



Interview questions by Fabrizio Filoni for the Italian magazine 'Husky Pride', July 2014
in connection to Karsten's judging assignment of the Italian Siberian Husky Club Specialty, Sept. 2014

What came first; your passion for the Siberian Husky or passion for sled dogs?

Being born and raised in western Norway, I was often out skiing in the mountains when I was in my twenties. One day I met a skier with a couple of Greenland dogs pulling a pulka sled and was fascinated by the sight of it. I decided I wanted to have a sled dog to accompany me in the mountains. Among the newspaper announcements for dogs, I came across the advertisement of Norway's well known explorer Helge Ingstad saying «Siberian Husky sled dog puppies for sale of Leonhard Seppala's famous line». This was one of the first litters of Siberian Husky puppies in Norway (and Europe) and I bought a female. The year was 1965. One year later I bought a younger sister. This female is still in my present dogs through her son Peik and his offsprings.

You imported dogs from USA. What gave these dogs to your breeding program...?

In 1978, I bought Yeso Pac's el Diablo from USA and Arctic Trail Fang from Canada. The young male El Diablo was recommended to me by Dr. Roland Lombard who had him in training at his Igloo Pak kennel. Arctic Trail Fang was one of the most proven males in USA and Canada at the time and I could buy him because his owner got out of dogs. Both males have been used frequently in my kennel. Yeso Pac's el Diablo got 7 litters in my kennel and Fang 4. Both El Diablo and Fang were on my team for many years. Their offspring were generally dogs with great attitudes, nice temperament and good conformation. On my website one can find an overview of all the influential dogs in my kennel and their offspring.

In 1985 I imported Ash of Markovo from Doug Willett, bred by Curt Stuckey and in 2001 I imported Iditarod finisher Alaskans Ping Ping of Anadyr and a young female Alaskans Chanel of Anadyr from Earl and Natalie Norris. All of them are still in my dogs of today.

Vargevass is based upon three prominent purebred working lines of the breed; Seppala, Igloo Pak/New England and Anadyr.

What do you want from a Siberian Husky as sled dog?

Breeding Siberian Husky as long distance sled dog (like the breed is meant to be) is much more complex than breeding for conformation only. There are many more factors playing in.

I want from a Siberian Husky as sled dog;

Right attitude; the mind of a sled dog is of great importance. It needs to have strong will to work. Even if the going gets tough and the dog starts to get tired, it needs to have the toughness of mind to continue also under harsh conditions. It needs to have good temperament, meaning willingness to cooperate and be social with humans and team mates.

Breed typical functional conformation; I want a dog with the right proportions, angulations, anatomy and polar characteristics typical for the breed, this also means good coat.

I want good health, good movement, good feet, good metabolism, good heat regulation, good restoration, good muscling, power, endurance, speed and appetite. If you run and breed Siberian Huskies as long distance sled dog, you need all of these qualities. When breeding only for conformation (i.e. shows) one can focus on only a few.

What is your vision of the Siberian Husky as sled dog?

I think many of the problems for the Siberian Husky as sled dog have been the same for many years and will not likely change. On a global basis, only VERY FEW Siberian Huskies are being worked and selected as sled dogs and even fewer as long distance sled dogs. (which is what the standard asks for) The vast majority of the breed is being bred as family dog and/or show dog without functional sled dog qualities being taken into consideration. This has evolved to body proportions that do not reflect a functional sled dog, (which is what the Siberian Husky should be according to the standard). I can only hope more people will start to work their Siberian Huskies in harness and will find out for themselves. Hopefully more people with Siberian Huskies bred for shows will start using dogs from working lines in their breeding program in order to get a wider genetic diversity and bring functional dogs to the show ring. In Sweden, all of the 4 sled dog breeds need to have a result from a racing test in order to be able to become show champion or to even win a CAC at a show.

As concerned for the breed as sprint sled dog, I think the current situation is not ideal for the Siberian Husky either. In central Europe, the races are often organized in warm weather and in crowded areas where there is not much space for extended trails. It is the organizers who make the rules for the races, but do they think about the breed as a sled dog and the way a sled dog should be tested? Siberian Huskies are meant as long distance sled dogs with moderate proportions and double coat. Some dogs in the middle European sprint scene have bodies like hounds and not very good coat. The split between the types in the breed seems to be getting wider and wider while the moderate, standard fitting dog is disappearing. If people are not careful, the breed will exist of extreme show dogs and extreme sprint dogs in the future.

Sprint or distance. What is the charm of the disciplines and what do you like best?

When I started with the sport and breeding Siberians, only sprint races existed in Norway. Sprint was most popular until middle of the '90's. I ran sprint from 1971 until 1994, followed by a period of stage races/middle distance racing like Alpirod (1995) and Pirena (1997/1998/1999). When running sprint I preferred races over 20 km. like Jotunheimløpet (48+35km and bivak) which was Norway's most popular race in the '80's. I am the opinion that races should ideally be over more than 20 km. to test the dog's endurance abilities.

My first long distance race was the Femund500 in the year 2000, I was 61 years old at the time.

I would prefer to do long distance racing if I were younger. It gives many more challenges in long distance as many more factors play a role. The bond between dog and musher gets an extra dimension when you are out on the trail in rough conditions for long periods. Running long distance is also what fits the Siberian Husky best and comes closest to the breed standard.

Sprint versus distance. What is the difference in management and training?

Differences in management; Keeping dogs for sprint involves that you carefully have to watch their weight. Every gram counts so it is important to keep them on the right weight. I also took my dogs indoors on very cold days of – 25C. or more as I did not want them to grow too thick coats because they get more susceptible of getting warm in races. It is also important to have a homogeneous team in regard to size and speed of the dogs when running sprint.

Differences in training; In sprint, one trains short and intense with much interval training and light load. In long distance, one wants to keep a calm, steady pace without too many speed rushes as that can give injuries when the dogs pull a heavy load. When training for long distance, I don't let them go much faster than 16 km. per hour on average, per trip. In November, I train ca. 35 km. per training run with the ATV. When training for Femundløpet I usually had ca. 3800 km. or more on the dogs in the period August-January. With distance training it is less important if the dog carries some grams more and you want to have dogs with good coats. To summarize; When training for long distances, the number of kilometers only in the month of December is as many as I trained throughout the entire season when training for sprint (= ca. 1300 km.)

Describe to us 2 of your leaders and why they were the best 2 leaders.

With each generation there have been good leaders, so to name only two is not easy. In the '80's, I still consider my sprint leader Kermit av Vargevass as my best dog. He was a dog with great drive, attitude and speed and a very happy temperament.

In the '90's when I drove Pirena my best leader was a daughter of Kermit; Tellervo av Vargevass. She had very good conformation, attitude and drive as well as great endurance. She was very serious and excelled as single leader. She led my team to victory in Pirena 1998.

Tellervo's grandson Nathan av Vargevass, was my best leader in my long distance period. He was leading the entire Finnmarksløpet 1000 km. for me in 2006 when we finished with the fastest time for a purebred team so far, and also the following year when we became 10th in Femundløpet 600 and were again best purebred team. Like his parents and grand parents, Nathan also has a very focused, serious attitude. Nathan's father Ukko is linebred on Kermit.

But in all fairness I should also mention other great leaders such as Shira av V., in the '90's and her grand son Houston from 1996 -2003 (leading the team to 3rd place in Femund 500 in 2001) and her grand daughter Noal av V. from 2007-2012 and there were of course many others in the '70's as well.

Describe Vargevass Siberian nr. 1, the dog who gave most to the team and to the kennel.

Kermit is the dog who has been used the most in my kennel and of whom I have been linebreeding on. He was a great leader in the team with good built and had a wonderful happy temperament. But also his parent Yeso Pac's el Diablo and Ch. Ylva av Vargevass and grand parents Peik and Talitta of Kolyma have played major roles in my kennel as sled dog and as breeding dogs through their other offsprings as well.