

Karsten Grønås

and his Siberian husky team

by Johanne Sundby

One could say Karsten Grønås of Norway is a veteran in the world of dog driving and Siberian husky breeding. He has been mushing Nome-style for more than 39 years now and is staying true to the Siberian husky breed all this time. In 1969, he registered his Vargevass kennel and has been working his dogs ever since.

Originally a sprint musher, Grønås gradually changed to distance racing by the mid-90s.

In his second running of Norway's most popular long-distance race, the Femund 500, Grønås took third place, leaving Robert Sørlic in fourth. This happened in 2001 which many remember as a cold year when temperatures reached -58 degrees F and lower. In 2005, Grønås placed 12th in a field of 43 teams and was again the best purebred team.

Grønås enters open races and races for purebreds only and is doing well in both. In 2005, he won Polar Distance for the third year in a row. This distance race in Sweden is 320 km long and the rules state that all dog food and gear is to be carried on the mushers' sleds.

In his sprint era, Grønås won the Open Scandinavian Championship Unlimited Class several times, beating Alaskan husky and hound teams. He won Jotunheimlopet 8 times out of 10 (Norway's most popular race in the 80s), the European Championship for purebreds in 1994 and the Pirena stage race in 1998.

Three years ago, he moved his kennel to central Sweden where he got hold of a remote farm. The 28 dogs have a large fenced-in dog yard of almost five acres where they can run loose together and play several hours a day.

At the age of 28, Grønås was very interested in outdoor life. He made regular skiing trips to the mountains around Oslo. On one of these outings he was impressed by a skjoror with two Greenland dogs and decided that he wanted something like that too. He later saw a newspaper advertisement by Norway's famous explorer, Helge Ingstad,



Karsten Grønås shares a quiet moment with 12-year-old Peik and puppy Jean av Vargevass in 1981. Peik was a foundation stud for the kennel.

announcing Siberian husky puppies for sale. This was in 1965, seven years after the first imports of Siberians to Norway which came directly from Leonhard Seppala.

Grønås responded to the advertisement and got his first Siberian husky, Rusky. One year later, he bought her sister Laika. They were great companions on his outdoor trips and he soon found himself with the beginning of a sled dog team.

Grønås started to race his dogs in sled

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dog competitions to show the breed's capability. He has been doing so ever since he entered his first race in 1971.

Johanne Sundby: You continue to race Siberians even when most other mushers turn to mixed breeds. What is, in your opinion, the main advantage of Siberians compared to some of the Alaskans you see?

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husky is equipped with better metabolism, health, feet and coat. Siberians are very social and in respect to breeding, I think the results are more predictable.

JS: Besides dog driver you are also a conformation judge for the breed. What do you look for in a good Siberian husky?

KG: He/she should fill the standard; Look outspoken like a Siberian husky, not be extreme in any way. The dog should have good movement and temperament.

JS: Which bloodlines are at the base of your kennel?

KG: The first dog I bred had Leonhard Seppala and Anadyr (kennel) background. Later on I brought in a female of Igloo Pak/Anadyr descen-

dant and the males Yeso Pac's el Diablo, Arctic Trail's Fang and Ash of Markovo. They form the base of my breeding program. In 2001, I visited the Norris' kennel in Alaska and took a male and female home with me. I have always been interested to import dogs with proven sled dog background in my kennel, with the exception of the 'Zero' line. [The 'Zero' line is a specific

line of Siberian huskies. Some people believe that this line also has Alaskan husky in it, leading to doubts over whether the line is purebred.]

JS: What is your comment on what Siberian husky breeders should go for in their breeding programs today?

KG: I hope they keep to the reputable and respected bloodlines and stay away from the questionable line. Train the dogs well, race them and be critical and honest in what you see.

JS: Do you think the Siberian is better in long or short distances?

KG: Long distance. That is what the breed is bred for.

JS: I have noticed you often don't use booties on your dogs, while many Alaskan husky mushers always use them. How come?

KG: One of the advantages of Siberians is that they have good feet.

JS: How do you train your dogs?

KG: In the fall I start with the quad about 8 km, gradually building up the distance. Speed is not so important in the beginning, I just let them pull and vary the speed depending on the terrain. By the middle of December, I can usually start with sled training. When the season is in full swing the dogs run between 35 to 120 km per training run.

JS: Do you still sell puppies and adult dogs and to whom?

KG: I only sell a few dogs and puppies per year, mostly to mushers who want to strengthen their teams.

JS: In the recent past we have seen an

increase in Norwegian Siberian husky mushers competing in races. Why do you think this is happening now?

KG: In general there are fewer Siberian husky teams competing nowadays than 20 to 30 years ago.

JS: Do you think there is a future for the Siberian husky as sled dog?

KG: I think there is only a future for the Siberian as a working dog when more owners and mushers do serious training and breeding and cooperate with other mushers 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.

JS: How long will you continue to be active and what keeps you going?

KG: I will keep on as long as I think it is still fun. Love for and dedication to the breed is what keeps me going. I want to help conserve the breed which has been used as sled dog for thousands of years. You may call it a matter of idealism and nostalgia.

For more information, visit these sites:

www.vargevass.com

Vargevass Siberian Husky kennel

www.femund500.com

Europe's most popular distance race

www.polardistans.se

Swedish purebred distance race

Interviewed by Johanne Sundby, Norwegian musher of Siberians, long- and middle distances, and a medical doctor when she has time for work.



JOHN PEDERSEN

Karsten Grønås races his team at the Nordic Championship for Polar Dogs in 1981. The dog on the left in team position is Yeso Pac's el Diablo, one of the foundation studs for the kennel. The female in point position is Ch. Ylva av Vargevass, dam to Kermit av Vargevass. The lead dog on the left is Minsten av Vargevass, who later was sold to Doug Willet's Sepp-Altia kennel.