

The Real Story of Balto

Adapted from The Adventures of Balto the Untold Story
by Patricia Chargot



Few people know Balto's true story. Only one small part has been told, and it has been distorted.

Leonard Seppala was a famous sled dog racer by 1922, the year that Balto was born. Sepp, as his friends called him, had won every big race in Alaska, including the 408-mile All-Alaska Sweepstakes 3 years in a row.

Sepp's No. 1 leader in 1925, the year of the diphtheria epidemic in Nome, was Togo, a nine-year-old male Siberian Husky. Togo was a born genius and champion veteran racer.

Balto was another one of Seppala's dogs. He was one of the lesser huskies, in Sepp's opinion.

Balto, though, appealed to Gunnar Kaasen who borrowed Seppala's 'B' team and was Seppala's dog handler. Seppala and Kaasen worked for a gold mining company, driving dog teams with supplies to the outlying gold camps.

The serum run was Seppala's most urgent mission yet. Children in Nome were dying and needed a diphtheria serum. In the original plan Seppala was supposed to make the entire run by himself. The total trip was 1,348 miles!

The plan was changed after Seppala left to pick up the serum. Now, it would include several mushers. Gunnar Kaasen joined the relay race at this time without Seppala's knowledge. Kaasen used Seppala's remaining dogs, and he picked Balto as the leader even though he knew that this would anger Seppala! Balto, though, rose to the occasion.

Meanwhile, Seppala and his dog team met the relay of mushers. He picked up the serum and continued on for his portion of the race. He and his team made a daring traverse across frozen Norton Bay. The team battled against gale-force winds and temperatures approaching 100 degrees below 0 all the way to Golovin.

Sepp then handed the serum to Charles Olson, who carried it to Bluff. Olson handed it to Kaasen.

Kaasen set off for Point Safety, but when he got there, he found his replacement, Ed Rohn, sleeping. Rather than wake Rohn up, Kaasen decided to make the final dash to Nome himself. Seppala, later, questioned this action.

Balto plowed through snow drifts and fought high winds for more than three hours in the swirling blackness. When the team arrived in Nome with the serum they became instant heroes.

By the time Seppala and Togo showed up, no one was quite as interested in their story, even though they had traveled 260 miles in comparison to Kaasen and Balto who had only traveled 106 miles. Kaasen and Balto had the spotlight and there was no room in the winner's circle for the other teams.

To make matters worse, reporters had mistakenly credited Balto with Togo's accomplishments. Now, Balto was the super Siberian, the veteran racer, skilled navigator, loyal leader.

Sadly, Togo had run himself to exhaustion and was badly injured. He would never race again.

Eventually, Gunnar Kaasen traveled to Hollywood with Seppala's 'B' team. The movie, "Balto's Race to Nome" was created. The movie was a tremendous success, but a great distortion from the truth.

Kaasen spent the next year and a half traveling across the country appearing in Vaudeville Acts with Balto and the team. Kaasen then sold the team to a dime museum (freak show) in Los Angeles.

Eventually, a kind man named George Kimble raised enough money to buy the team from the dime museum and Balto and the team spent the rest of their days in the Brookside Zoo in Cleveland, Ohio.

Balto died on March 14, 1933. His body was stuffed and mounted at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History where it can still be seen today.

Togo's mounted body stands in the Iditarod Trail Race Headquarters in Wasilla, Alaska.

Bronze statues of the two famous huskies have been placed outside the Wolf Wilderness Exhibit Center at the Cleveland Zoo and the two heroes of the north have been reunited, at least symbolically.

That is the real story of Balto.