

The Challenges of Russian Snow

Text and images by Vera Kupriyanova

“The hand-written instructions given on commands for the dogs started:

Appeal to Alisa (the leader), indicate the direction of your desired turn with your hand, and congratulate.

I was fairly confident that this was going to be **tragic.**”

Pat Moon

Every winter, amid the picturesque and ecologically clean forest area northeast of Kostroma region, Russia, an enthusiastic group of Musherers gather to compete in the traditional sport of dog sledding.

Six high-spirited Siberian huskies Ermak, Enisey, Ezdok, Lora, Evfrat, and Eger – are strapped into harness and clipped to a gang line—most are imports from Australia. Together they’re a team, eager and desperate to run.

Behind them, Australian musher Robert Stevens steps onto his sled, pulls up the aluminium snow hook and with quiet authority commands, “vperyod” the Russian word for go.

On cue, the howling dogs fall quiet and lunge forward. Then, all that is heard is the panting of a half-dozen huskies as they whisk their cargo of light-weight sprint sled and human companion across the frozen Russian snow.

I'M IN MY ULTIMATE SETTING – With an insatiable addiction for photography, snow and sled dogs, I find myself submerged in a freezing expanse of white, a large crowd of cheering spectators and at least 100 excitable sled dogs and Musherers. It's late February and I converge on the picture-postcard village of Dementyevo for the North Hope International Sled Dog Stage Race... Russia's most prestigious dog sledding event. Held annually in February, this six day race is celebrating its fifth year.

North Hope Sled Dog Centre, initially founded as an orphanage for young children by the Saint Nicholas Parish of the Russian Orthodox Church is the race initiator and organising body of this great event. “We incorporate working with dogs into our learning programs for the children which have since led to the development of today's race - an extension of those earlier working with children programs.” North Hope Sled Dog Centre President Mother Paraskeva told me.

“Our competition at North Hope is distinctly a blend of local and international Musherers. During the years global interest in our children's programs has seen mushers from the USA, Canada, Australia and now Scotland travel great distance to be a part of and experience this unique event.” Mother Paraskeva continues.

“This particular stage race is unique in the sense that the International mushers pair with a Russian musher and share the same dog team. For the most part, pairing of the International musher is done with graduate boys from the Orphanage. Those boys not paired assist with other aspects of the race like timing, handling, check-points and trail grooming. Any remaining International mushers will then pair with local Russian mushers and share their dog teams also.” Mother Paraskeva concludes.

That said the race is a series of tough challenging trails winding through pristine Russian wilderness, across frozen streams and swamps then passing through deserted ghost villages finishing via a stunningly visible down hill dash into North Hope Sled Dog Centre. Competitors of this race must be both physically and mentally fit to compete.

“It's a complicated long story for another day however a few years back the dogs in this team came to Russia from Australia! Some are the founding fathers of the dogs working with children programs here at North Hope today. When not racing, these dogs are used for education programs within the North Hope junior musher school. Further more, they are involved



in canine therapy programs for orphans and physically challenged children, and then there is a highly active role with family ecotourism stays at North Hope also.” Robert informs me before the second stage of the race program, an enduring 35 kilometres in bone chilling -38°C conditions. “And they love it! Despite the fact they came from one of the driest continents on earth - the colder it is the harder they run, the

will to run is in their blood, their heritage is Siberian and this is their heartland. Further more these dogs are intelligent, strong, healthy and happy. Most important, they really enjoy running.”

As they patiently wait Robert's two lead dogs anchor his team, noticeably they stand strong and disciplined. They are purebred Siberian Huskies... having not been cross bred with other breeds

to produce the popular hybrid racing sleddog commonly referred to as the Alaskan Husky. There is also an assortment of mixed breed teams and teams of Alaskan Malamutes entered, but at North Hope the Siberians do appear to dominate the line-up.

Husky and Malamute breeds can often resemble Wolves, and for many people their appearance, combined with their curious nature, is often unnerving. For Robert however, his proud looking “Aussie Boys” are “each individual characters who continuously leave me smiling.” He jokes. “They are the best company, especially when we’re out in the wilderness kilometres from anywhere and running as a team that’s when we are totally dependent on each other to return home safe.”

For those mushers entered, I’m told today’s dry and cold conditions appear to be near perfect. This is unmistakably evident by random dogs excitedly and spontaneously howling and keen to run.

Secured to stake out lines each team is pegged out in specially dug out trenches. Here they prance around in circles waiting for their mandatory pre-race vet check followed by their final fitting of booties and harness.



Not all competitors herald from stage racing, Pat Moon, a ball of exuberant energy from the United States of America is a long distance musher usually, expatriate Iditarod in fact. When asked to compete in Russia by North Hope International Race Marshall Terry Hinesly, Pat jumped at the idea. “I’m used to mushing long distance, running a stage race is kind of new to me, but to sleep in a warm bed each night and knowing the dogs are bedded down also resting safely, well that just provides me a with a refreshed feeling for the next day.” Pat says with a satisfied smile.

TRACKSIDE - Talk amongst Mushers suggests Pat’s Russian team of mixed hybrids and Alaskan Huskies is the one to watch. However, out on the trail an unusual encounter nearly ends in tragedy for Pat. “We encountered no problems at all running across the open tundra and no glitches passing the slower teams, the team and I were synced and doing well!” Said Pat. “The trail came off the tundra into a thick forested area, it was then I saw movement in the trees. Next thing this wild dog leaps out and takes on my leaders causing the swing and wheel dogs, sled and me to ball up in tangled mess in the middle of the trail. The wild dog quickly high-tailed it and I found myself twisted, tangled and pretty much paralyzed trying to hold and calm the team.”

In short stage racing, any cause for delay can cost a musher their race! Pat being in second position could see his chances of a podium finish rapidly slipping before his eyes. “I thought Rob was not far behind me so I waited.” His face grimacing.

But Rob had also fallen behind, encountering his own problems traversing off the trail and dogs floundering in meter deep powder snow.

“I’m on my back tangled in lines... the teams in a mess! I laid there waiting for what seemed like 15 or more long minutes for the “aussies” to arrive. Rob stops on the trail, hooks in his team then saunters up to me smiling, looking down he says” “Hmmm need some help?”

“Together we untangle dogs, lines and me. Dogs all sorted, no damage done, sled now back on it’s runners we finally make tracks for home.”

As Bill Sutherland approaches the last checkpoint he speaks to his dogs: “Haw!” he urges. On command, his lead dogs, Alisha and Vik, veer left and point toward the ghost village a remnant of the former soviet era and final land mark on the home trail before the finish.

At this checkpoint the trail merges and drops down onto a disused icy road surface—to avoid tipping his sled Bill transfers his weight to the sled’s left-hand rail and casually leans into the turn, his knee nearly grazing the ground. Those gathered at the check point stare in awe as they are sprayed with snow and tiny shards of ice. Again Bill speaks commands to his leaders “Take us home Alisha take us home Vik.” And with that the checkpoint cheered as Bill disappeared down the trail in a steamy blur of powder snow dust, saliva and panting dogs...

Besides regular sleddog teams North Hope International Sled Dog Stage Race offers various skijoring events as well. Skijoring mushers complete the same 230 km’s as the larger dog teams nonetheless they do face huge challenges navigating the bumpy narrow trails, passing and being passed by larger sleddog teams and the constant chance of either their dogs or themselves dropping off the packed trail base and floundering in deep powder snow.

But, for Miss Polina Blinnikova, a local Russian musher from nearby Kostroma region her North Hope skijoring race experience was testing her persistence and endurance.

“For the past 7 years I’ve been involved in sports tourism and activities such as extreme skiing, mountain climbing and cave hiking which I believe has helped condition me for the physical and extreme challenges of the North Hope skijoring event.” She tells me whilst performing a series of warm up stretches.

“It was 2008 when a friend of mine brought me to North Hope to see the Orphanage and dogs programs. I was allowed to trial two dogs from the orphanage kennel—Shanna and Molly and I’ve been returning to North Hope Orphanage, training and skijoring with them ever since.”

It’s pointed out to me that Polina is one of the youngest mushers

at North Hope and that this is her first competition race although the third for her dogs Molly and Shanna. Whilst chatting with an anxiously waiting Polina I do witness a great level of care and trust between her and these dogs. Noticeably evident by the many hugs, massages and soft talk that a strong bonding relationship has formed with her dogs, a relationship that will definitely help this skijoring trio out on the trail....

“For us, it’s been extremely difficult at times, for example, on the first day when the trail was powder dry and not firmly packed, my skis just refused to move but I think all the skijoring teams felt the same. The first two days were quite chilly also, -38°C, - 32°C degrees, then it warmed up a little bit and we performed much better.” She excitedly blurts out. “Surprisingly, the 50km leg turned out to be the easiest for us, we spent 5 hours on the trail with only a single 5 minute stop at the 25km checkpoint and we still finished strong.” She continued.

On the last day of the race a simple navigational incident could have spelled tragedy for Polina. “Due to a trail marking ribbon having been accidentally torn out we took a wrong turn running an extra 5km’s, but we still managed to make up time and take out third place!” laughing excitedly Polina informs me after the final stage.

“I really like racing here, the beautiful environment and nature of Neya area and North Hope race site. I like the challenging trails and meeting so many interesting people from Russia, Canada the USA, Scotland and Australia!” She further adds before running off to a nearby house in search of a hot cup of chai.

The freezing night air quickly engulfed Dementyevo village where teams are again gathering for North Hope International Sled Dog “night” Stage Race. Testing their athleticism and courage the Russian partners of the International Teams have drawn the short straw and will race this stage.

“This stage is another ordeal of endurance and tests the depth of the relationship between musher and their dogs,” said Anna Odintsova North Hopes Race Administrator. “In this tricky night light and treacherous environment the musher is enormously dependent on their dogs, particularly their lead dogs; they need to be both fast and responsive to voice commands, whilst also guiding the entire team out of potential danger.”

As the many spectators jostled for a slice of warmth radiating from a huge bonfire blazing beside the start chute the last departing team’s headlamp could be seen disappearing into the cold black night...It would be several hours before all teams returned from this difficult stage. I caught up with the three International mushers I had been following and listened to their discussions of the night stage.

“I’m a bit concerned about Slava.” said Robert. “He does not appear to be wearing enough clothing, his hands were freezing after we booted the team however when I gave him a pack of hand warmers he just nodded and put them in the sled bag.” Robert did appear to be a little worried for Slava who is one of North Hopes original orphans, but on the contrary... “My partner Zhenya, he has no concerns, to me the dogs looked really excited to be going out again and Zhenya was looking forward to a faster run tonight!” said Pat. Equally Bill commented “My guy Kolya, he’s as tough as nails, all he wanted to do was run the team, get this stage over and done with then yum! yum! yum!” said Bill laughing whilst pretending to spoon food into his mouth.

Later into the night, each team returned safely to Dementyevo village. As they passed through the finish there was much excitement and celebration. The results of this night stage saw some teams achieving their fastest times of the entire event.

The mid afternoon sun reaches peak light, the finish chute is in sight and the international teams make their final push for home. For all, North Hope has been a demanding event. Both Rob and Bill are now running with just 5 dogs each whilst Pat has forged ahead maintaining 6 dogs and not surprisingly has increased his distance between Rob and Bill.

The first of the “internationals” appears on the horizon...stirring movement and cheering amongst the crowd gathered at the finish chute. On top of the ridge the moving blur of dog team slowly becomes visible before a final descent down into Dementyevo village and the end of this great race.

Against a back drop of blinding white and clear crisp blue sky the unmistakable glowing lime yellow LOKI jacket is that of musher Pat Moon... Now placing first, a surprise awaited all...as Pat neared the finish chute he unfurled a large Russian flag igniting a fearsome roar from all Russian spectators. “I proudly flew the Russian flag as a tribute to the North Hope race organisers but more in tribute to my Russian team partner Zhenya Valeyev and his Russian dogs” Pat advised later.

Dazzling blue, green and brown eyes focus on the finish chute, oblivious to the cheering crowd below, the next team to materialise started down the hill.

Like some kind of traditional dog sledding ritual the musher of this team unveiled a large national flag also. Primarily blue in colour and zip tied around this musher’s neck caused visual confusion amongst spectators. “Who is it?” Many asked. “It’s the flag of Scotland.” Said some. “No it’s an American flag!” Somebody replied, but International Race Marshal Terry Hinesly intervened “It can’t be American, there’s not enough stars or stripes!” he jokingly quipped.

The team surged into the finish chute achieving second place... then it became visibly clear, the flapping blue flag adorned with stars and union jack was Australian.

Eyes’ squinting from the bright afternoon sun, musher Rob Stevens stepped off the sled runners politely thanking his Russian team partner Slava Goots, then in a true display of teamwork showered each of his dogs with praise, hugs and pats in appreciation for their hard work. Their faces... covered in frozen saliva, snow and ice they loyally responded, both man and dog happily soaking up the attention.

As the third team came into view the warning siren wailed. All eyes now focussed on the ridge line the third placing team of the “internationals” as they were now commonly referred to, began their descent to the finish chute.

Once again, flag already unveiled this amazing visual continued.

Imposing a striking presence this particular flag—sky blue in colour and bearing the white cross of Saint Andrew was in fact the flag of Scotland. Coming home strong, this team driven by Scotland’s “BraveHeart” of mushing Bill Sutherland stormed the finish line as if they were charging at the longshanks from days gone by.

Smiling with a satisfied expression of achievement Bill too, gratefully embraced his Russian team partner Kolya Ivanisov, his dogs and his long time friend Pat Moon. Bill commented “I’m glad it’s over, I’ve done it mate, we’ve all done it!”

Vera Kupriyanova is an enthusiastic amateur photographer and dog sledding devotee from Moscow. She is actively involved with the many organizational aspects of the North Hope Race whilst committed to managing the financials of the North Hope Sled Dog Centre. Adding to photography Vera has a keen interest in writing and enjoys being a part time student of English language.