

Survival Characteristics of the Alaskan Malamute

Extracts from an article by American breeder Nancy Russell – in which she emphasises some important breed basics

The Alaskan Malamute's survival features are those characteristics of the breed which enable him to function in the harsh Arctic environment. The real Standard for the breed was not written by man but by extreme temperatures, wind, snow, ice, rain and sleet, long hours of daylight, long hours of darkness, swarms of insects in summer and a scarcity of food.

Food or lack of it was probably the single most important influence on the evolution of the Malamute. Food provides calories. Calories provide heat. Therefore the breed developed a very efficient metabolism, as the dog which could maintain himself on the least amount of food would survive to reproduce. Any characteristic which would help to retain the heat of the body would reduce the number of calories needed. And so it was that in this survival of the fittest, everything from the tip of his nose to his beautiful plumed tail had a function.

As breeders of the Alaskan Malamute it is our duty to maintain these characteristics even if they are no longer necessary in our environment today. The American KC Standard for the breed describes most of the characteristics but it does not tell their function.

Our standard calls for no stop, "the topline of the skull and the topline of the muzzle showing but little break downward from a straight line as they join". Actually, what

appears to be a stop is really the fatty pads above the eye which also forms the "slight furrow between the eyes" as described in the Standard.

The Malamute should have a thick, almost puffy layer of fat both above and below the eye for several reasons:

1. When working, the act of shaking the head or even blinking the eyes will break away the frost, ice or snow collecting around the eye by the jelly-like movement of this fat.

2. This fat also works like a sunshade in that it can droop over the eye with the lid slightly lowered and protect the eye from flying ice particles etc.

3. The third and perhaps the most important is that the eye is protected by this layer of fat which absorbs the body heat and maintains a stable temperature. Malamutes also have eyelashes and these protect the eye from flying ice particles etc.

The almond shape and oblique set of the eye is determined by the shape of the head. The more stop the rounder the eye can be. Also the amount of the fatty pads about the eye will alter the appearance of the eye. A round or protruding eye is more susceptible to injury and snow blindness. Compare the eyes of the other Arctic animals in pictures. All are almond shaped and deep set.

The double coat is the most obvious survival characteristic of the breed. The thick, coarse guard coat acts as a water repellent

covering for the insulating undercoat. Since loss of body heat is so critical to survival, the proper coat is essential.

Because Wisconsin weather is so variable, I've had a chance to observe how the dogs with different kinds of coats tolerate different kinds of weather conditions. Dogs with a long soft coat can do well in the cold temperatures, wind and dry snow, but wet and sleet cause ice balls to form on the long hairs. When working the ice pulls the balls out; they will tear the coat right out and without shelter the moisture laden coat will freeze.

The dog with a short guard coat can't tolerate the wind and severe cold as well. They require more food to maintain body weight and when the severe temperatures continue for several weeks, I find fur worn off and sores developing from constantly curling up in the dog houses.

The dog with the thick, coarse guard coat and dense oily undercoat seems oblivious to the cold, wind, snow, sleet or rain. He is ready to work or play and sleep out in all kinds of weather. You can almost tell the windchill factor by which dogs are using the dog house and which are sleeping out.

Malamute temperament has been shaped by his environment and his work. His survival instincts are very strong. Don't expect to teach your dog not to steal food from you or other dogs. His instincts tell him that the dog who stole food even if beaten for it was the one who lived on to perpetuate the breed. The dog who refused to cross unsafe ice, no matter how much he was beaten, is also the one which lived. So independence and stubbornness are two more of their survival characteristics.

The culture of the Eskimo also shaped the dogs' temperament. The Eskimos were

nomads so Malamutes have no territorial instincts except for their own food and space. Home is wherever he is staked for the night. Sharing was the Eskimo way of life. No one was ever refused food, shelter or even the company of one's wife. Therefore, the dogs were never used to protect anything.

During World War II the army tried to train Malamute for guard work. First it took a great deal more aggravation to get Mals to attack. And when they finally did attack they went straight for the throat and couldn't be called off. The breed proved to be totally unsuited for this kind of work. This is not surprising as our Standard specifically states he is not a one man dog.

The Malamute has a very strong pack instinct. Because he feels this need to establish his order in the pack, he frequently shows aggression toward other dogs. And if the dog is not properly disciplined he will eventually try to include human family members in his pack. It is the owners' inability to understand and cope with this strong pack instinct that causes most of the temperament problems in the breed.

The Malamute doesn't belong in every household. So it is our duty as breeders to screen our puppy buyers and to educate them. With plenty of socialisation and proper and consistent training, the Malamute can be a perfect pet for the right family. However, we must never forget that his original function was to be a sledge dog for heavy freighting in a harsh, Arctic environment and it is our duty to maintain every one of those survival characteristics, even if they do not adapt readily to our environment.

Submitted by L & J Watkins, Victoria.

Breeder of the Year: Nancy C Russel of Sussex, Wisconsin, with her Alaskan Malamute trio comprised of Am Can Ch StormKloud's Oomiak, Am Can Ch StormKloud's Vanilla Snoman, and Am Can Ch StormKloud's Better Than Ever.

