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Autor: Wey, Alain
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Dogs just like in the Far North

A country with a tradition of winter sports, Switzerland is also passionate about sled dog racing and breeding pedigree Nordic dogs, including the most popular breed, the Husky. Breeder Maurice Jobin from the canton of Jura, and musher Pierre-Antoine Héritier, from the canton of Valais, give us an insight.

By Alain Wey



A sled team in full swing in a race in Kandersteg

The atmosphere of the Far North, the packs of sled dogs howling, sensing the imminent start of a race. Although North America and Scandinavia are the champions in this sport, Switzerland has more than 200 mushers and some 3,000 pedigree Nordic dogs. And where there is passion, races abound in the middle of winter. Alongside competition and breeding, the winter season attracts tourists for dog sledding tours, with demand far outstripping supply. Developing a passion for epic Alaskan adventures is becoming a way of life. The most experienced Swiss mushers even take part in the long-distance races which made this sport famous. This is true for Pierre-Antoine Héritier from the canton of Valais, who completed the 1,600-km Yukon Quest (Alaska-Canada) in 12 days in 2010. There is a whole world behind these impressive feats: the life of enthusiasts and of the Nordic dogs, whose breeding is strictly controlled in Switzerland to preserve the pedigree of purebred dogs. Let's take a ride on the trails of the Nordic dogs, breeders and mushers in Switzerland.

The packs gather

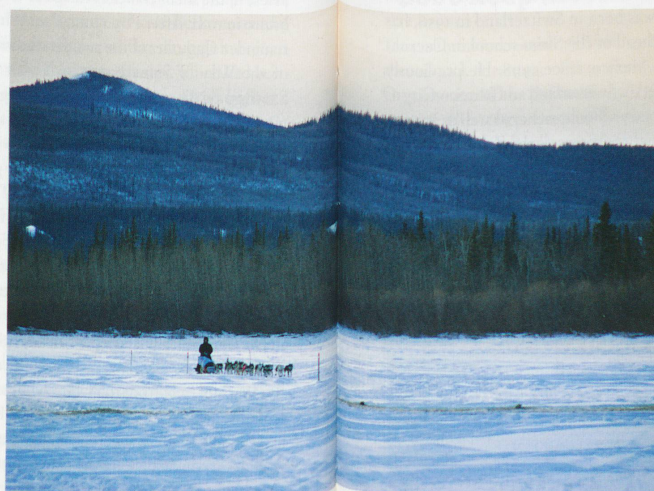
The Swiss Club for Nordic Dogs (SKNH) has been working to maintain the pedigree

of the four pure breeds since 1959, and now numbers 1,078 Siberian Huskies, 450 Alaskan Malamutes, 393 Samoyeds and 80 Greenland Huskies. Although crossbreeding to improve the dogs' speed and performance is widespread in the world of mushers, Swiss competitors largely prefer to conserve breeds. Yukon Quest Finisher Pierre-Antoine Héritier only sleds with Siberian Huskies. The first real sled dog race in Switzerland was held in 1973 at Saignelégier (Jura), where the Franches-Montagnes district takes on the look and feel of the Far North in winter. Over the course of the 1970s, it became a European benchmark in the genre, and today hosts 120 teams and more than 20,000 spectators. The late 1980s saw the birth of three national sporting federations, which are behind most of the winter races in Switzerland: the Swiss Mushers' Society (SMV), the Swiss Sporting Club for Pulka and Sled Dogs (SKS) and the Swiss Sled Dog Sports Club (SSK). Since then, up to three sled dog competitions have been held on one-day races every weekend between January and March at locations including Kandersteg (Berne, Swiss championships), Lenk (Berne), Lenzerheide (Grisons), Les Mosses (Vaud), and numer-

ous others where sled dogs have made a name for themselves.

The Husky, polar endurance with a transcendent stare

Maurice Jobin (79) has been breeding Siberian Huskies on the high slopes of Saignelégier (Jura) since 1979. This fastest and most widespread of the pedigree Nordic dogs is the most iconic symbol of the Far North dog breeds. Its bright blue eyes and wolf-like appearance have captivated many among the non-initiated. At Le Lichen Bleu – the former musher's kennels – 421 puppies have been born to date. The breeding regulations here are similar to those for racehorses. "Studs should be the offspring of studs selected over five generations", explains Jobin. "You also have to check for predispositions to hip abnormalities and eye diseases. Finally, they must be subjected to behavioural tests as the dog shouldn't be aggressive." Jobin cannot help but praise the qualities of Huskies: their resistance to cold, independence and intelligence. "There are a dozen official breeders in Switzerland, added to



Pierre-Antoine Héritier and his dogs on the Yukon Quest trail in Canada

whom are those who compete or take tourists on sled rides. They breed litters from time to time to bring new blood into their team."

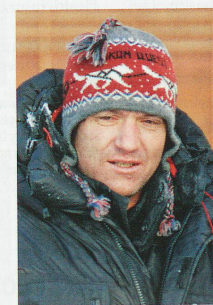
Dreams of the Far North

When sled dog competitions are mentioned, dreamers inevitably think of the challenges of the Far North. The Iditarod Race, the longest in the world, commemorates the achievement of a musher who in 1925 successfully reached the town of Nome (Alaska), which had been hit by a diphtheria epidemic, with ice and a blizzard preventing serum being sent by air or boat. Switzerland's passion for mushing is also embodied in countryman Martin Buser. Originally from Winterthur, Buser has lived in Alaska since 1979 and became the first non-American to win the race in 1992, going on to win it a total of five times. In view of these achievements and the escapism images that the sport conveys, we could legitimately ask why it has never been included in the Olympic Games, despite the fact that almost all countries practising winter sports are sled dog enthusiasts. Just imagine the excitement that these races could generate if aired live on television! The Swiss would certainly have the means to compete against the North American champions. Until then, the teams will continue to cross thousands of kilometres in complete freedom, in a harmony between man, dog and nature.

www.lichenbleu.ch (website of Maurice Jobin)

"The Yukon Quest, the ultimate challenge"

Musher Pierre-Antoine Héritier (47) began competing in 1990. Sprint and middle distance (8-50 km) races led on to major endurance races over stages and without assistance covering hundreds of kilometres. The high point of these challenges was the Yukon Quest in 2010, which is considered to be the most difficult race in the world. With his team of 14 Huskies, he raced from Fairbanks (US) to Whitehorse (CA) in 12 days (1,648 km). A book on his epic adventure will be published in December. The heroic deeds of this wine grower from Savièse (Valais) now also include six Polardistans (300 km, Sweden), four Grande Odyssée (1,000 km, Savoie Mont-Blanc), five Femundløpet (400 and 600 km, Norway) and one Finnmarksløpet (1,000 km, Norway).



How many dogs do you currently have?

«P.-A. HÉRITIÉR: Twenty. After the Yukon Quest, my team of dogs had become a little old. I'm currently breeding and training for a team that will be ready in the 2014 season for long-distance races over ten days. As I have young dogs that need training, I'm starting off with three-day races. I generally race with teams of between 8 and 14 Huskies.

What is the Yukon Quest?

It's the ultimate challenge. It's like climbing Everest or competing in the Olympic Games. The 14 dogs that start the race are like the footballers in my team, but they cannot be substituted, only taken off. The rule is that you need to finish the race with a minimum of six dogs – I did it with 11. My aim was to finish the race, and not to place well.

What do your Huskies mean to you?

They're my football team! I consider myself to be a trainer, owner, dietician, masseur, vet and psychologist. During a race, you depend on the dogs. If you don't treat them well, get to know them and look after them, this isn't possible. In endurance races, the dogs need to be confident and well supported. They're like athletes: if they lack the morale, they won't succeed. These races are extremely difficult to manage on a physical and mental level, both for the Huskies and for the musher.

Which races will you compete in this season?

The Haute Maurienne Trophy over three stages of the Grande Odyssée in January, and sprint races in Switzerland over 15-20 km between December and February. Then, in mid-February, I'm competing in two 300 km races in Sweden:

the Polardistans and the Amundsen Race. But this year, it's just about getting the young dogs used to competition. In the coming seasons, I'm thinking of lining up some 400 and 500 km races. I'll be working based on the abilities of my dogs.

Are there any major challenges you would still like to tackle?

There's still Iditarod in Alaska, which with a course of 1,800 km is the longest race in the world. That said, it's still less difficult and more manageable than the Yukon Quest because there are no mountains and the course is punctuated with around 20 checkpoints compared to eight on the quest. So, maybe one day!

How do you see your future as a musher?

I've still got some time before I think about someone else taking over. Some of my competitors are currently aged over 60... We're a little like equestrians: mushers improve with age!

www.teamheritier.com

ALAIN WEY is an editor at "Swiss Review"