



The Seppala Siberian Sleddog Manifesto

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Preface

THIS STATEMENT has been prepared at the request of Mr. John Coyne as a first step in reconciling the situation created by the actions of the “International Seppala Siberian Sleddog Club” and its promoters, in independently attempting to re-invent the Seppala Siberian Sleddog after it has already been in existence as a breed in North America for over five years. As those actions were undertaken completely without consultation of the existing Seppala Siberian Sleddog Project, its promoters, or The Working Canine Association of Canada which sponsors the breed, very serious disparities now exist between the Canadian breed project and its U.S. imitators.

In this document I have tried to set forth clearly and briefly the principles that have guided the Seppala Siberian Sleddog Project in Canada from its inception. These principles have not been lightly or hastily adopted; they are the result of sustained deliberation and extensive experience not only with Seppalas but also with mainstream Siberian Huskies of many different bloodlines. They represent our own deeply felt and strongly held values concerning sleddogs.

I would emphasise that these are neither demands nor challenges, nor yet condemnations of the views of others. They are our principles, the principles that established the Seppala Siberian Sleddog as an independent evolving breed, that we here set forth in the hope of clearer understanding by others who, like ourselves, feel concern for the long-term survival of the Leonhard Seppala Siberian sleddog heritage.

Breed Origin

The Seppala Siberian Sleddog originated as a breed in Canada in 1997; the Canadian breed project has seniority and the right to be informed and consulted .

(1) The Seppala Siberian Sleddog (SSSD), as a breed in its own right, was originated in Canada by J. Jeffrey Bragg and Isa LeS. Boucher. Agriculture Canada recognised it as an evolving breed on 31 July 1997; an animal pedigree association for the breed, known as The Working Canine Association of Canada (WCAC), was chartered on that date. The Canadian breed project, originators, and pedigree association have seniority and priority in SSSD breed matters; they have the right to be fully informed and consulted when SSSD breed registries, associations or projects are to be established elsewhere.

Co-operation and Consultation

Full co-operative liaison between new SSSD organisations and the senior SSSD project is indispensable to the interests of the breed.

(2) It is unquestionably vital to the best interest of the breed that any registries, breed clubs or breed projects outside Canada using the SSSD breed name and based on Markovo-derived stock should proceed in full liaison, co-operation and consultation with the original SSSD project. For the so-called “International Seppala Siberian Sleddog Club” to put itself in an autonomous or opposing position to WCAC and the original project, to ignore their existence, to attempt to establish a breed standard and eligibility rules without reference to them, or to try to imitate, pirate, or hijack the SSSD concept independently and without acknowledgement, will prove disastrous for the breed’s future prospects, as events thus far have already begun to demonstrate.

Breed Standard

The Seppala Siberian Sleddog Breed Standard, 1995 (Rev. 1/97), is the only valid breed standard worldwide.

(3) The Seppala Siberian Sleddog Breed Standard, 1995 (Rev. 1/97), is the standard currently in effect in Canada, the breed’s country of origin. Therefore by the rules of the Fédération Cynologique Internationale it is the only valid breed standard worldwide for Seppala Siberian Sleddogs. That standard may not be replaced, altered, added to, deleted from or otherwise modified, except by The Working Canine Association of Canada, the sponsoring organisation in the breed’s country of origin.

Dual Breed Status

SSSDs cannot also be registered AKC Siberian Huskies.

(4) Adherence to a distinct SSSD breed standard implies a fully separate breed identity, since one animal cannot conform to two different breed standards. “Dual breed status” as claimed in the USA by certain ISSSC members is an abuse; it is an inadvisable practice, contrary to the goal of long-term Seppala survival. SSSDs (other than the founder generation) cannot also be Siberian Huskies with AKC certificates of registration; registry rules should respect this principle.

General Purpose Sleddog

The SSSD is a versatile general purpose sleddog, not a heat-style middle distance specialist.

(5) As stated in the Breed Standard, the SSSD is a “general purpose sleddog,” a versatile working dog capable of fulfilling a variety of purposes, not just a narrow specialist racing dog designed exclusively for 25 to 80 mile heat-style middle distance racing. Adequate genetic diversity and a stable breed identity for such a small breed population cannot be maintained by focussing narrowly upon one specialised aspect of dogsled racing. Sleddog selection cannot operate efficiently without diversity, while changes in popular race formats (as happened in the late 1970s with the renewal of long distance racing and as is happening now with the advent of stage races) can spell disaster for an overly specialised sleddog variety. The SSSD should not be made into a one-trick “designer dog.”

Work Proving

Work proving is essential to the SSSD concept but need not be restricted to race proving.

(6) Work proving is essential to development and maintenance of the SSSD breed, but work proving can and should take a variety of different forms, of which “race proving” is but one. Racing is not a *sine qua non* for the SSSD, neither is it an indispensable requirement for maintenance of working ability. Working SSSDs that do something other than racing are not second-class sleddogs and cannot be regarded as “unproven,” “inferior,” or “unathletic” dogs.

Racing Modes

All dogsled racing modes are equally valid for SSSDs.

(7) All modes of dogsled racing are equally valid for SSSDs; long distance racing, stage races, skijoring, and speed racing are not inferior to middle distance racing. All are legitimate avenues for the use of working Seppala sleddogs, provided that they are conducted in a humane and sportsmanlike manner with full regard to individual dog welfare. As a versatile sleddog breed, Seppalas may be expected to make a creditable showing in any sleddog application or racing mode; the diversity of physique that accompanies such versatility is a welcome and legitimate expression of this breed's genetic diversity.

Sleddog Welfare

Individual SSSD welfare is an absolute value that must not be compromised by collective values .

(8) The welfare of each and every SSSD as an individual is an absolute value that may not be ignored. Breed improvement through "culling" as practised in many racing kennels is inhumane and unjustifiable. No collective values "for the good of the breed" can justify the abuse, exploitation, or slaughter of individual Seppalas. In particular, sleddogs that have given the prime years of their lives in faithful working service have the right to honourable retirement in the kennel in which they worked, for the balance of their lives. To sell, give away, neglect or "euthanise" older sleddogs because they can no longer run in a fast team is gross and inhumane abuse.

"Numbers Game"

The "numbers game" is incompatible with SSSD ideals and values.

(9) The so-called "numbers game" is incompatible with and completely contrary to the ideals of the SSSD breed. This practice, in which racing drivers breed multiple litters each year and raise sleddogs in numbers greatly exceeding the rate of superannuation, with the intention of keeping "only the best" dogs and selling or killing the "washouts," deserves condemnation by SSSD breeders, breed clubs and associations. Dog drivers and breeders who manage their Seppalas in such a way should be deprived of the privileges of whatever breed club or registry they or their dogs are associated with. The SSSD ideal is to produce an overall breed population of competent sleddogs, not to pursue a toe-of-the-curve athletic elite.

“The Best Dogs”

Racing by itself does not adequately define which are the best Seppalas.

(10) Dogsled racing is a sport, and should not be regarded as a mechanism for determining “who has the best dogs” or “which dogs are the best.” Although certain well-known races (*e.g.*, ONAC, Iditarod) are seen as benchmark events for “world class” or “championship” levels of competition, races are won by a single team and driver *on the day*. This occurs under a particular set of circumstances, such as trail conditions, weather, starting order, dog care, dog conditioning, feeding, challenges to dog health, accidents and obstacles on the trail, etc. Each race proves relatively little, apart from the participating teams’ response to one particular set of circumstances on that day. The race winner does not automatically have “the best dogs” (whatever that is supposed to mean), he only has the winning team on that occasion. Racing cannot by itself be used to define “the best dogs,” “the only worthwhile dogs,” or “the dogs that should be bred from.”

Population Performance

SSSD values aim for versatility and high overall performance for the whole breed population, not identification of individual elite athletes.

(11) The Olympics mentality, which sees only the gold medallist, “world class” performers as truly worthwhile, seeks to identify the best dogs in its own narrow context, discounting the fact that “best” must be defined differently in each different set of circumstances. SSSD ideals aim for maximum versatility combined with a high overall sleddog performance level throughout the entire breed population, rather than the mere identification of a handful of individual elite performers.

Recreational Mushing

Recreational use of SSSDs is valid, respectable, and offers a valuable and stable market for the breed.

(12) Recreational mushing is a valid, respectable and self-sufficient use of Seppalas. SSSDs are, in fact, the sleddog breed best suited to the needs of recreational drivers, owing to their docility, trainability, stable temperament and innate sleddog capability. To denigrate the activities of recreational mushers as trivial, inferior or somehow damaging to the breed is narrow-minded and ill considered. Recreational mushers offer an attractive and stable market for this breed; breed clubs and associations ought to concentrate on presenting Seppalas to that market as a choice of sleddogs that is vastly superior to and more enjoyable than show dogs, Alaskan racing dog culls, Samoyeds, and Alaskan Malamutes.

Sleddog Qualities

Twenty sleddog qualities are relevant to SSSD breeding and selection; racing speed and endurance are not the only traits that matter.

(13) Twenty sleddog qualities have been identified by the Canadian SSSD project as relevant to breeding and selection programmes. They are: (1) pulling ability, (2) speed, (3) endurance, (4) attitude or determination, (5) innate sleddog capacity, (6) intelligence, (7) trainability, (8) co-operation, (9) docility, (10) bonding, (11) metabolism, (12) movement, (13) courage, (14) seriousness, (15) temperament, (16) eating and drinking, (17) climate hardiness, (18) reproduction, (19) health, viability and longevity, and (20) leader quality. Racing speed and racing endurance are only two aspects of this set of qualities; they are far from being the only traits that matter.

Genetic Health and Diversity

Genetic diversity largely determines genetic health; both are vital to SSSDs.

(14) A small breed population (such as the SSSD probably will remain indefinitely) cannot continue in existence without genetic health. Genetic health depends largely upon genetic diversity and the maintenance thereof. Anything that substantially reduces genetic diversity (screening programmes, excessively rigid selection for physique, selection for cosmetic traits, etc.) over time becomes a liability affecting population survival. Normal purebred breeding practices, too, act over time to diminish diversity, eventually making it necessary to replenish the gene pool by true outcrossing. Consequently, the effort “to determine which are the best dogs” in a narrow racing context, with the intention that those dogs shall be heavily favoured in breeding, is a *modus operandi* contrary to the long-term best interests both of the breed and of its individual dogs.

Screening Programmes

Screening in an effort to “eliminate genetic defects” is ineffective and harmful to genetic diversity.

(15) Screening programmes against specific so-called genetic defects are not an effective means for maintenance of genetic health. Screening has been demonstrated to be inefficient, ineffective, and costly in terms of genetic diversity. It is not possible to “eliminate” a broad spectrum of problem genes without creating other equally serious problems in the process. The proper procedure would be to imitate nature by a more open breeding plan, so that recessive “defect” genes seldom match up with one another but instead are covered by corresponding normal dominant genes. Screening represents an unacceptable burden to a Seppala breeding programme and probably should not be supported by Seppala breed clubs and associations.

Dog Shows

SSSDs should not be evaluated by dog show judging.

(16) The SSSD is by its nature wholly a working breed and should be evaluated only in a working context. Therefore, participation of SSSDs in competitive exhibitions or dog shows is inappropriate. SSSD registries and breed clubs should not organise such events for Seppalas; owners and breeders of Seppalas should decline to participate in them or to enter their dogs in them. Violation of this precept is a very serious matter, since the judging of SSSDs in dog shows will inevitably be harmful to working ability, just as it has been for the mainstream Siberian Husky and countless other breeds.

Over-use of Studs

Frozen semen programmes and over-use of popular stud dogs are harmful to genetic diversity, therefore not in the best interests of SSSDs.

(17) Over-use of popular stud dogs is a major factor in loss of genetic diversity and should be scrupulously avoided in small breed populations. For this reason, frozen semen conservation or “breed preservation” programmes are contrary to the best interests of the SSSD breed. In the best interests of canine genetic health, the number of individual sires should be equal to the number of dams of litters. Each new generation should contribute normally to the breeding population; the artificial intervention of deceased stud dogs in generations distant from their own diminishes the effective breeding population and seriously reduces diversity.

Inbreeding

Cumulative inbreeding in SSSDs is already dangerously high; further inbreeding is undesirable.

(18) Inbreeding is another major factor in loss of genetic diversity. It causes fixation of undesirable recessive genetic traits. It also harms sleddog versatility, adaptability, and response capability to environmental challenges, changes in working modes, etc. In Markovo-Seppala matings analysed in Canada, inbreeding has already been found to have reached levels as high as thirty percent cumulative Wright's Inbreeding Coefficient in the fifteen to twenty generations since the 1930s breed foundation. Geneticists regard levels that high as dangerous to population survival. For these reasons, further inbreeding, especially close up in the pedigree, should be systematically and formally discouraged in the SSSD breed. (WCAC By-laws prohibit registration of offspring from brother/sister, sire/daughter, son/dam, half-brother/half-sister, grandsire/granddaughter, and grandson/grandam matings.)

Repro-Tech

Reproductive technology threatens the ability to reproduce naturally and is dangerous to SSSD survival.

(19) Artificial reproductive technology (such as artificial insemination, freezing of semen and ova, lab testing for ovulation, surrogate mothering and embryo transplant, cloning and similar techniques) have become increasingly common in animal husbandry and are enthusiastically promoted by repro-tech companies and corporations. As use of such techniques increases, capability of domestic animals to breed and reproduce naturally becomes threatened. Already some breeds (both of dogs and other livestock) are routinely conceived and born with repro-tech assistance and would be in trouble without it. As the SSSD concept is that of a hardy natural working breed, use of repro-tech methods in breeding SSSDs should be prohibited by breed clubs and registries rather than encouraged or sponsored.

Mainstream Siberian Husky

Mainstream Siberian Husky bloodlines offer only the illusion of an outcross, not the reality.

(20) Inbreeding and loss of genetic diversity can be avoided only if there are genuine exogamous alternatives to the perpetual endogamy of the closed stud book, which has been endured by Seppalas for the past seventy years. Mainstream Siberian Husky bloodlines *are not such an alternative*, as they share exactly the same Seppala foundation stock in approximately seventy percent of pedigree lines. (In addition to which, mainstream lines have already been stripped of most of their original genetic diversity by random drift, inbreeding, and cosmetic selection.) The remaining thirty percent of mainstream Siberian Husky lineage consists of the very lines that Wheeler, Shearer, Belford and McFaul thought must be excluded from Seppala breeding. Thus Anadyr, Natomah, Kodiak, and all other Seeley-derived and mixed-lineage bloodlines *have nothing to offer Seppala breeders*; they provide neither relief from inbreeding nor substantial improvement in sleddog capability.

True Outcross

A true outcross can be found only by looking beyond the present AKC/CKC registered Siberian Husky domain; the Canadian project has identified two promising lines .

(21) Since Siberian Husky “cross-strain breeding” and “percentage Seppala” strategies have little to offer SSSD breeding programmes, genetic diversity must be sought elsewhere, beyond the closed studbook registered Siberian Husky domain, through *true outcross breeding* in which there are no common ancestors as far back as pedigrees can be traced. Suitable outcrosses are few. The Canadian programme has already explored a number of possibilities and has had success with two outcross sires (the Russian import Shakal iz Solovyev and the Terry Streeper Alaskan racing leader “Hop”). Both of these outcross lines are unrelated to Seppala lineage as far as can be determined, offering total exogamy in the F1 cross. Both lines when crossed with Markovo-Seppalas have produced progeny showing excellent sleddog performance.

Outcross Guidelines

Outcross animals must be chosen with great care; indiscriminate outcrossing must be discouraged.

(22) It is important that outcross animals be chosen with great care, that excessive outcrossing be avoided, and that the outcrosses chosen genuinely possess superior qualities. Geneticists claim that the introduction of just one outcross animal in each generation across an entire breed population is sufficient to avoid the harmful consequences of closed-studbook inbreeding. Therefore widespread outcrossing should be unnecessary and probably should not be encouraged. Candidate animals should be carefully vetted for compatibility with Seppala phenotype and traits (especially temperament and mentality). Inferior animals must not be used simply because they are readily available, or out of idle curiosity. Preference should be given to imported sleddog stock from Siberia when and as such is available. When Alaskan racing stock is used, such use should be restricted to fully proven “world-class” animals that also demonstrate a high degree of conformity to the SSSD standard.

Post-Outcross Strategy

Two generations or more of breeding back to Markovo-Seppalas should follow each outcross.

(23) In the absence of urgent reasons and compelling evidence for doing otherwise, outcrosses should be followed in the next two generations or more by breeding back to Markovo-Seppala rootstock, not by more outcrossing or breeding to low-percentage stock. To do otherwise will risk the loss of distinguishing Seppala characteristics.

Low-Percentage Strategy

Low-percentage Seppalas should be bred to Markovo-Seppalas, not to one another or to outcross lines.

(24) Similarly, when “percentage” animals below fifteen-sixteenths Seppala are admitted to the breeding programme, these should be bred to Markovo-Seppala stock, not to one another or to outcrosses or outcrossed lines. Here, too, to do otherwise risks dilution and eventual loss of distinct Seppala traits. General experience (including that of both Doug Willett and Jeffrey Bragg) strongly indicates that the best Seppalas are those closest to Markovo-Seppala purity. The mixed-lineage bloodlines introduced over the past quarter century have been found to involve higher risk of genetic problems and inferior attitude. Grading-up procedures should be used consistently to ensure a close approach to Markovo-Seppala ideals.

Part-Seppala Problem

The large existing body of part-Seppala stock is a problem that demands careful handling.

(25) The very large existing body of part-Seppala “percentage” stock constitutes a serious problem that must be intelligently and carefully handled if we are to avoid excessive dilution of Seppala bloodlines and traits. Many owners claim “pure Seppala” stock when in fact the animals in question may be one-quarter or more non-Seppala in ancestry. To admit large numbers of these animals into the breed development programme without controls or limitations will quickly result in loss of distinctive Seppala traits and mere duplication of the “racing Siberian Husky” gene pool. Not only must realistic percentage assessments be made, but low-percentage stock must then be expected to upgrade by breeding to pure Markovo-Seppala animals.

Defining Seppala Lineage

Clear and objective rules should define the limits of Seppala mainstream ancestry.

(26) It is essential that from the outset “what is Seppala and what is not” should be clearly defined. The existing system is fraught with problems and internal contradictions and is not consistently followed even by the man who originated it. It is unacceptable merely to say, “the breed club representative will determine the Seppala content of the dog”; there is too much potential for abuse. Clear, understandable, objective rules must be developed. These should clearly delineate the Wheeler/McFaul/Markovo Seppala mainstream. The pretence that other distinct bloodlines such as Calivali, White Water Lake, Natomah, Kodiak, Wobiska and others either constitute “other Seppala” lineage or can have their component lines calculated as “percentage Seppala” must be abandoned in favour of a clear determination of what lineage is legitimate Seppala and what is mixed-lineage non-Seppala.

Percentage Cut-off

Any percentile cut-off point for Seppala eligibility is problematical unless it is seen only as a practical parameter within an upgrading context.

(27) The fatal defect of the percentage-Seppala concept is that any percentile cut-off point adopted will necessarily be arbitrary and somewhat unfair to those whose animals happen to fall just below the cut-off point. Thus a percentile cut-off level is useful and significant only in conjunction with a grading-up scheme, in which percentage stock is bred to Markovo-Seppalas in order to decrease the influence of non-Seppala contaminant lines. Otherwise there is little or no justification for a percentage-Seppala system of evaluation. This implies that the highest levels of Markovo-Seppala content must be the permanent ideal for every SSSD breeding programme.

Markovo-Seppala Option

Full Markovo-Seppala ancestry is the only viable alternative to upgrading.

(28) The only viable alternative to a grading-up scheme is to require full Markovo-Seppala pedigree ancestry for SSSD eligibility in every case, other than designated outcross matings. This appears impractical, although it would reserve Seppala traits effectively and have the advantages of simplicity and clarity. (This option has in fact been adopted in the Seppala Kennels SSSD breed development project, although WCAC breed eligibility rules are broader, anticipating the participation of percentage-Seppala stock.) The Markovo-Seppala option has the distinct disadvantages of needlessly excluding many worthy and typical high-percentage Seppalas, discouraging broad participation, and diminishing the breeding population of SSSDs. Clear and conservative rules to determine what is legitimate Seppala lineage will prevent the exclusion of worthwhile stock. (Any options other than grading-up or full Markovo-Seppala ancestry will only duplicate the existing racing Siberian Husky and result eventually in the assimilation of Seppalas.)

Percentage System Reform

In order to institute an effective upgrading scheme, the existing percentage-Seppala system must be reviewed, corrected and reformed.

(29) In order to institute an effective upgrading scheme, the percentage system now in common use must be corrected and reformed. Where errors were made in determining Seppala lineage content of crucial early animals (as, for example, in the case of Bayou of Foxstand) these must be corrected. Distinct and recognisable bloodlines of racing (and, of course, show) Siberians that stem from mixed lineage must be identified as non-Seppala and rated at zero percent, abandoning the present practice of calling certain major racing bloodlines “other Seppala” and calculating Seppala percentage for some mixed lineage but excluding others. Percentages must then be re-calculated for ancestral and current stock. Clear and consistent rules must govern the calculation procedure, which cannot be left to the discretion of any “breed club representative.”

Confirming Parentage

For the protection of Seppala pedigrees, positive confirmation of parentage is desirable.

(30) The integrity of the Seppala pedigree is a vital factor in maintaining the existence of Seppalas as a unique population. For this reason the much-abused “honour system” of dog registration, in which parentage of each litter is supported only by the signature of the breeder and stud owner, is insufficient guarantee of ancestry as stated in the written pedigree. Too many unacknowledged substitutions of sires have taken place in the past; for this reason, SSSD breed clubs and registries should support and implement supplementary methods to confirm parentage of litters. This can begin easily and immediately by requiring photographic proof of matings and can later be expanded with DNA testing as that technique becomes more affordable and in general use.

Dog Identification

Positive dog identification also protects the integrity of pedigrees.

(31) As additional support for the integrity of pedigrees, positive identification of individual dogs by tattoo marking or microchip implantation methods, together with the inclusion of clear standing side-view photographs on all registration or identification certificates, should be required by SSSD registries and associations.

Preservation

Preservation of the Leonhard Seppala sleddog should be the overriding goal of SSSD organisations.

(32) The primary goal and purpose of any SSSD breed club, association, or registry, indeed of the SSSD breed concept itself, should be the preservation, perpetuation and long-term survival of the Leonhard Seppala sleddog. Only as a separate breed in their own right can Seppalas be sheltered from the risks of extinction or assimilation into the Siberian Husky show-dog mass. Preservation of the Seppala population as a unique genetic, phenotypic and behavioural canine entity should be paramount, taking precedence over other values espoused or promoted by SSSD breed clubs or registries.

Supporting SSSD Welfare

SSSD organisations must support individual dog welfare without compromise.

(33) An inseparable part of the task of Seppala breed clubs, registries or associations must be to ensure maximum welfare of each and every Seppala as an individual. Studbooks and breed improvement schemes must be so structured that they cannot result in abuse or slaughter of sleddogs. Sponsoring or sanctioning of races must include humane provisions against abuse or exploitation of sleddogs. It must be recognised that purse racing promotes the “numbers game,” inviting exploitation and killing of sleddogs. Breed clubs, registries and associations should be vigilant and proactive in humane matters, taking measures to ensure that their membership, their events and their systems are free from the taint of dog abuse.

Pillars of Identity

Breed standard, Seppala ancestry and versatile sleddog purpose support SSSD identity; all three are vital.

(34) Three vital pillars support the fullness of Seppala Siberian Sleddog breed identity: (1) Seppala type, temperament and mentality as described in the Seppala Siberian Sleddog Breed Standard, 1995; (2) ancestry derived to the maximum possible extent (consistent with genetic health) from Leonhard Seppala dogs, through Wheeler, Belford, Shearer, McFaul and Markovo breeding lines; (3) versatile general-purpose sleddog working ability, backed up by work proving in each succeeding generation. Lack of adequate attention to any of these three vital areas will result in irreparable harm to the “Seppala-ness” of SSSDs. It must be recognised that short-term “preservation,” “performance” and “improvement” schemes, unless very carefully worked out, can easily cause long-term damage by upsetting the balance of the pillars of SSSD identity.

