

THE SIBERIAN HUSKY

Fit for function or not?

by Sally Leich

By way of an introduction, Sally Leich (Forstal) has had Siberian Huskies and been active in the breed for 45 years. She was the first person to work them, indeed any sled dog breed, in the UK, and still works and races competitively. She has worked and raced Siberians in Central Europe with the well-known Kolyma Siberians, sadly no longer active. She has trained with many of the best known working Siberian Husky kennels in the world including Alaskan/Anadyr, Sepp-Alta and Vargevass. She has attended a Siberian Husky Club of America specialty where there were in excess of 400 entries.

She was a founder member of the Siberian Husky Club of Great Britain and helped set up hip and eye testing schemes, code of ethics, working teach-ins and judges' seminars and the early racing scene.

Sally has been awarding CCs in the Siberian Husky since the first year the breed attained CC status and indeed awarded the first set at Crufts in 1986. She has judged many times in this country and has also judged many club shows overseas. She was given the honour of being asked to speak at the Polar Breed conference, held in Sweden in 2012, an event that occurs only every few years.

Forstal Siberians were honoured and delighted to be asked to appear in DOG WORLD in 2009, on their 40th anniversary, in the 'Great Breeders' feature, written by Simon Parsons. His article provides an excellent reference for anyone interested in the aims and achievements of Forstal Siberians.

I WAS VERY pleased to read in Krystyan Greenland's breed notes in *Our Dogs* that he has expressed grave concerns about the way our breed is being taken in the show ring these past few years, and especially the last couple of years. I fully agree with his concerns and have recently written a letter, on behalf of both the Siberian Husky clubs in the UK, expressing similar concerns to the Siberian Husky Club of America, which is currently compiling a new illustrated version of its US breed Standard.

It is of interest here that three of the Scandinavian Siberian Husky clubs – Norway, Sweden and Finland – where the dual-purpose and working Siberian is still thriving, have done the same. It is the view of all of these clubs that we need to air our concerns in the dog press now, as well, because the situation has become so bad.

The trends that we see in the show ring at the moment are very much 'history repeating itself' and it is my belief that they stem from a basic misunderstanding about the Siberian Husky and the type of work the breed was developed for.

When people envisage a sled dog, they tend to think of a freighting type dog, generally a large, heavily built type of dog. Indeed, Joe Public always expresses surprise at the comparatively small size and slight stature of our Kennel Club Standard-fitting working Siberians.

It was exactly the same when Siberian Huskies first came across the Bering Straits into Alaska in the early 20th century. Indeed people there (the Gold Rush folk, who already had teams of big, heavy freighting type dogs) famously viewed these little sled dogs from Siberia with total disdain and called them 'Siberian Rats'. It was not until teams of Siberian Huskies finished first, second and fourth in the prestigious and very tough 408-mile All Alaska Sweepstakes race that people looked again at these small, understated dogs and started to realise what exceptional sled dogs they were.

Funnily enough, we had a very similar experience when we imported the first few Siberians into the UK in the late 1960s/early '70s. At that time, judges and exhibitors in the UK had only seen the freighting types of sled dogs in the show ring. At the shows we were often in AV sled dog or AV Husky classes and when we entered with our Siberians we were always last in every class, behind all the much larger, bigger Alaskan



photo Siberprint

Malamutes and what were then termed 'Huskies' (now divided into Greenland Dogs and Canadian Eskimo Dogs). A well-known breeder and owner of both these breeds was once reported to say that the Siberians 'wouldn't be able to pull themselves out of a wet paper bag'. This is the type of attitude we were up against a lot of the time and there was no working/racing scene in which we could prove our breed's worth. I was the first person to work any sled dog breed in the UK as, in those days, people didn't really believe it was possible to do anything like this in a country with a temperate climate like ours.

Siberians were originally developed to travel long distances at moderate to fast speeds, NOT to pull freight. Siberian Huskies are very strong dogs indeed, but they do not get this strength from bulk and weight, they get it from their build and the leverage a correct structure provides.

They are a natural and ancient breed of sled dog, developed by the Chukchi Indians of Eastern Siberia over many centuries of co-dependence. These beautiful, functional, friendly, highly intelligent and social animals earned their keep by pulling the Chukchi's sleds swiftly across vast tracts of inhospitable hunting grounds, where speed, stamina, toughness and hardiness were crucial for survival – the survival of the Chukchi people and their wonderful dogs, the Siberian Huskies, alike.

Over the years it is a sad fact that many breeds have been altered by showing and many breeds have ended up with two completely different types, those

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that work and those that do well in the show ring. Typically, dogs that do well in the show ring in all these divided breeds are more heavily built, stockier and altogether chunkier than their functional counterparts. Unfortunately the Siberian Husky is no exception in many countries. The fact that this is starting to happen in the UK show ring as well now, is a very sad and worrying trend indeed.

When we returned from the US with our Siberians, we were amazed to discover that there were only four other Siberians already in the UK – as they were already becoming a popular breed in the US. We became increasingly involved with the then 'Husky Club of GB', which took our breed under its wing, as it were, and encouraged us to show and breed to get the Siberian established in the UK.

Right from the start we were determined to try and keep the functional, dual-purpose type of dog



photo Cockram

The Siberian pictured standing is a mature dog and a very typical, Standard-fitting fellow in all areas. Please note the ideal length of leg relative to the depth of chest and the topline with that correct slight arch over the loin. The running shot is this dog in action running double lead with his sibling, and this is a very good illustration of the doubled-up phase of the double suspension gallop.



Lorna Demidoff, one of the founders of the Siberian breed in the US, with some of her foundation dogs. Pictured in 1935. Please note the correct length of leg and depth of chest, the toplines with that slight arch over the loin and good croup and the finely chiselled, typical heads of these early Siberians. The first breed Standards were describing dogs like this.

in the show ring, and to try to educate the judges to appreciate these functional, truly typical Siberians. We felt this was especially important as a different type was already starting to be promoted and exhibited in the show ring in the US and some other countries, so we were determined to try to prevent a similar division from occurring in the UK. To this end, we set out to promote and maintain a dual-purpose type of functional Siberian and get them accepted and recognised as correct in the show ring by our judges.

The UK Siberian Husky clubs have provided numerous seminars and teach-ins over the years to help interested judges understand the finer points of breed type and functionality and I personally have also produced much material for these functions, to help explain the type of work Siberian Huskies were designed to do and why they need to be built in a certain way.

It has not always been easy to get our point across, largely because of that stereotype I mentioned earlier of a heavily built, freighting type dog, which so many people carry in their minds in relation to all sled dogs. However, despite this, we have in the UK managed to go against the trends we see in just about every other country in the world where Siberian Huskies have become popular show dogs. We have had numerous champions in our breed which are also exceptional workers and these dogs have been put up in the ring by breed specialists and all-rounders alike.

While there have always been some all-rounder judges who felt they knew best and were not interested to learn, there were many more who were keen to understand the finer points of the breed and who attended our seminars. These judges did their best to recognise and reward a good dual-purpose Siberian in the ring, at least attempting to recognise working, functional structure and movement. Sadly many of these judges have now retired or died (to name but a few, David Samuel, Leonard Pagliero,

Bobby James, Andrew Thomson and Ellis Hulme). In the meantime the breed has grown in popularity all over the world, with the show type of Siberian more and more prolific, so our UK all-rounders see numerous examples of these incorrect types of Siberians at shows when they judge overseas.

As, nowadays, most working Siberian people overseas will not bother entering a show unless they know they have a working judge it becomes a vicious circle and it is therefore not surprising that our all-rounder judges believe that the type they see being given top honours in other countries must be correct – there are no examples of the correct working type to compare. This trend is also occurring in the UK now, and indeed seems to be happening to such an extent that the breed specialist judges, who understand the working requirements of this breed, will get a completely different entry from the all-rounders and certain breed judges who favour the 'show type' over the correct type.

With many new judges passed to award CCs every year, the breed clubs feel they could lose control as there seems to be less and less understanding of the functional requirements of our breed or the finer points of breed type, among some of our judges and exhibitors alike. This situation has coincided with a huge surge in popularity of our breed in this country and this, combined with the fact that it is much easier to import dogs into the UK now (especially from EU countries), means that many people new to the breed are jumping on the bandwagon and importing show type dogs. All this has meant that for the last few years in the UK show ring we are finding that our dual-purpose, functional Siberians are overlooked in favour of the stereotypes I have mentioned.

We feel that, in many countries, a caricature of the breed has been created, which bears little resemblance to the original working Siberian. We see many with incredibly short legs, overly deep, barrel chests and rigid toplines, with no flexibility; often these dogs also have rather stylised heads and tiny equilateral triangles for ears.

The other type that is becoming more and more prevalent is the mini Alaskan Malamute, with excessively heavy bone and a blocky, heavy, and altogether untypical head, with way too much stop and deep, jowly and loose-lipped muzzles.

Both these types of dog have started to be imported into the UK, bred and shown, especially under all-rounder judges. They don't usually appear under judges, like me, who are widely known to support the dual-purpose, functional Siberian. However, they are gaining many successes in the show ring, despite the fact that the more extreme examples are like a different breed from our functional, Standard fitting Siberians.

As the breed Standard is so often interpreted in the ways I have described, we have suggested to the SHCA that its new illustrated Standard would provide an excellent opportunity to redress the balance and strongly emphasise the great importance of various crucial features that are vital for a good Siberian.

These are: sufficient leg length (so that their length is greater than the depth of chest); correct depth and shape of chest (the chest should finish above the elbow); medium bone; correct topline, with that very important slight arch over the loin and a croup that is of sufficient length and slopes at 30 degrees from the horizontal (this arch over the loin is still described in our UK Standard, as it used to be in the original breed Standards, although I know it is no longer included in the US version).

To complement this athletic build, they should have a finely chiselled head (we still have the words 'fox like' in the UK Standard, although I know this was removed from the American Standard many years ago, along with all references to other animals); almond-shaped eyes set a trifle obliquely; and correctly shaped high-set ears, which should be slightly taller than they are wide at the base.

The Siberian Husky should be capable of good top speeds; the early breed Standards used to state that they could achieve speeds of 20mph for short distances, while working in harness and pulling a load. To achieve 'moderate to fast average speeds over vast distances', as all the original Standards for the breed required, these dogs would have to be able to reach this sort of top speed.

To achieve such top speeds, dogs should not be too heavily built, should have sufficient leg length, and they should have a slight arch over the loin allowing the necessary degree of flexibility to double right up and stretch right out in the forward stride.

It is our view (a view shared by people who have an interest in preserving the original type of functional Siberians everywhere in the world) that Siberians should be capable of the double suspension gallop like the sighthound breeds, where there are two phases of the stride when all four feet are off the ground. This is when these breeds are running flat out – when they are doubled up completely and when they are stretched out completely, and they will be doing this when running at 20mph. To achieve this double suspension gallop they must have the necessary degree of flexibility in their spine and the slight arch over the loin is a vital part of this flexibility.

Many of the recent imports into the UK are of the show type I have described and they would be physically incapable of doing this type of gallop or lope. Their builds are all wrong for the range of functionality required by a good working Siberian. The caricature types often have the 'flashy' sort of trot where there is a great deal of wasted energy – what I describe as 'all-action' movement, with the front legs coming up high to achieve more stride length and the back legs coming way up and out behind them at every stride. Sadly many people seem to love this sort of uneconomic, flashy action and mistake it for good movement. A typical Siberian movement is effortless, light footed and ground covering, with no wasted energy.

Something else which we find in our working lines is that they are a very slow-maturing breed; they only really look mature from the age of about five years and onwards. In most European countries a dog cannot attain its championship before it is at least one year old. We believe that this slow-maturing aspect is a very important feature of the breed because, if they look mature as puppies, then they will end up far too heavy by the time they are four or five years of age, or even younger. We have always stressed this point when running breed judging seminars in the UK.

Slow-maturing dogs also last well and will still be capable of working well into their older years. It has not been uncommon for the CC to be won from the veteran class at a UK show and many of our dual-purpose type champions have not attained their championship until they were veterans. In the US a dog can become a champion when it is still a puppy and this does not do a breed like ours any favours. I know you need to judge on the day, but if a puppy looks finished at under a year of age, you have to ask yourself what it is going to be like when it is three or four years old. It is not always the case, but frequently such a youngster will just continue to fill out and heavy up.

There have recently been some very heavy youngsters doing well in the UK ring, dogs that we would consider very heavy even if they were five years old and fully mature, but they are not yet two years old. A judge with a real understanding of the breed will not put up overly mature youngsters, in my opinion. A puppy or a junior can still be awarded the top honours, of course; if a judge understands the breed they will see the potential of an immature youngster and, if that is the best exhibit on the day, then such an outcome is fine.

We expect a young dog to look like a young dog – to

be leggy and unfinished looking, to have a chest that still needs to deepen as it matures and also to toe out a little, because those toes will end up straight enough once the dog is muscled up, whereas in our experience, the dead straight toes/feet in a young dog will usually end up toeing in at maturity. Similarly, the chest broadens and deepens with maturity.

Having said all this, I do recognise that some of the apparently 'working' type dogs seen in the show ring in this country can be too refined and light boned. It is also true that sometimes dogs are shown underweight and under-muscled. Indeed I have seen some dogs with lovely type when standing in profile which seemed to fall apart on the move, with ridiculously wild front action and weak, cow-hocked rears. This can sometimes be put down to youth and lack of fitness, but there is surely no excuse for showing dogs which are so lacking in muscle that they have really unsound movement!

Youngsters that toe out a little are absolutely acceptable, but the wild and excessively loose front movement and the weak, cow-hocked rears that we sometimes see are not desirable or typical. I feel that soundness in our breed needs watching and everyone exhibiting the dual-purpose type needs to be sure that their dogs are in good condition and absolutely sound in movement before they take them in the ring. Exhibiting unsound movers of this type will not do our cause any favours at all.

Equally judges need to be very aware of soundness when they are judging because, I am very much afraid, CCs have sometimes been awarded to unsound animals by some of our 'breed specialists'. There can surely be no excuse for this, where usually there is a good entry of functional, sound dogs from which to

"It is very sad to see our breed becoming more and more polarised..."

select a worthy winner for the top honours. To send an unsound dog through to represent the breed in the group does our cause no favours at all – and simply provides ammunition to those who would criticise the correct, dual-purpose, working type of Siberian in the show ring.

While discussing specifics about judging it should also be mentioned at this point that the Siberian is a natural breed and should be shown as naturally as possible. It should be allowed to come into a free, natural stand and then should be moved on a loose lead. Many newcomers to the breed are stacking their dogs in the show ring and actually placing their feet. This is all wrong. By all means a dog can be held or steadied while the judge goes over it, but it should not be set up, stacked or strung up while standing. Similarly while we want our breed to be presented clean and well groomed; trimming of any part of the coat is not allowed. I understand that this has occurred on more than one occasion recently, presumably to alter a dog's appearance.

Many people argue that a dog show is all about beauty and that the non-functional show type dogs are very beautiful with their flashy movement, stylish stereotyped appearance and often stand-off, fluffy coats. We totally disagree. Once you work these dogs in harness or even just see them working, you start to appreciate the really functional, athletic build of a correct and Standard-fitting Siberian. This is what is truly beautiful, with that balanced outline, ground-covering, light-footed and economical movement, and a well-chiselled foxy head. This breed should never be 'so heavy as to suggest a freighting breed nor so light as to suggest a sprint-racing animal', but it does need to have all the attributes I have mentioned to be a truly functional working sled dog, capable of the work for which it was developed.



Ch Forstal's Kaliznik (Cub), the breed CC record holder, in the show ring. He is pictured here at the age of about one year and eight years, winning a veteran stakes class under Brenda Banbury. As a youngster he clearly looks young and immature and this is what we would expect in a promising youngster. Cub was an excellent working dog and like all the dogs pictured with this article was capable of running at 20mph in harness for short distances of a few miles, as all correct Siberians are. He is the grandfather of the dog illustrating doubling-up movement.



photo Walker

It is worth noting that, while the breed as a whole is becoming increasingly popular, the true dual-purpose, typical and functional Siberian is becoming increasingly rare. The vast majority of people who compete in all types of sled dog races worldwide today do not have purebred Siberians any longer; there are so many different mixed-breed sled dogs out there now and this fact makes it all the more important to support and encourage those people who do stick with the purebred Siberian and preserve it as a functional, working sled dog. Good bloodlines can be lost so very quickly, in just a few years, if there is nobody making the effort to preserve them.

Back in the 1970s and '80s there were some super, dual-purpose, functional Siberians in Central Europe. The sport, and along with it the purebred, typical, functional working Siberian was thriving then. The majority of these dogs were truly lovely with excellent breed type and working ability. Very, very sadly and almost unbelievably, this has not been preserved and in these countries now there are very few from this gene pool left. The purebred racing scene has been taken over by some very extreme and often most untypical racing type dogs and the show ring by some very extreme and again most untypical 'show' type dogs. This is really so tragic in my view. All that work, all that selection through careful assessment and work testing, has been lost in just a few short years.

Is it not truly wonderful to have a breed that can still be work tested to the extent possible in the Siberian Husky? Is it not therefore a real shame if those dogs that can actually DO the job are not recognised by gaining top awards in the show ring? Is it not wonderful to have a pedigree breed that is, or can be, still truly 'fit for function, fit for purpose'?

Along with the Scandinavian Siberian Husky Clubs (Norway, Sweden and Finland) the UK Kennel Club, the Siberian Husky Club of Great Britain and the Scottish Siberian Husky Club we have suggested to the Siberian Husky Club of America that its new illustrated Standard

is a perfect opportunity to depict all the necessary attributes of a functional, original and correct working type clearly. We have suggested that it should include photographs and celebrate that our breed Standard can, within certain parameters, allow some variation in type. They have an opportunity to help to get our breed back on track in the show ring all round the world and start to rectify some of the damage that has already been done. A really constructive, informative and good illustrated Standard now will have an influence on opinion all over the world and could potentially be very positive. After all, surely a breed Standard should be a blue print from the past, defining the breed into the future?

It is very sad to see our breed becoming more and more polarised with some Siberian kennels focusing only on the show ring, closing their minds to the possibility that their type of dog is no longer capable of performing their original function; while other Siberian kennels focus only on working and racing, forgetting about the finer points of breed type. With no counterbalances in place this can only lead to further polarisation and a situation where the two types look like completely different breeds. Is this what people want? We have, in the main, managed to prevent this from happening in this country for over 40 years. Do we really want to see it happen now?

In my opinion and in the view of all those who support the notion of a dual-purpose, functional Siberian, including both the UK breed clubs and the breed clubs of Norway, Sweden and Finland, this is a very sorry state of affairs. This is why we feel it is so important to offer our views publicly now. We feel that a critical situation has been reached for our breed in this country and we offer this perspective in the hope that the true Siberian Huskies, these excellent working dogs that are such awesome athletes, can start once more to be accepted as correct, and be recognised and appreciated in the show ring by all CC-awarding judges.



Above, Sally training some of the Forstal Siberians back in the early 1990s. This six-dog team included a CC winner in lead, two champions and one multiple CC winner, just behind the leaders.

Right, Sally training a ten-dog team on a quad, with a passenger, in 2004. This team included two champions also and other CC and reserve CC winners.

All the dogs in these two teams are closely related to the dog illustrating the doubled-up phase of the gallop.

