

Is Racing a Test of Alaskan Malamute Function?

Alaskan Malamutes were not racing dogs.

I completely agree with the reasons Steve Anderson, as president of the Alaskan Malamute Club of America (AMCA), gave in his letter to the Alaskan Malamute Club of Sweden. And I cannot state it better.

However, in pursuit of information about the Alaskan Malamute, I have made nearly a fifty year study of Eskimo life; Arctic and Antarctic explorations. I will give you just a small sample of that information, pertaining to mileage, loads and speed; because it does not vary much from one source to another.

In *Peter Freuchen's Book of the Eskimos*¹, it is observed, "...the dogs adopted the trot that is natural to them – that is too fast for man to walk and too slow for him to run." Speed was not a factor in Eskimo life.

From *The Cruellest Miles: The Heroic Story of Dogs and Men in a Race Against an Epidemic*², it is noted that the serum run to Nome in 1927 was a relay of the best teams and drivers available. The 674 miles were completed in 127½ hours. This is an average of 5.3 miles per hour. The dogs were going as fast as possible over a well-used trail, but with typical Alaskan storms, and below-zero temperatures. The first 505 miles of the route were run by Malamute-type teams; the last 169 miles by Siberian Huskies. (Page 263).

The only reference I have found of Alaskan Malamute racing, per se, was in the All-Alaskan Sweepstakes. This was a 409 mile race from Nome to Candle, and back. Winning speeds were five miles per hour by Scotty Allen's Malamute-mix team in 1911 and 1912. (*The Cruellest Miles*, Page 67). "The malamute teams of Nome, which were bred for freighting heavy cargo, rarely went faster than five miles an hour." (Page 65).

On Byrd's 1928-1930 expedition to Antarctic, a 1,525 mile dog sled trip to the Queen Maud Mountains took 77 days³. This is an average of 20 miles per day. It was a supported trip, with airplanes dropping supplies. Byrd got his dogs from Eva Seeley in New Hampshire, and they were likely Malamutes as she is the person credited with registration of the breed with the American Kennel Club (AKC).

In *Malamutes of Mount McKinley National Park*⁴, it is noted, "After the initial start, a freight team (7-12 dogs), will settle down to a steady pace, usually around 6 miles per hour, regardless of load.... This steady pace, with a load, for long periods is where the freight team proves itself."

The most comprehensive statistics I have found are in the U.S. War Department's Field Manual on Dog Transportation, 1944.⁵

#64 - LOADS. "The average load should be calculated on the assumption that each dog will pull his own weight. However loads vary widely with conditions and terrain. On flat terrain a load of 1000 to 2000 lbs. is not exceptional for a team of 9 to 10 dogs. In rough, mountainous terrain about 300 lbs. is a good average load..." (page 94).

#67 – RATE. *“Lightly loaded mail teams in Alaska average 60 miles per day. Heavy loads (100 lb. per dog); 20 to 25 miles daily average is good. Average 3 to 4 miles per hour is possible.”* (page 95).

#91 – PULKA. *“The dog can pull twice his weight in flat country or on sea ice. In mountainous country, the load is the same as the dog’s weight when using a pulka.”*

No miles per hour were given. This is the only reference I have found for dogs pulling a pulka. Although the army used them in World War II, they did not become popular in this country.

From Jamie Nelson’s Musher Notes and Mileage Log on the Alaskan Malamutes she trained for the 1994 Iditarod Race:

Dec. 11, 1993 - Did 50 miles in 6 hours; had a team of dogs in front of me.

Dec. 12, 1993 - They reminded me they are Malamutes. The same 50 miles took 10 hours.

Note: At this time Jamie had approximately 1,000 miles on the team since the beginning of Autumn. This was with a 16-dog team, on a well-used trail and no load. 8.2 miles per hour was her best time.

I called Jamie and talked to her about requiring Alaskan Malamutes to race and she made the following comments:

Malamutes cannot compete with Huskies. If you are going to train to win Malamute-only races, you will have to have lean dogs (i.e. “skinny” to judges and show-dog owners). Will the show-dog owner risk getting damaged coats, injuries to pasterns, shoulders and feet, or possible dog fights when tangles occur within the team or with other teams? Or will you be able to educate judges to overlook scars, poor coat condition and very lean dogs and reward these dogs?

In her opinion, the show-dog owner cannot compete with a professional musher. Of course, one could send a show-dog to a professional musher to be trained and run in races but this would involve giving up the dog for months. Very few people would be willing to do this even if they could afford it, and again, provided there was a musher available and willing to train the dog.

Remember also, the statistics above are from professional working teams; not show dogs or family pets. If the Alaskan Malamute Club of Sweden endeavors to test the show-dog, who is primarily a family pet, or whose exercise limited to that of a non-professional musher/owner, it cannot expect to see the same performance level as a professionally-trained working team. Such an expectation would not be fair to the dog or the owner.

As I am not familiar with the terrain, trail conditions and climate of Sweden, I will not attempt to say what would be an appropriate test. But hopefully by having these statistics, you can develop a working program that will test the innate working instinct of the Alaskan Malamute.

I hope that the tests you decide on for the Alaskan Malamute in Sweden are not based on the speed of the faster teams. I have witnessed what happened to the Siberian Husky in the United States. The racing Siberian Husky is so different in structure, coat and substance, that they cannot compete in the show ring. The same has happened to the sporting breeds. The DNA of a champion field trial Labrador Retriever is no longer the same as a champion conformation Labrador Retriever. Therefore, please consider that the kind of performance test you require could split the breed into Show Malamutes and Racing Malamutes. To prevent this, you must develop a working test which proves Alaskan Malamute breed function as power and endurance, not speed.

Respectfully,

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¹Freuchen, Dagmar (Ed.). (1961). *Peter Freuchen's Book of the Eskimos*. New York, NY: Fawcett World Library. Reprint paperback, pg. 62

²Salisbury, Gay and Laney Salisbury. (2003). *The Cruellest Miles: The Heroic Story of Dogs and Men in a Race Against an Epidemic*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

³Gould, Laurence M. (1984). *Cold: The Record of an Antarctic Sledge Journey*. Carleton College; limited edition. Page 188.

⁴Sunborn, Roy, and Tom Ritter. (1971). *Malamutes of Mount McKinley National Park*. Alaska National Parks and Monuments Assn.

⁵*Dog Transportation: U.S. War Department, Field Manual 25-6*. (1944). Taylor Falls, MN: Taylor Falls Bookstore Publication (reprint 1976).

⁶Nelson, Jamie (professional musher). (1993/1994). *Musher Notes and Mileage Log for the 1993 and 1994 Iditarod Alaskan Malamute Team*. Togo, Minnesota.