

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Mush

Sled dogs born, live to pull

By Dick Ellis

With a sharp command from Musher Jon Mattsen, the power of the Gun Team unites and the dogsled surges forward on the trail of the southern unit of the Kettle Moraine State Forest. Still under one year of age and delivered in the same litter, Alaskan Huskies Remington, Marlin, Winchester and Ruger have strained at their harnesses and whined in anticipation of the word that will allow them once more to do what they were born to do; run...and pull.

Very quickly, the sled is at peak speed and the laminated ash runners glide over packed snow. The youthful exuberance of the team, (Colt, Savage and Browning have been left back at the East Troy Farm and out of the day's pull), is tempered by the steady experience of lead dog, Doc. The 12 year old Husky knows the game well and will turn on a dime at each fork of the trail to Mattsen's call of "Geee" (right) or "Haww" (left).

"It's the same commands used by the old teamsters with their horse teams or the drivers with the mules on the covered wagon trains," he says with a smile. "It's bad when you throw out the wrong command at a turn in the trail and the dogs listen."

Mattsen is a laid off construction worker from Milwaukee pursuing a long-standing passion for



Part of the Gun Team is rigged and ready for a sled pull and looks back in anticipation as musher Jon Mattsen prepares Marlin and Remington. (Dick Ellis)

working with pulling dogs during the long winter months. In the late 1990s, he worked with his Rotweiler, Buster in weight pulling competition on wheels on indoor surfaces like tile floors or on snow pulling sleds laden with weight until a winner was determined by the most weight, pulled the greatest distances, in the shortest time. The 110 pound Buster won often, with a maximum weight on wheels of 3,000 pounds and a maximum

weight on sled of 2300.

"The reason I did that kind of competition was that I was limited in the number of dogs I could have," he said. "I couldn't have six, seven eight dogs so I did what I could with Buster. Even as a little kid I would hook up my dog to a plastic sled and throw hotdogs in front of his so he would pull me up and down the driveway. My sister still has pictures of that."

He purchased his first "legiti-

mate" team for pulling a sled when his cousin bred a female Siberian Husky with an Alaskan Husky. Mattsen brought home eight of the pups in 1992, and purchased a training sled on the internet from a sled-maker in Montana.

"I trained those dogs with an ATV without an engine in early spring without snow," he said. "You can train all kinds of breeds to pull. But huskies are bred to pull and they have natural instincts



Laid off construction worker Jon Mattsen will run his teams of 11 Alaskan Huskies at least every other day throughout the winter on Wisconsin public snowmobile trails or on private land. The team is available for pulls at private parties. (Dick Ellis)

to run and pull inbred over thousands of years. With other dogs you don't have the advantage of that natural breeding."

"To learn how to do this, I read a lot, talked to people who knew a lot more than I did, and learned mostly from my own mistakes."

Over the years when personal circumstances allowed Mattsen to own, train and house the numbers of dogs necessary to run sleds, he would. Most recently, he purchased 14 dogs from a line of runners in the Iditarod, the famous 1100 mile annual Alaskan race, and sold three. He will run teams of five or seven, depending on the length of the day's pull, and make sure all of his dogs receive the regular training and exercise.

"The dogs are excited when they see me getting the sled and truck ready at the farm," Mattsen said. "They're like, 'take me, take me.' I take five or six dogs for each training



A hard earned rest is given to his team by Jon Mattsen on the trail within the southern unit of the Kettle Moraine State Forest. The Alaskan Huskies were ready to go immediately and finished the three mile course without problem. Mattsen has taken the team on treks as long as 30 miles. (Dick Ellis)

run and try to run every other day. They haven't had dog food in I don't know how long. A lot of my friends are hunters and they all give me the venison scraps after butchering. They're really in good shape."

"I would love to run the Iditarod some day," he said. "I have done some sprint races, which might be six dogs pulling six miles. There are also mid-distance races where the teams run 30 to 40 miles and distances races."

The pull Friday in the Kettle Moraine State Forest southern unit with Mattsen standing at the back of the sled to guide the team and over this reporter sitting on the padded sled seat covers three miles. Mattsen will often encounter coyotes on the runs, whitetail deer, and recently flushed a rare covey of ruffed grouse on a southern Wisconsin trail.

The run is exhilarating, fast and cold. Temperatures flutter near 20 by this early afternoon and bright sunshine streaks through the rows of pines bordering the hilly snowmobile trails that the team uses. Mattsen is wearing orange deer hunting coveralls to be easily seen by the sled-machine drivers. A

hand brake and foot brake can bring the sled to a quick stop in the event of traffic. A rope with an anchor quickly finds a tree when Mattsen stops at the half-way point of the run to offer his dogs a rest; a reprieve they really do not need, nor apparently want.

"I'll tell you something else about my dog team," he says. "They never break a belt or run out of gas."

Well, they might run out of gas, but only after miles of trail wear. This ride is finished too quickly. The dogs have made fast work of the three miles despite their human cargo of about 400 pounds. Mattsen's longest run is 30 miles with the team. An average pull is 11 miles. He'll be on trail again tomorrow, somewhere, or the next day at the latest. And his Huskies will whine in anticipation when the old truck pulls up again to the farm.

"They just keep getting better and better," Mattsen said. "Like you or me when we exercise regularly. I try not to take the same trail so they don't really know what to expect. This is a labor of love. It's more of a hobby than a profession. I don't care if I win any race I'm in, I just want to finish and have that sense of accomplishment as a team. I love my dogs. They're like my kids"

For information on hiring John Mattsen's dog team for a private party, call 414-630-9034. ⁶wo