



# THE PAIN AND JOY OF A BLIZZARD RUN IN AUSTRALIA!

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Many exhausting sled dog adventures and races have been run in the world. "The Last Great Race", the "Alpirod", even the challenging "Yukon Quest", cause many of us to dream and wish for a chance to mix with the best. What inspires dog owners to subject themselves to such extremes? Why do sled dog drivers subject themselves to insomnia, pushing their teams through the darkness with minimal sleep? For days, even weeks, the pain of frostbite will remain. What is their reward? For the musher it is themselves and their dogs against the great force of nature!

The working Siberian has been aiding man for hundreds of years but sledding in Australia has existed for only a fraction of this time. Over the last few years the number of racing Siberians has taken a dramatic increase, due the dedication of a few enthusiasts. It is a shame that Australia will never experience the thrill of an international sled race – the frenzied noise of the eager dogs, the nervous excitement of the dog driver, the constant buzz from the enthralled crowd.

In many ways we are a lucky country. It would be difficult to choose which twenty dogs to harness from a kennel of 140 eager faces. However, Australia's leap into the world of the sled dog has had two main stumbling blocks – bureaucracy and the overnight expert. The responsible sled dog driver should be able to run his team in an allocated, suitably snow covered area. Except for a small tract of land, the best snowfields are contained within National Parks. Thus, according to a select few in Government, is the end of the story. The other danger is the overnight sledding expert – one of my greatest fears. Some of their work I have already experienced, and spent a vast amount of energy to repair the damage they have inflicted. It is a frightening scenario. Another seed ready to germinate is the influence of the animal activists. When they rear their heads in Australia, will the working/racing Siberian survive?

What makes a great working Husky? Do you have the right dog? Questions that pose great problems in Australia because of our limited number of reliable breeding kennels. You must be honest when assessing your dogs, or anything of sledding potential – not every dog is a leader and not every dog owner is a team leader! Poor team performance is often blamed on the dogs, but many owners must carefully assess themselves first. Training programs, diet, bloodlines, approach and health are a few of the important factors which a dog cannot control. Whether speed racing, weight pull or endurance, the essential ingredient is enjoyment. No matter what the level of experience,

forget the "I must win" – think and consider the happiness and well being of the dogs and their condition. Always keep the notion of fun on your mind – as soon as it becomes hard work, give up.

How well do you really understand your dogs? To be successful you must communicate verbally and non-verbally. Dogs can read our signals very easily, through the tone and pitch of our voice to the simple body language. Study your dogs and learn their habits – speak their language and listen to what they have to say. A good lead dog should never look back when running. You must look through its eyes and watch the ever scanning ears. Where is it looking? If it trusts you, it will do as you ask – but be ready for the unexpected. Never lay fault with the dogs. Gain your dogs' respect by showing them respect. I have seen people try to drive a dog team when they are not a part of the team. The "Look at me ..." approach will only lead to disaster. Socialising is a must, especially for mixing dogs from different kennels, no fights, no trouble. An aggressive dog must be dealt with swiftly.

A training program can only commence once you have decided your goal – sprint versus endurance, weight pull versus carting. My training program will not begin until the cooler months following Easter. I train for endurance rather than the short track gig racing, so my program will differ from others. Starting with short, slow runs, I progressively build up runs to over 30km a session. In order to keep up the interest of the dogs, a variety of track locations and speeds are chosen. I have learnt that it is much better to take extra time to find locations of interest rather than train over the same old, boring, repetitive ground.

Keep your commands simple, short, but expressive. I use only ten and a few of those not very often. No – out in front – left – right – on by – woo – stay – easy – OK let's go – back.

If your team is doing what you have asked of them, then shut up. Don't confuse them with constant chatter. Always remember to be expressive with your voice, this is far more effective than screaming out commands.

Start your training program with a little more condition on your dogs than normal. A lean dog does not mean a fit one. As temperatures drop and the hard work begins, an increase in fat in the dogs' diet will enable them to give that extra without so much physical strength being depleted. As I cook my own dog food, I find it easy to regulate the fat/carbohydrate ratio. Meat,

vegetable, pasta and rice, combined with a dry mix is a well balanced working dog diet. As the work rate increases, do not over feed on dry mix as the water absorption/loss rate will be too great. Keep an eye out for stress, injuries and dehydration. Keep the fluids up, especially with any cases of stress diarrhoea. Even in the coldest climates, water is essential so even bait the water if necessary.

I would like to think that this new sport of harnessing the Siberian is here to stay. The endurance and stamina of teams will increase along with the distances travelled. As the co-ordinator of the Victorian Disabled Skiers Association dog sled team, I have been the main person involved in running a team of Siberian Huskies in the snow for the past ten years. The aim of the voluntary program is to allow access for the disabled to the snowfields, away from the crowded ski resorts. Through a heavily restricted permit system, we have been able to gain access to all of the main picturesque, snow covered alps throughout Victoria.

The achievements of the team have been nothing short of history making. From winding through many crowded ski resorts, exploring the summits of Falls Creek and Mt Baw Baw to the exhilarating return trips to Dinner Plain after lunching at Mt Hotham; magazine features; TV segments; the opening of ski shows and lectures.

Our team size varies from six to 14 dogs, depending on their availability. All dogs have their set place in the team, from the leaders to the wheel dogs. Many have preferred sides on which they like to run. It is now very easy to slot new dogs into the existing team. With so much experience, it only takes a few moments and simple routines for beginners to understand what is happening. I now never underestimate a dog's potential. To see our team in action is a credit to all those involved. On the simple command of "out in front", the leaders will hold the team tight with no human assistance. Winding a massive line of 14 dogs through a crowded ski resort, the dogs and sled will not touch or knock a single skier. A single call of "back" will enable the whole team to run around and face the other direction on a track no more than a metre wide, no tangles and no extra help. The dogs have the ability to stand quietly while being patted and photographed, yet when requested, they will pull their hearts out.

Snow in Australia is not good for sledding, it is too soft and wet. I have great pride in what our team has achieved and what they are capable of doing.