

The dawn is just breaking over a very cold winter scene in Canberra. At the intersection of Cotter and Uriarra roads, a small group of people emerge from heated cars, beanies jammed tight over their heads to keep out the cold, gloves on. Some like myself mutter about leaving warm beds so early on a Saturday morning. We are all here for a purpose, something that unless we do, the weekend is as good as ruined - to run our dogs in harness. We are the Canberra Sled Dog Club.

As the day brightens up, more cars arrive, some towing trailers with dogs, some with rigs on top, others with scooters. Dogs are harnessed and people swap beanies for bike hats and in groups, away we go. The Canberra Forest is alive with mushers!

Teams come in all ages, all sorts of dogs have a go. There are of course many Alaskan Malamutes and Syberian Huskies but a regular musher is an Akita who was a rescue dog. A team of GSPs run occasionally. Even more unusual is Ella the Great Dane.

Ella is my Great Dane. A fawn girl. Her registered name is Aust. Ch Danehill Isadora CD ET. From a pup I wanted her to show the world that a Dane can do run in harness, except I had to wait until she was 2 before we could really have a go as she had to grow up first. We have been training with the club since April 2002 and have competed in three races over the winter. Its been fun- except for the time we crashed big time!

Sprint races for the one dog race are over about 3km. That's 3km of flat out running for your dog, and flat out scooting for you. Getting fit was the challenge for this winter!

In suburban Canberra, trying to get fit for running was proving difficult. My first problem was my full time job (but I couldn't give that away) and the second, somewhere safe to run in the dark. A harness run was out of the question around where I live. We compromised by running Ella off lead beside a bike track and me pedaling the bike as fast as though the seat was on fire!

We could only manage this once a week so we would walk miles to keep our endurance. Twice a week we would walk 10 km per night. I would be accompanied by my neighbor Richard who also doubled as my scooter mechanic and Ambrose our older Great Dane who was the first dog I trained in harness.

One night a week I would try to jog (puff, blow and stagger) 3 km to get me fit for running as I have never been good at this (getting fit or running).

Our first race was Wingelo. I was so nervous. All I could think of was what if Ella won't run and make a fool out of us. It was also cold and windy. We were camping in tents in the forest. It took four people to put up one tent as the wind kept blowing everything away. The only civilised comfort was porta loos which by Sunday were not that civilised! To my surprise, Ella ran ok. Not great but she did run. We passed other mushers and other mushers passed us without mishap. We didn't even come last! I was very proud of our 5th last place.

Chuffed with my success of camping in the wilderness with no husband, electricity, showers and loos, I entered Belangalo races. There was a charity night race so I entered Ambrose in that one for a bit of fun. Not every day can you see a 90kg Great Dane in harness.

Stepping up our preparation and our fitness training we headed off to our next race with high expectations. I even had my husband come on this trip for support. Two great danes in our wagon, trailer with camping stuff and a scooter, a couple of cameras and away we went following the Canberra Sled Dog Club convoy.

Belangalo camp was great. The club took up a whole corner of the grounds. We had the biggest number of members at a race they'd seen in ages.

Greg, my hubby, wondered why I didn't bother setting an alarm to get up the next

morning but at 5.30am he heard why. As 3.00 or so dogs start to sing good morning at once, it makes quite a din. So much for his sleep in - not impressed!

Off we went, half asleep and freezing cold to the mushers meeting then on to get ready and watch the 6 dog teams leave.

By the time it was time for the 1 dog, I was in my normal frenzy and Greg was just struggling out of bed.

It last was at last our turn to race. We counted down and Ella was off after some encouragement. She hit her straps and took off after about 5m of dawdling. The track went up a small hill and around to the left, then right. Another track branched off to the left from here. This track lead back to camp and a lot of dogs were trying to go up this track instead of straight ahead.

Ella decided to go left after she saw the team ahead do it. The only thing was she was going flat out, the fastest I had ever felt her go - which at the time I was rapt. Her sharp left hand turn took me and my rickety old scooter by surprise. I could not brake as the brakes were not the best in spite of poor Richard trying his best to mend them on several occasions. I turned the handlebars but it was too late. The scooter whipped out from under me and flung me fair into the air and toward the track embankment.

All too fast but in slow motion is what it feels like when you are crashing. The ground came up to meet me and I bit it hard.

Unbeknown to me I had thumped my head that well that I had concussion. All I felt when the world stopped moving was my lip hurt and so did my nose and I was somewhat winded.

Where was Ella? Ella had taken fright and now towing the scooter - tail between her legs, ran past me. I had to catch the scooter to stop the dog. That achieved (don't ask me how as from now on I was on autopilot) I started assessing the damage. Blood was flowing from my mouth as I had put my front teeth through my bottom lip. My nose was hurting but not bleeding so did not concern me for the moment. Legs and arms all worked. Back on and racing.

While I was brushing myself off and untangling the dog from the line and harness, another musher came along. She had started after me and her dog also wanted to turn left, although, not with the determination Ella had shown. Sharon asked me if I was ok and I replied I was fine, then she saw my mouth and nearly had a fit. She pleaded with me to go back to the start but there was no going back for me! All I wanted to do was finish the race - Autopilot and all.

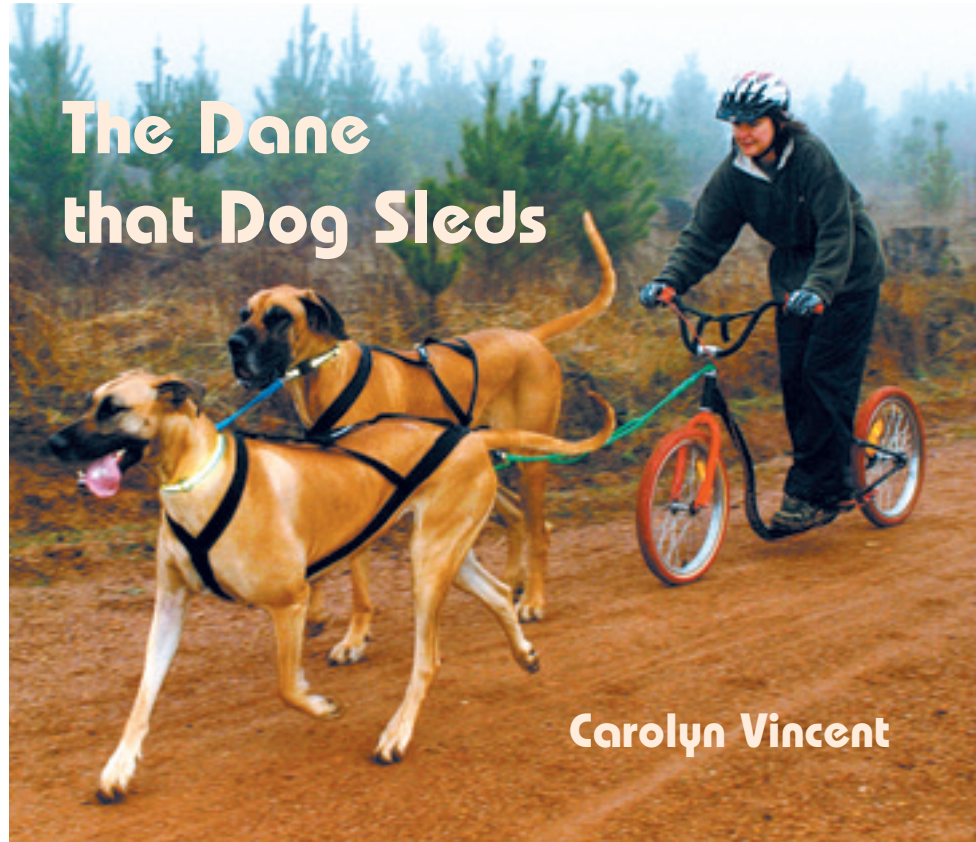
Back to camp to assess the damage on human, scooter and dog. Dog appeared fine but was in disgrace. Scooter was far from fine, with a bucked back wheel and almost irreparably stuffed brakes. Human was in worse shape than scooter with a big gash under chin, bleeding mouth, numb nose and various bits of bark off all over. What a mess.

So ended my dream of finishing victorious in front of a proud husband. The husband was holding a bucket for me to rinse my bleeding mouth with salt water into. This was clearly not what was supposed to happen on my weekend of racing.

After resting up for the remainder of the day, I decided I would not run Ambrose in the charity race, so I went to the musher's meeting to scratch him. At the meeting, I only saw about a dozen other mushers and felt bad that a charity race should have such a poor turnout so decided to stay entered. Little did I know they had over 30 entries! However by the time I discovered this, it was too late to pull out.

I am sure Greg and the rest of the club thought I was an absolute nutcase. I was beginning to wonder whether this was true. We did the best we could to fix the brakes on the scooter so that they worked in a fashion. I had

The Dane that Dog Sleds



Carolyn Vincent

borrowed a rig light so I could see where I was going. So we attached this somehow too. Ambrose and I set off for the "Dash in the Dark."

"Dash" and "Ambrose" should not be mentioned in the same sentence unless it involves chasing a cat. Thank goodness there were no cats as I was dead scared of crashing again. Ambrose true to form, put on his best show gait trot and we did what must have been one of the slowest 2km tracks ever. Every time he broke into a canter the rig light would fall off and I would have to stop him and fix it back in place. What a comedy.

For our efforts in the Dash in the Dark we won the red lantern for coming last. At least now I can say Ambrose has won something in his dog sledding career! After the presentation and a few red wines around the camp fire, I called it a day!

Next morning bought us another thick frost and blue skies. I contemplated pulling out of the second heat of my race as my chin and inner mouth were so sore and swollen and I felt quite miserable. Glad tents don't come with mirrors! However, I needed to run again as I was desperate to get my confidence back running Ella. (fall off the horse - get back on theory)

We didn't crash but Ella and I did not have the synergy we had before either. I could tell the work would be cut out for us getting back our trust and Ella not expecting the scooter to frighten her again.

To my extreme astonishment, as I was awarded my Red Lantern (again) I was announced the winner of the Syberian Husky Club of NSW Encouragement Award. I was absolutely thrilled and very thankful.

Back to training and Ella and my confidence was shot. She did not like running and I was nervous crashing. We had entered our own club race - the Canberra Classic and I was dreading another red lantern because we just were just hopeless. I also hated my scooter in spite of Richard trying his best to mend the brakes and the wheel. I had started dropping big hints for a new one for my coming birthday etc, unfortunately to deaf ears.

The big race arrived and I was not feeling good about it. After attending the musher's meeting, receiving my number etc, I went about getting my scooter off the car bike rack. The brakes were jammed on. Panic stations! I cannot race with a jammed wheel! Emergency calls on the mobile to husband to

summons Richard and his magic spanners to the race post haste!

While I was going berserk, my good friend Sue turned up with a scooter in her car. She offered me her scooter as she was not racing

and thought someone might need a spare scooter. Hooray for Sue!! She saved my day and me going spare!

Sue's scooter made mine feel archaic. It had front and back brakes and they worked! It also had bigger wheels, (my scooter was modeled off a BMX bike). From the moment I had a quick practice on it, my confidence was back. Now we had 5 minutes to get Ella's confidence back too.

Greg and Richard arrived in a squeal of tyres and a nick of time to fix the old scooter only to be told by me not to bother, I had found a new one and I never wanted to get back on the old one again! But while you are here, you may as well watch the race.

We started our race in the normal fashion, me yelling "go" and Ella turning around to see what I was yelling for, then realising that it was her cue to run and trot off the start. Soon we were galloping at a wild rate down the first leg of the race. Ella must have sensed that we had our confidence back as she galloped on not turning around to see whether the scooter was going to bite her on the bum. We were rocketing along when we came to the hill that took us to the finish. Then we conked out. Just when your legs cannot scoot any more because the muscles are screaming and you are puffing so much that your lungs are on the verge of collapse and all you want is a rest, the finish line comes in view and you don't dare stop to save face!

We had made it and in good time. No red lanterns for us on this race! We came 27th out of 37.

Heat 2 on Sunday was just as good. The best part was that Ella decided that she wanted to run and instead of turning around at the start, she pulled right from go just like a real sled dog. I was stoked. Its only a small step but it meant all the training was finally paying off. Our overall result was 26th out of 37. We had finished on a high after all. Our best result all year.

Summer time is coming so its time to have a rest and get ready to go to some shows. We will again endeavor to sled race again next year (if Ella is not having pups). I hope Santa will bring me a good scooter like Sue's at Christmas time.

Many thanks go to the dog sled racing folk, particularly from the Canberra club for their help (particularly when I crashed) and advice and for embracing this mad woman and the Great Dane. Its been an interesting and educational season.

See! You can teach a Great Dane to run! Next challenge ≠ to get fast enough to win a ribbon!