the time I bought him. El Diablo was only two years old and not yet tested. He turned out to be a very good dog who passed on his positive genes strongly to his progeny. He produced Kermit out of a Peik x Talitta female as well as many other good dogs. By the middle of the '80s I bought Ash of Markovo from Doug Willett as I happened to see a publication with pictures of his dogs in the International Siberian Husky Club Magazine. Ash seemed to me the dog with

the best built and I was interested to buy him. He got 3 litters in my kennel. He gave quite a variety in built, type and temperament. The best progeny out of Ash from my kennel was without doubt Esso Extra.

In the '90s were Shira, Tellervo, Houston and Amigo key dogs in the team and Finnemarka's Hippy in breeding. Hippy was bred by Christen Rose Andersen out of ArcticTrail/Igloo Pak and Natomah lines. All these dogs have given outstanding sled dogs in my opinion and often good leaders.

5. What is the most important experience you took from all these years of breeding and mushing sled dogs?

I have learnt through the years that patience is very important. And, a good team is made by 3 factors; genes, feeding and training.

I would say in regard to breeding that the best sled dogs usually throw the best offspring, although sometimes I got real surprises. In general, I think that the dogs one uses in breeding should be of good heritage; thinking of sled dog capacity, type, temperament and health. I have also experienced that it is important to have patience with young dogs. They are all developing differently and some are not really mature before they have reached the age of 3 years.

In regard to mushing; I feel that driving my dogs in long distances adds an extra dimension to the relationship we have. Driving in long distance is a balancing act. While out on the trail I need to be able to read my dogs in order to decide how and when to rest them, how much and what to feed them and how to motivate them when they start to get tired. If the balance is right, they are willing to take me wherever the trail leads us.

6. Did something in your breeding or training fundamental change because of these experiences

In regard to breeding: not really. I have always been interested to buy and breed dogs of proven sled dog background.

In regard to mushing: it is one of the reasons why I turned to long distance racing.

7A. What do you think about the purebred sled dog sport in middle Europe?

7B. Is there a future for the Siberian Husky as a racing and working dog?

A. The races in central Europe are often in warm and humid weather. In addition, the trails are usually over short distances due to space and weather limitations. These factors are not in favor of the Siberian Husky. It is important to think of what a Siberian Husky should be

according to the breed standard. It is a POLAR dog which is able to pull a sled with a not so heavy load over longer distances at moderate speed. It is the people who are making the rules for the races, but are they thinking of what a sled dog should be and how it should be to evaluate them?

B. I think there is only a future for the Siberian Husky as a working dog when more owners and mushers train and breed seriously and cooperate with others who do well with pure Siberians. The matter is not only whether there is a future for the Siberian Husky as a sled dog, but also whether it is kept as a pure breed.

8. You described the Zero strain as questionable. How do you think about the popular Zero strain? Why are the Zero's questionable.

I visited the Zero kennel in 1978 in the accompany of a Swedish breeder who was interested to buy dogs from Harris Dunlap. At the time, there were about 125 dogs in the kennel. Only six of them were Siberian Huskies according to Harris; 4 females and 2 males. The rest of the dogs were Alaskan Huskies with Siberian Husky like appearance. One of the females and the two male Siberian Huskies were sold to the Swedish breeder later that same year. When the dogs arrived in Sweden one of them looked in my opinion a lot different than the dog I had seen in the USA, though having the same name. The dog in the USA was mostly brown and looked polar, while the dog which came to Sweden was black and had a very short coat. Another thing what struck me during our visit was that Harris was surprised to hear that I was running Siberian Huskies and asked me seriously why I "bothered to struggle with those stubborn Siberians". To me it appeared that the Siberian Husky was more a selling object to him than a breed he cared for and cherished. Though Harris had a only a very small population of Siberian Huskies in his kennel and he sold half of that population to Sweden in 1978, he still sold lots of "Siberian Huskies" after that.

In the '80s there was a big discussion going on in Norway about the credibility of the Zero strain as it was said that 3 Norwegian visitors had been offered mixed bred dogs in 1982, with the reassurance that it was no problem to get Siberian Husky pedigrees on them. When former co-owner of the Zero kennel Prof. Dr. Vet. David Kronfeld visited Norway in 1984, he was asked in a private conversation with me and 5 other mushers present what he knew about the breeding practices of the kennel. He answered that he knew very well about, what he said were, "Harris' so called Siberians" as he (Kronfeld) "had often been with in the game of picking out who were to be the Siberian Huskies in the litters". He also mentioned an episode in which Harris sold a mediocre Alaskan Husky bitch for an excessive price. The reason he could do so was because he sold her as a registered

Siberian Husky to Europe. He gave us insight on the backgrounds of some of the dogs imported to Norway and Sweden.

Not only in Europe is the Zero line much disputed, but likewise in its home country USA.

9A. What is your breeding goal in the future?

9B. How will you succeed in breeding competitive Siberians?

9C. Which thoughts do you have regarding inbreeding or outcrossing?

A. Although I will only be breeding on a limited scale in the future, my goal is to continue breeding good working Siberian Huskies who are sound in type, health and temperament.

B. I think I have so far succeeded in breeding competitive Siberians.

There is no magic formula to it, but breeding those individuals who are best in the team gives a good chance of success.

C. I have been doing a fair amount of both line breeding and out crossing. When doing an outcross, I tend to breed the next generation back to my foundation stock. I think that gives the best results. I have been doing quite some line breeding on Kermit, but Kermit himself was very much an outcross (old Seppala, Yeso Pac, Calivali and Anadyr).

Inbreeding like father to daughter or brother to sister I am much more sceptical to. It happened only once in my kennel; between brother and sister.

10. In case you breed an outcross, which strain would you prefer and why?

I have been breeding with many different strains. Vargevass is built upon old Seppala, New England (Igloo Pak, Arctic Trail, Natomah and Calivali) and Anadyr lines. In 1995 I used a male from Anu Jaakonsaari (who still ran two Siberians on her team by then) on one of my best females at the time; Shira a granddaughter to Ash of Markovo. The male was from Lokiboden/Polar Speed background, so mostly Igloo Pak behind.

In 2001, I imported two dogs from the Alaskan Anadyr kennel. The male Ping Ping had been twice to Nome on the Norries Iditarod team. The female Chanel was a puppy when I bought her. She has been bred this year to a male from my lines. I prefer dogs from strains which are sound, proven, typical and pure.

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