

## Togo, a Real Hero

*Excerpts from the International Seppala Association*



A Norwegian man named Leonhard Seppala came to Nome in 1900. In Nome Leonhard entered the old ways of dog mushers and used this old Eskimo art to deliver mail and freight into the remote Alaska wilderness. He, like everyone else, used mongrel dogs some weighing as much as 120 pounds.

In 1913 he became involved with a different kind of dog, the Siberian Husky. This is how it happened, quoting Seppala himself:

"It was in 1913 that a man came to me and said that he had bought a group of Siberian females and puppies and wanted me to take charge of the raising and training of the young dogs. He said he was going to make Captain [Roald] Amundsen a present of a team of Siberians next year, at which time it was planned that Amundsen was to come to Nome with an expedition on his way to the North Pole. Hence, about fifteen dogs, mostly puppies and females, arrived at my camp and as soon as the snow began to fly I started to break in the oldest ones."

Amundsen abandoned his plans for a polar expedition once the Peary expedition got there first and the dogs remained with Seppala. He ran the All Alaskan Sweepstakes Race with these dogs and had a hair-raising experience in a blizzard nearly going over a precipice into the Bering Sea, sliding down an icy slope, unable to hold his team and stopping finally by means of his "emergency steel bar" jammed into the snow.

Seppala was hooked, no matter how dangerous his race had been. In the years 1915–1917 Leonard and his teams of Siberian Huskies astonished the mushing world by winning the All Alaskan Sweepstakes race three years in a row.

It was about this time that a skinny, mischievous pup named Togo worked himself into Leonhard's life. Seppala tried to sell Togo twice as he doubted the pup's potential. Each time Togo proved to be quite the escape artist and returned to Seppala's kennels. At eight months of age Togo freed himself to chase after Seppala's dog sled team, chased them up a trail and caught up to them easily.

Seppala had to bring the young dog along if only to keep an eye on him. By the end of the day Togo had proven himself & had earned a place hooked next to the lead dog, a position he held for 75 miles.

"In 1917 my team covered a greater distance than any in Alaska has ever done so far as is known -- for, in addition to traveling from the first snowfall until the last fall in June, I used the dogs as motor power on the Kougark railway all summer, covering in all, approximately seven thousand miles."

My chief pride in winning the All-Alaska Sweepstakes race three years in succession was not in the purse or in defeating my rivals, but in the fact that in each successive race all the dogs arrived in harness and in as good condition as they did in 1915."

In 1925, the year of the Serum Run to Nome, Seppala had the dog he describes as his finest leader at the head of his team: "Togo", a small (48-pound) dog who was then 9 years old. Of the twenty mushers who rushed the serum to Nome, the man who drove the furthest in perilous conditions was Leonhard Seppala. The dog that led Seppala's team on a loop of two hundred and sixty miles, including a long stretch over the fracturing ice of Norton Sound was the same dog with an impressive record of race victories over the previous decade, Togo, the real hero of the serum run. It wore Togo out and he was unable to race much after that.

Togo lived for several more years, his most athletic endeavor, the serum drive, behind him. Togo sired multiple litters before dying in honorable old age.

Seppala retired to Seattle. He died in 1967 at the age of 90. His ashes were scattered along the Iditarod.

Together, without benefit of on-lookers, or cameras, in dangerous weather and conditions, Seppala and Togo, earned their right to be called true heroes and raced their way into a history that has, until now, overlooked their part in it.

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