

## Malamute Wheel Dogs



*Years ago, on a remote island in South East Alaska I had the opportunity to work in a logging camp. Holy smokes, those loggers were tougher than wolverines! They loved hard work, and were always upbeat and full of character. I often reflect back to those loggers when my wheel dogs are hitched up and ready to take on the day. Some say enduring a life of hard and tough work builds character. There's no doubt that loggers and my wheel dogs are true testament to that philosophy.*

Wheel dogs all have a particular character in common. If they were people in our society, they would be the ones with hearts of gold. They would be the laborers, loggers, miners and frontiersmen. They would be the trailblazers, making life easier for the rest of us. My fondest memories of my wheel dogs are not when they were busting through snowdrifts, blizzards or clawing over torturous mountain passes, but when we were camping.

We had been traveling for two months, and it was late January. The temperature was unusually mild, about +10F. Traveling by the dim glow of a quarter moon we climbed to the highest point on a mountain pass. I decided to make camp since it was windswept of snow. The bare tundra would be comfortable for the dogs, a break from the usual snow and ice they

sleep on every night. After stopping the team, I pulled the picket line out of the sled, strung it across the brown tundra, anchored the ends down with ice hooks and attached the dogs to the line. After feeding them, I set up my tent and settled in for the night. The dogs immediately fell asleep on the soft tundra with full and bulging tummies. I wasn't far behind them as I dozed off in my tent with the aroma of arctic moss in the air.

Around midnight, somber mournful howls broke my sleep. Slipping out of my sleeping bag, I crawled across the tent floor, unzipped the door and looked outside. Red, bright orange and deep purple lights illuminated the sharp jagged pinnacles on the mountain peaks. The bright light of the Aurora Borealis cast shadows of the dogs against the white canvas tent wall.

On the tundra were all the wheel dogs, sitting side by side with their muzzles pointed straight toward heaven, singing a harmonious tune, a perfectly orchestrated howl, an ancient hymn to their ancestors.

Since the wheel position in a team is so demanding, I like to use up to seven wheel dogs side by side. With this method, there is no stress on an individual dog. If one of them gets tired, he can ease off for a while, recover, and hit the harness again. In the meantime, his running mates pick up the slack and keep the sleds moving. They have fine-tuned this technique, and I find it amazing how intelligent and resourceful those wheel dogs are.

The wheelers' physical build and cheerful disposition contribute to their importance in a team. What exactly are the ingredients that



Clockwise from top left: Farmer • Hero • Hooch • Nikko • Nanook • Johnny

make the perfect wheel dog? Of course, sheer muscle is on the list, good temperament, and a pinch of athletic ability doesn't hurt, however intelligence is the main ingredient. A dog does not have to be an Einstein to grunt and pull a loaded sled across the arctic, but it does take brains to pace themselves, prevent tangling lines, and learn how to hit the harnesses simultaneously to get the sleds through tough jams. Over several years in harness, these traits are naturally developed, but it takes intelligence to start with. Actually, I like to use the wheel position as the first step on the ladder for my young lead dogs. In the wheel position, or the trenches, is where they develop enthusiasm, strength and character.

One of my best wheel dogs and the most dominant character in the team is Hero. He finds a spot in everyone's heart the second they meet him. What makes him stand out from the others? I am sure his moans, howl, and begging for a scratch on his butt might have something to do with it, and his huge muscular build and thick, reddish brown fur is quite remarkable. However, his big warm heart and friendly nature shine boldly above all his other characteristics.

Roger Burgraff lent Hero to me 9 years ago. Roger is a long time Alaska resident, gold miner, entrepreneur, and expedition dog musher. Roger also has been a malamute breeder for 45 years with a working line of Alaskan malamutes that trace back to the original mals. Just the other day, I asked him where in the world he came up with the name Hero. His enthusi-

asm shot up immediately. "Boy, that's a story!" he said.

When Hero was a pup he ran loose freely amongst Roger's other animals. He was like the guardian of his chickens, goats, and geese on his small farm. The family fell in love with mother goose and her two goslings. When the goslings disappeared for a couple days, Roger combed the brush, swamps and gardens, but there was no sign of them. The family feared that a fox may have had stolen the little goslings. Luckily, young Hero, tromping through the thick willows, found the two little ones trapped in a deep hole in the woods. His moans and howls attracted Roger's attention and the goslings were saved. So, that's where Hero got his name, and he has lived up to his namesake all his life.

Hero is the patriarch of our kennel. Not only has he fathered most of our pups, he has also taught every young wheel dog and leader to pull, I mean PULL. You might ask how a dog can teach another to put their life and heart into such a toilsome task. It seems Hero's upbeat character pours out of him and affects every dog around. Although malamute pups naturally love to pull, they still have to learn how to work together as a team.

In addition to Hero's influence, I have found the best way for pups to overcome the many adversities encountered on the arctic trail is simply, one-on-one personal attention to each dog. From the time the little fur balls are born to the day they pass on to their eternal playground in heaven's arctic, they are treated as

members of our family. This close bonding creates character.

There is one amazing phenomenon that many dog mushers and dog owners agree with; dogs sometimes live up to their namesakes, or exhibit a certain trait of their name. My wheelers are great examples of this.

For instance, Farmer was named at four weeks of age and he's the only dog I have ever seen that gets dirty in midwinter in the arctic while everyone else's coats are shining exuberantly. He somehow finds a "field to plow" and gets his red and white thick fur covered with dirt.

Nikko, is a 120 lb. calm and resourceful 'ol brute'. His name is of Greek origin, meaning "victorious." Although, there are few dogs in the team that would ever cross him in any way whatsoever, I am sure he would live up to his name in record time. And true to Greek nature, he's confident and knows how to work hard but have fun when the day is done. Nikko is Farmer's brother and best friend. When the two dogs were 6 weeks old they were impossible to tell apart, until Farmer discovered dirt!

In the Greek language, Pete means "rock," and just like a rock, our Pete is solid and impenetrable. His white and black coat glistens in the sun as he hits his harness with force. The other wheel dogs notice his enthusiasm and the team jumps ahead. Pete is a relatively light guy at 85 lbs but packs a punch nevertheless.

Gentleman Johnny, now there's a character! Johnny has a sharp black and white coat and a face of weathered dignity. He behaves perfect-



ly at times. He would be like the guy who lays down his coat over a mud puddle for a lady crossing the street, or mows the lawn for an old grandma out of sheer kindness. However, sometimes the “gentleman” part of his name transforms into “hell raiser.” He can cause the biggest unprovoked malamute brawl I have ever seen and he seems to love it!

Hooch is a 115 lb. big ol’ brute. He’s relatively tall for a malamute but is a model m’loot. We had the privilege to adopt Hooch last winter after his owner passed on. Although, his name doesn’t relate to anything he drinks, he obviously was his owners favorite. He overflows with friendliness, loyalty and loves to pull.

And then there’s Nanook. Now she is living proof of this namesake phenomenon! She is a pure white malamute, 100lbs., intelligent and has great stamina. In the Inupiat language, her name means “polar bear” and Nanook seems to take after her namesake. She is an excellent wheel dog, and a top-notch command leader, but she has one quirk; I never saw a malamute that was so obsessed with chasing polar bears. Nanook can sniff out those bears five miles from our camp. When she’s in lead she will drag the other leaders, against their whining wills of course, towards the source of the smell. That’s when Nanook gets demoted to wheel dog, where she calms down quite quickly. In wheel she gets to run next to Hero, who has been her best friend since the two dogs were pups. They love each other and Hero becomes incredibly ticked off towards any dog that gets between them. It’s amazing to watch these guys exhibit those emotions, just like kids!

These wheelers have an upbeat and energet-

ic characteristic about them that sets the tone of the entire team. They are like the cement foundation of a building; they support the rest of the structure, or in this case the team.

What makes them hunger and thirst to pull with such heart? I like to think the answer lies with their carefree life when they are pups. I have found that malamutes take a relatively long time to mature, usually four years. During their first year in harness there is absolutely no pressure upon them; they just enjoy running, pulling and playing. In fact, they goof off so much while in harness the entire team sometimes gets completely absorbed in their childish antics, and all forward motion of the sleds ceases.

Last winter I brought two yearling pups with me on an arctic expedition. They were both males, Bucko and Howdy. Howdy, has a thick off-white coat and is stout and energetic. Harnessing this guy can be tricky to say the least. Howdy is like one of those fireworks that when it’s lit, it twirls, whines and screams then goes ballistic bouncing off the ground. But when he finally focuses his energy he can sure use it against me. I bet the Olympic wrestling team would be proud of Howdy. I believe he has pinned me a time or two.

Now, Bucko is his polar opposite. He has a plush, sunset red coat, which feels like thick velvet. He’s calm, mature beyond his years, resourceful, conservative and has a bit more dignity than his brother. I like to hitch the pups beside the sleds with tug lines attached to the back stanchions by the handlebars, and their necklines attached to the brush bows. This gives the pups freedom to ease off in pulling when



*Malamute wheel dog: Pete*

they feel like it, and it doesn’t distract the adults from doing their work. Nevertheless, there is a drawback in this method. Sometimes a resourceful pup will figure out riding ON the sled is more exciting than running beside it. Bucko, with his inventive canine brain, decided riding on the sled was boring, so he stood up on his back legs, placed his front paws on top of the sled and hopped along. It looked like a toddler pushing a grocery cart full of food downhill with his legs desperately trying to keep up with the speeding cart. Howdy, the firecracker and champion wrestler thought that Bucko’s idea was brilliant, and mimicked his brother. Now, I had a team of malamutes pulling thousands of pounds of vital supplies across Alaska’s frozen arctic with two goofy pups pushing grocery carts. Holy smokes!

As the pups mature, they will remember their first experiences in a team, good or bad. This first impression sets the tone and character for the rest of their lives. Eventually the pups will become like the other wheel dogs in the team. They will be the ones with hearts of gold. They will have the characteristics of laborers, loggers, miners and frontiersmen. They will be the trailblazers making life easier for the rest of the team.