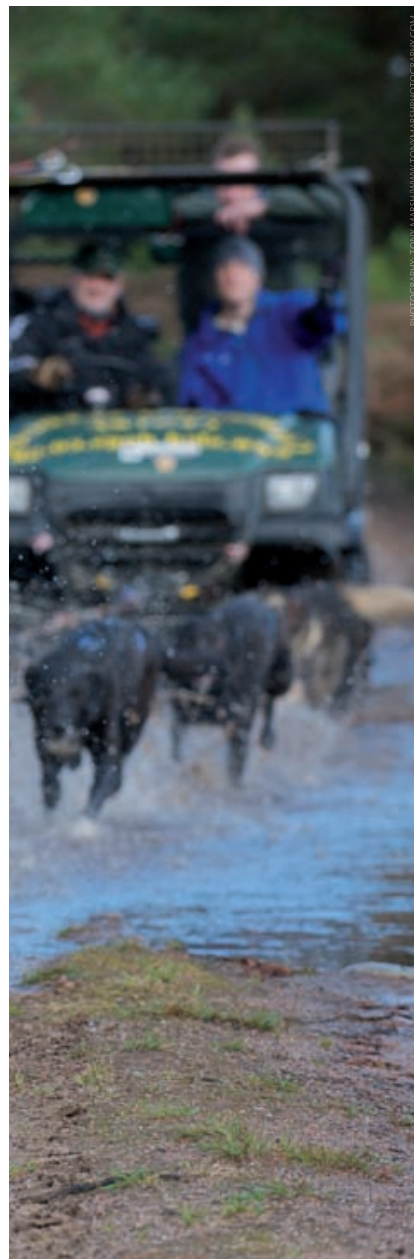


ADVENTURE • SLEDDOG RACING



PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY MARSH WWW.TONYMARSHPHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK

YOU DON'T NEED SNOW TO GET A TASTE OF THE ROUGH AND TUMBLE WORLD OF PROFESSIONAL SLEDDOG RACING, AS RICHARD ROWE DISCOVERS ON A VISIT TO THE CAIRNGORMS

BORN TO RUN

WE ARE ALMOST READY TO GO. Up front, the two lead dogs, the implacable Lidl and Dingo, wait patiently while we position the yearlings – young dogs that are new to racing – alongside older animals. “We don’t mess around when getting the dogs ready,” says the no-nonsense Alan Stewart who, with his wife Fiona, runs the Cairngorm Sleddog Centre. “You’ve got to be quick.”

And he’s right. Some of the young dogs are already getting quite worked up – not good for calm, controlled running – while the baying from the other dogs in the kennel not chosen for this run is getting louder by the minute.

Finally, Alan holds the last dog between his knees and expertly slips on its harness. With each animal connected front and back to the main tow line, it’s time for Snowy and Pandora, Sophie and Lefty, Heidi and Buddy, Jack and Budweiser, and the two wheel dogs – those closest to the ‘sled’ – Kid and Culter, to show us what they’ve got. We jump onboard an all-terrain vehicle, which doubles as a sled-cart when there is no snow, Fiona flings open the gate and we are off at a staggering pace.

For the next half an hour or so – in truth, it’s so exhilarating it’s hard to keep track of time – the 10-dog team takes us on a high-octane ride first along open gravel tracks and then ripping through much narrower trails cut through the forest. We splash through deep puddles as the dogs negotiate roots, overhanging branches and other awkward obstacles.

As we race along, Alan ‘talks’ to his two leads using voice commands – ‘haw’ for left, ‘gee’ for right – as well as eye contact and hand movements that are interpreted instantly by Lidl and Dingo as they guide the team through the twists and turns. “We need to regulate the pace and effort,” he says. “The young ones want to go all the time, but they would blow out in a long race.”

It’s breathtaking stuff, with the power of the dogs evident even though we are sitting on a souped-up quad bike rather than a gossamer-light sled. Although the engine is on, watching Alan work the brakes it quickly becomes clear that we are not helping the dogs, but holding them back.

Every few minutes, Alan calls a halt as one of the yearlings gets tangled in a leash or is not quite running as

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He would like. The dog is put back firmly in its place – with Lidl and Dingo ever watchful, waiting for instructions – before the team digs in and we are off again.

Once back at the start area, Alan announces himself pleased with the performance of the yearlings before switching on an overhead sprinkler system to cool the team down. We remove the harnesses from each panting dog and return them to their kennels, again serenaded by the rest of the pack.

KLONDIKE DAYS

Think of sled dogs and the mind conjures images of furred Inuits 'mushing' wolf-like animals with bushy coats and piercing blue eyes. But while most of the senior dogs being run here are Alaskan huskies, only a handful fit the stereotype. To the untutored eye they appear more mutt-like, but looks are deceptive; most of the animals in this 40-strong kennel are descendants of bush dogs bred for pulling power and endurance rather than show-ring looks.

These are the dogs that were first used to transport goods and people to far-flung places in Alaska and the Yukon back in the Klondike days. "I always say to people that the sport comes from the gold rush, not the Inuits," says Alan. "The majority of dogs were used by people in the transport business for moving goods around – including gold."

Now 55, Alan has a keen sense of the sport's history and has even built a cabin that houses a museum dedicated to Alec 'Scotty' Allan, a legendary musher who grew up on Speyside before becoming a central figure in sled dog running in the Yukon and elsewhere.

Having first got into sled dog racing almost 20 years ago, Alan has funded what is an expensive sport by working as a member of a deep saturation dive team based in the North Sea – a well-paid but dangerous occupation that involves spending weeks at a time in pressurised diving chambers.

Alan went on to compete in races across Europe and South America, often bringing his young son, John, along to help. It was an experience that clearly paid off for John. At just 24, and with a string of UK championships and long-distance races under his belt, he is rapidly emerging as one of the world's leading sled dog racers. In March, he will compete in the Iditarod (see sidebar, *Northern exposure*), a 1,150-mile marathon across Alaska that is regarded as the pinnacle of the sport and one of the toughest endurance races anywhere on the planet.

More recently, the Stewarts have devoted their time to running what is the UK's only sled dog centre where they train dogs with an eye to providing top racers for John. They live in a 300-year-old cottage set in a clearing deep within the forest on the Rothiemurchus Estate near Aviemore. It's quite a workplace, with panoramic views over ancient Caledonian pinewoods to the high Cairngorm plateau.

Here, visitors can choose from high-speed blasts through the forest to more sedate wildlife safaris, all the time learning about what it takes to rear and train champion sled dogs. "For me, this is a way of life," explains Alan. "I love working with these kinds of dogs and seeing the respect you get back."

The centre itself is a colourful shanty town of sheds, huts and kennels that house gear, the Scotty Allan museum and



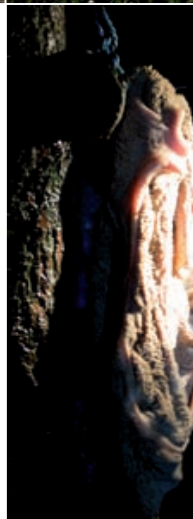
Dog days: Pandora in her kennel (above); harnesses (top); young dogs look and learn (opposite top); Alan preparing dinner (below right)

a pack of animals that range from retired dogs to five-week-old pups. Many live in kennels made out of straw-lined whisky casks and look deceptively cute. However, these are no domesticated pets – a point emphasised at feeding time. I watched as Alan sliced a tub of cows' stomachs into bite-sized morsels and then went from kennel to kennel lobbing chunks of pungent flesh over each fence from a wheelbarrow. The tripe was devoured almost before it hit the ground.

RACING GENES

Most of the dogs have been sourced from top breeders around the world and can be traced to just a few select blood lines. Lidl, the lead dog from the earlier run, was brought over from Germany but was born in Alaska. Half-husky and half-Viszla, he has raced in the US at the highest level.

"Lidl is awesome, but came to me as a problem dog," explains Alan. It seems Lidl has a liking for chewing wood and the splinters would damage his throat during races. Right on cue, Lidl bumbles up to the fence with a chunk of wood in his mouth. "He's more like a bloody beaver," says Alan. **D**



NORTHERN EXPOSURE



Having grown up racing with his Dad in events around the world, John Stewart (pictured above) is now preparing to tackle the big one: the Iditarod in Alaska. At 24, he will be the youngest ever UK entrant in the race.

First held in 1973, the annual Iditarod is a gruelling event that sees mushers race teams of up to 16 dogs 1,150 miles from Anchorage to Nome on the western Bering Sea coast. The route covers some of the harshest terrain imaginable and usually takes between 10 and 17 days to complete.

Elite sled dog racers are attracted not just by the challenge, but the history of a race that is indelibly linked with the pioneering spirit of Alaska. The route follows the Iditarod National Historical Trail, which has its beginnings as a mail and supply route. Sled dogs delivered essential goods and returned with gold and furs. In 1925 the people of Nome were struck by a diphtheria outbreak and once again it was the sled dog teams that transported life-saving medicines to remote communities.

Having qualified following a fourth-place finish in the 300-mile Montana Race to the Sky event in early 2009, John is now itching to get started. "Anyone who is serious about sled dog racing knows about the Iditarod," he says. "It's always been my ambition to enter the race."

From December he will be based in Montana where he will live and train with four-time Iditarod winner Doug Swingley. As a warm-up, John will race in the Wyoming Open in late-January before driving some 2,500 miles up through Canada to the start line of the Iditarod.

But even getting to that point is a feat in itself. It can cost \$40,000 just to lease a dog team and equipment and some mushers spend the entire year raising the money needed to compete. John has received some sponsorship, most recently from the Macdonald Highland Resort, but, like his Dad before him, has raised the bulk of the funds through diving work in the North Sea.

PHOTOGRAPH: WWW.ISTOCK.COM



Furry fun (from left to right): Fiona with a possible future champion; night running; kick-biking with JR the husky pointer cross



Elsewhere, in a larger enclosure, stand a handful of incredibly striking husky/pointer crosses. Short-haired, with startling blue eyes and heavily-muscled hind legs, they are the speedsters of the sleddog world. “These guys dominate in sprint and middle distance racing,” explains Alan.

Alan leads me to another kennel and for the first time goes a little gooey-eyed. He confesses to “not being a doggy person”, but nonetheless has a soft spot for Buster, a 14-year-old German short-haired pointer, now greying at the muzzle, but still with a glint in his eye. “Buster crossed the Alps with me twice,” says Alan, before calling for his old pal to lollap over. So, which top kennel did he find Buster in? “I didn’t,” he says. “I got him from a fish and chip shop.”

Training starts almost from day one, with pups cared for by Fiona until they are old enough to be handed over to Alan. Until then, the older pups are kennelled in clear view of the race carts. “They see me working with the other dogs, so when the cart goes back and forwards they realise that I am involved with the pack,” he says.

Meanwhile, it’s obvious that Fiona enjoys working with the very young dogs. As we talk, a five-week-old Alaskan husky stares out from the folds of Fiona’s coat. Unlike puppies that are taken as pets and removed from their litter mates at an early age, this pup and his four siblings will remain together as a pack as they grow up.

Although far from pampered, the pups are nonetheless brought up accustomed to being handled. “Holding them is important because you must be able to check their feet and put their harnesses on when racing,” explains Fiona. “You sometimes also have to suture them if they have been fighting, so the dogs must learn to trust you totally.”

She happily cuddles the young pup, but has no interest in rearing softies. “We need the dogs to have good feet, good coats and that racing attitude. If they are sitting on your sofa all mollycoddled they are unlikely to have it.”

PULLING POWER

Having already sampled the dogs’ power and racing instincts from the back of an all-terrain vehicle, Alan decides it’s time for me to have an altogether more raw experience. He steps into the workshop area and grabs a contraption that looks like a chunky mountain bike, but is in fact a scooter, or kick-bike.

I’d heard of Cani-X – running while attached to your dog – but this was new to me. Apparently, riding with dogs using a kick-bike or mountain bike is huge in the US. All you need is a waist harness, a tow cord and a dog that likes to run. “A lot of people with larger dogs are nervous about having them off the lead, but I have never known anyone who could keep a dog fit on a lead,” says Alan. “Riding in this way is a great way to connect with your dog. The amount of mileage you cover is incredible.”

I remember a childhood incident when I tied the family labrador – a sturdy beast – to my bike and came a cropper on a corner. Alan reads my mind. “Don’t tie the dog to the scooter because if you come off your bike will get trashed,” he advises sagely.

Alan says he and Buster have enjoyed many an adventure on the kick-bike, including travelling through the Lairig Ghru from Braemar to Aviemore. Meanwhile, champion musher John usually attaches six dogs to one of these jalopies. “You should see them go,” says Alan. One will do me fine, I say.

Alan picks out JR, a nine-year-old husky/pointer cross,

and we head down the track. He then attaches the dog to my waist harness, the short lead between us draped over the handlebars of the scooter. Fiona and kennel helper Andy keep a firm grip on JR while I collect my thoughts. He’s nine years old, I mutter, how fast can he be?

Suddenly, with a shout from Alan further up the track, JR rears, digs his claws in and we are off. He runs dead straight, pulling me with ease. It’s brilliant and I grin like a lunatic as we zip along the heather-lined track.

“RIDING IN THIS WAY IS GREAT FOR CONNECTING WITH YOUR DOG”

On the next run, we swap JR for Macallan, a handsome Siberian husky, and the scooter for a mountain bike. It’s the same drill, although this time I am riding something more familiar and can pedal to keep up with Macallan. If anything, it’s even more fun and I imagine the adventures I could have with my own dog – Rolf – if only he would run straight and not follow his nose into the heather.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Cairngorm Sleddog Centre is open year-round and the dogs run from August to April, with or without snow. Visitors can help prepare a dog team and choose from a variety of day and evening rides, including an overnight stay in a cabin deep in the forest. The centre also offers two-day sleddog courses for those who want to take their first steps in the sport. www.sled-dogs.co.uk

THE IDITAROD 2010

To follow John’s preparations, or assist with sponsorship, visit www.johnfortheiditarod.com

NIGHT RUNNING

Later, it’s back to the serious stuff. Alan is eager to give some of the young dogs a first taste of running in the dark. A bright day has turned into a filthy night, but the dogs seem no less excited about heading out into the gloom.

Once again, the ever reliable Dingo and Lidl – minus his chunk of wood – lead the way, this time with four of the eight other dogs running under torchlight for the first time. If anything, placement of each animal is even

more crucial than during the daytime run and once again we go through the routine of rigging the dogs up in pairs.

Apart from the darkness, the other difference this time is that the dogs are attached to a much smaller, nimbler quad bike, which in turn is hooked to a two-man trailer that resembles a cage on wheels. We set off at what seems like an even more explosive pace and quickly disappear into the forest.

Sitting in the cage trailer behind Alan on the quad bike, it is impossible to see what is coming up ahead and there is no time to brace as we crash through a series of ruts and hollows.

It’s quite a ride, but once again the dogs take everything in their stride. By the time we return to the centre, they are wet through and have no need of the overhead shower. The dogs’ chests heave with the exertion, their tongues lolling from mud-spattered faces, while steam rises from their bodies. But they are happy – this is what they live for. And for one or two, the run is just one more step in an education that could take them to the very top of the sleddog racing game. ■