

A Great Musher Speaks—

Geo. Attla Praises His Leader 'Johnny'

(From ALASKA DOG
RACING NEWS)

Johnny - George Attla's 1969 leader! Purchased from Theodore Westlake of Kiana last summer, Johnny had raced in the Anchorage and Fairbanks big races with Larry Westlake's team of two years ago.

Now four years old and just hitting his prime, George Attla, the 1968 Fur Rendezvous World Champion says of Johnny:

"This is a dog that runs hard out of desire to go. You can't force him to do it, he is just out there all the time because he likes it."

"I have never seen or driven a better command dog," commented George (which is really putting it on the line considering the many good leaders that George has had in years past.) "He will fight other dogs to take a command, and will pull the whole team around."

Johnny, described by George as: "A real pretty dog, and tops as far as I'm concerned," is about 24 inches at the shoulder and weighs 55 pounds, and looks like a rangy Siberian Husky.

Most important in our mind is this remark by the Huslia Hustler:

"There aren't many dogs being trained like this anymore, as a lot of leaders can follow a beaten trail on a sno-go track. This dog will take me anywhere I asked him to."

George Attla, Jr. was born into a world where everyone had dogs. In Huslia in 1933, George Attla, Sr. had one of the best teams around the country.

"The dogs were all white with black heads," recalls George, "and my father could do things with that team that I can't do with mine. He was a top dog trainer."

"When I was six years old I

began helping with the dogs. When I was eight I contracted TB of the kneecap, which resulted in my being unable to bend my leg."

Later that year, George was given a team of three dogs.

"I raced that team in the junior races, and learned how to handle a sled as well as anybody. The dog team helped me become more mobile than I would have been without it."

George recollects: "I started to have dreams of racing when Jimmy Huntington went to the Livengood races in the early forties. After the war - in the late forties, Jimmy again went to the races, this time the North American Championship in Fairbanks, where he did quite well."

"Through the early fifties, the competition in the villages became very strong, and the type of dogs that the people kept changed from a work type to more of a racing dog. In 1958, I put together a team made up of village dogs and came to Anchorage to race."

"Half of those dogs were owned by my brother Steve. The other dogs were cast-offs that other people were going to get rid of. The only dog in the team that I owned was the leader, Tennessee. I gave him to Doctor Lombard, but he died before 'Doc' could race him in Fairbanks."

"Until I won that race that year, I really didn't know just how good our dogs were, and I had no way of telling what competition would be like."

"I went back to Huslia and began to raise my own dogs and didn't make it back to the big City for four more years. I started with the dogs of my brother and have stayed pretty close to that line ever since. During those four years I loaned dogs to other

mushers when they went to race.

"Some of those I helped were Warner Vent, Lucien Sam, and my brother, Alfred. I didn't race because I didn't think that I had a team that could win."

George came back in 1962 and won the Fur Rendezvous Race once again. The sixteen dogs he brought with him on that trip were all his. The team was a fast one, breaking a lap record set by Earl Norris eleven years prior.

Some of the leaders that George Attla has had have gone on to big wins with other mushers. These leaders seem to run in pairs. Nelly and Tuffy. Nellie now shows the way for Doctor Lombard, and Tuffy went to Keith Bryar (now a leader for Californian, Bob Levorsen).

Tricky is now an Earl Norris team member, and Buster hails from New York with Anne Wing.

"This year I have a new leader," says George, "Johnny. The others I am running this year are Coolie, Blue, and Darkie."

George raises about three litters of puppies a year. They are usually Spring of Fall pups and are ready to break to harness in the spring after the racing season is over.

When asked what he looks for in a pup, George said, "A smooth gait and plenty of speed."

He said that he could usually pick the best pups between three and four months. He lets pups run loose with the teams as he is training in the spring. At about three or four months they start to follow the team out and back.

"Some of them, by the time they are four months of age are running almost twenty miles a day, by going out with several teams. The pups that fall behind at that age are usually the ones that won't make it when they

are older."

When he is ready to hook these pups up in a team, George chains them out for a couple of weeks. After watching the teams going out for that time and not getting to go, the pups are ready to run.

"I have never hooked up a lazy pup," says George, "they all are eager to go."

The dog situation in the villages is getting "kind of tight." There are just four other teams in Huslia. These are owned by Winkler Bifelt, Cue Befelt, Barney Sam and Tony Sam. In Hughes, only Lester Sam, Henry Beattus and Bill Williams now have teams.

Some of the teams are just for pleasure and are driven just occasionally - sentimental reasons, mostly. The snow machines have taken over.

"I even had to buy a sno-go just to get back into the conversation down at the pool hall," said the Huslia Hustler with a grin.

Dog sled racing is on the way downhill unless there is more prize money offered, according to George. The dog mushers from the villages can't afford to come to town for the money that is offered.

With a slight frown, George said, "Even when I win some of the big races, I can't break even for the season. The expenses are just too high." And then, with a grin, "It just happens that I am an addict of racing. I wouldn't miss these races for anything."

Concluding, George feels that his dogs should hold up better this year than last. Based on last years performance - a pretty big statement! George Attla knows that the competition is getting tougher each year and that he will be in some close, exciting ones this year.