



Seppala Siberian Sleddog Project Documents



Seppala Siberian Sleddog Breed Standard 1995

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General Considerations:

THE SEPPALA SIBERIAN SLEDDOG is a working breed; it exists for the purpose of pulling a dogsled in cold country. Its characteristics are determined by the nature of its work and by its working environment. It originated from an amalgam of tribal dogs from several different regions of the vast land of Siberia, owing its vigour and hardiness to the harsh environmental and cultural selection to which its forebears were submitted, and to the genetic variety of the regional strains that contributed to its makeup. It was developed by the breeding of Leonhard Seppala in Alaska and Maine during the period 1914 through 1930. It is an exceptional general purpose arctic sleddog capable of serving a variety of purposes, such as freighting, rapid long-distance dogsled transport, sleddog racing (whether long-distance, middle distance, or short-distance), passenger touring, recreational dogsledding, skijoring and dog packing. It should be capable of demonstrating endurance, speed, strength and versatility in its work.

Consequently a natural range and variety of characteristics exist and such variability is not to be discouraged. Since the breed is defined primarily by its purpose, no single narrowly-defined breed type can be specified or preferred. Individual excellence is with reference to that purpose, not to ideals of breed type or cosmetic beauty of colour and markings. Although the breed naturally produces many animals of striking type and beauty, these qualities should not be made the goal of selective breeding. In physical conformation, form should follow function. A natural range of somatotypes exists. If a dog's working performance is consistently superior, it may be assumed that his physical structure is suitable; never the reverse.

Metabolic efficiency, good eating and drinking, hardiness in the face of climatic extremes (particularly those of arctic and subarctic environments), fertility, fecundity, natural whelpings, viability of offspring, and general good health and longevity are also characteristics greatly desired in this breed.

Performance in Harness:

ALTHOUGH the capabilities of individual dogs will vary according to size, physique, mentality and conditioning, high ideals of performance must be consistently maintained. Breeding Seppalas without proving both breeding stock and progeny in harness will undermine the breed purpose and dissipate essential working traits.

The Seppala dog should be capable of speeds of 18 to 20 miles an hour for short distances. He should be able to pull loads averaging 100 pounds per dog over distances of 30 to 50 miles in a day even in poor conditions without quitting. Unloaded in middle-distance racing he should be capable of average speeds of 12 to 17 miles per hour over daily heat distances of 40 to 60 miles, depending on team size, terrain and conditions. In a long-distance racing context, the ideal expected performance might be average speeds (including resting time) of from 5 miles per hour over a 400 mile course to 3.5 or 4 miles per hour for 1000 miles.

Size:

THE SEPPALA SIBERIAN SLEDDOG is a medium-sized canine. Although he can be a capable freighting dog, that does not justify breeding for great size.

The average height at the withers of mature males is 23 inches, with a normal range of from 21 to 25 inches; exceptionally an individual may be as tall as 27 inches. The average weight of a mature male in lean working condition is around 52 pounds, with a normal range of from 38 to 65 pounds. The average height at withers of a mature female is 21 inches, with a normal range of 19 to 23 inches. The average weight of a mature female in lean working condition is about 42 pounds, with a normal range of from 30 to 55 pounds. Weight should be in proportion to height. It must be borne in mind that excess weight hampers the dog in the performance of his work.

Physical Proportions and Body:

BALANCE AND PROPORTION of parts should be considered of great importance as affecting the efficiency, coordination and agility of the dog. Viewed from the side, his body should appear longer than it is high; a "square" profile, although allowable in individuals is not desired. There is a natural range of proportion from moderately compact to somewhat rangy. A dog that is too short-coupled for his height will be unable to move forward without "crabbing" to prevent his limbs interfering with one another; this is highly undesirable. Many good dogs look "high in the rear" when standing; this is acceptable provided the dog shows no evidence of having a weak back.

The body should be quite solid in appearance with chest deep (but not to extremes -- it should never extend below the elbow) and ribs well-sprung but flattened at the sides. The forechest must not appear hollow. Loins should be well-muscled though markedly narrower than the thorax, and should show a slight arch. Although the dog may be compact, he must never be cobby or very short-coupled. A rather long back is characteristic and allows for an effortless working lope. The croup slopes downward somewhat from hipbones to tailset.

The hindquarters should convey an impression of substance and muscle mass equal to the front, which should not be overly broad of brisket nor coarse in bone structure, nor yet too narrow. Front and rear angulation must be balanced and strongly defined, with stifles well-bent, shoulders and upper arms well laid back.

Legs and Feet:

THE LEGS SHOULD BE straight and well muscled with strong but not heavy bone. Forelegs should be set well under the dog with good layback both of scapula and humerus; the pasterns should show some slope but without weakness. Hind limbs should be well-angulated but always in proportion to the fore end. Unbalanced extremes of rear angulation are undesirable. Most good dogs stand with a slight “toe-out” in front. Some good dogs may turn their hocks slightly inward, but definite cow-hocks are undesirable.

Feet should be oval in shape, on the large side, well knuckled-up, with tough well-cushioned pads. Small, round cat-feet are highly undesirable. As the foot serves the dog as a snowshoe, some spread is tolerated, but splay feet are undesirable.

Both front and rear dewclaws should be removed at birth as they are vulnerable to abrasion and injury in crusted snow conditions and serve no practical purpose.

Head, Eyes, Ears and Neck:

EXCESSIVE EMPHASIS should not be placed on the head, it being of much less importance than the dog’s running gear. It is typically of medium size in proportion to the body, medium in width, the muzzle about equal in length to the distance from stop to occiput. The face has a well-chiselled appearance; the muzzle, though strong, should never appear deep and heavy, nor long and thin. The nose should be black (it may be flesh-coloured in white animals). The lips should be close-fitting. Incisors should meet in a scissors bite; slight degrees of overshot or undershot bite can be tolerated but extremes ought not to be used for breeding.

The eyes are set slightly obliquely in the head and tend to be almond-shaped in outline, preferably with black-rimmed eyelids. Eyes should neither bulge outward nor seem small and “piggy”. The spacing between the eyes should be moderate, never close-set. Eyes vary from very dark brown to amber, blue, or heterochromic. The dog’s expression is keen, alert and interested; the eyes should have a friendly look.

Ears are well-furred, set high on the head, moderately pointed at the tip and erect. There is some variation in ear shape and length. Seppala ears are taller than those of other arctic breeds. An occasional animal may have an ear or ears that are not completely erect; this is permitted but not desirable, as the normal ear is strongly erect.

The neck should not be too short or thick; it should be arched and medium in length.

Coat and Tail:

THE COAT SHOULD BE thick and soft in texture with a very dense weather-resistant undercoat nearly as long as the straight guard hairs, giving a smooth outline and good protection to the dog in any weather conditions. The length of coat varies naturally from medium to moderately long. Very short “houndy” coats are sometimes seen; though favoured by sprint racers in warm climates for their superior heat dissipation, they should properly be discouraged as they render the dog vulnerable in extremely cold conditions. Long coats have always existed in the breed; many dogs in Siberia show extremely long

coats. Hence the longer coat is tolerated though not desirable. A shaggy appearance must be discouraged. The coat must never be harsh or wiry in texture.

The tail is a well-furred brush carried in a sickle curve over the back when the dog is at attention. While pulling it is usually held stiff and low. It should not be tightly curled and never “snapped” flat to the back or down the side. It should be fairly long, typically reaching down to the hocks. It must not be set too high and should appear as a natural extension of the back and croup line.

Colour and Markings:

COLOUR VARIES from nearly all-black to pure white with many distinctive shades of grey, fawn, sable, reddish-brown and banded wolf colourings. Colour is relatively unimportant, except to note that black-coated dogs may suffer considerably from the heat in the strong summer sunlight of the far north, whereas white-coated dogs are much more resistant. (The liver-nosed red or “copper” colour found in other arctic breeds is absent in Seppalas; should it appear it may be a sign of crossbreeding. In any event it is regarded as highly undesirable as it represents a metabolic inability to produce normal black pigment and has been linked with poor working performance.) Seppala reds, called sables, typically show black tipping to the guard hairs with black lips, noses and eyerims.

A wide variety of distinctive markings exists. Asymmetry of markings carries no penalty and symmetry of markings no premium. Piebald spotting and white body markings (“splash coat”) are common and acceptable. The “saddleback” pattern, in which black pigment on the head and limbs fades out in late puppyhood leaving a body pattern of dark hairs similar in shape to an English riding saddle, is strongly characteristic of many Seppalas. Markings must not be made the object of selective breeding.

Gait:

A VERY SMOOTH and efficient working lope is a strong point of the breed; similarly, the trot is also very free and floating. The trot, out of harness, should show great ease and smoothness, with good reach but not overreaching. A choppy or bouncy trot is undesirable. The dog’s working lope should show power and forward drive; a bouncy, up-and-down lope is inefficient. Good rear end flexibility and full co-ordination of fore and hindquarters in action are essential. At all gaits the dog should move straight and true, never crabbing or kicking out to the side. The gait should never appear in any way clumsy.

Temperament and Mentality:

THE DISPOSITION of the Seppala Siberian Sleddog is active, merry and often quite inquisitive though sometimes showing great reserve with strangers. He is always gentle, tractable and docile; no tendency towards viciousness should ever be tolerated by the breeder. His desire to co-operate with his driver is noteworthy and his trainability is outstanding.

Stable and serious temperament is characteristic; desirable specimens are neither nervous nor aggressive.

Natural, innate sleddog ability is a primary characteristic of the Seppala dog. A majority of pups show a marked disposition to pull in harness at their first introduction to work, which may begin around 3 1/2 to 5 months of age; at this age many Seppala pups begin pulling immediately with little or no tendency to tangle their lines or to run without pulling. The best adult dogs display a high degree of determination and tenacity in their work and will keep going under very bad conditions, sometimes even in spite of injury or illness. A steady and serious working attitude is important and should be a prime breeding objective; dogs that “slackline” (go along in the team without pulling), shirk, or that tend to quit in harness despite adequate conditioning should not be used for breeding. Seppala

Sleddogs should display courage in the face of hazards and obstacles encountered on the trail without being foolhardy; awareness of danger without fearfulness is the ideal.

Unlike some arctic breeds, Seppalas bond strongly to their owners and display a high degree of affection for them; this forms the basis for an outstanding working unit of driver and team in difficult situations. His co-operative, intelligent and loving nature makes the Seppala dog a very enjoyable choice for recreational dogsledding.

Summary and Epilogue:

THE BREED FOUNDATION was based on Siberia import dogs, originally *circa* 1910 in Alaska, in 1939 when it was first registered in Canada as the C.K.C. Siberian Huskie and in the 1990s in the Yukon when new import stock was added to the inbred "Seppala Strain" registered Siberian to develop a distinct breed faithful to original import attributes, separate and distinct from the "Siberian Husky" bred for dog shows. The breed should always remain closely connected to its Siberian geographical origins; ideally, additional Siberia import stock should continue to contribute to the gene pool, ensuring that it is refreshed with hardy, primitive stock at regular intervals.

Of paramount importance is correct working mentality. A positive attitude on the part of the dog towards his work of pulling in harness is essential; he should be a natural, born sleddog; he must be intelligent, amenable to serious training and discipline and not quarrelsome with other dogs. Other important breed characteristics are balance and proportion of physical parts, good feet, flexibility and freedom of movement, an easy and efficient gait, and good strength for pulling power in harness. When breeding decisions are made, utility and functionality should always prevail; the Seppala dog was never intended to be a show dog, hence the ideals of the exhibition ring, particularly mere cosmetic factors, are totally out of consideration in this breed.

