

Spirit of a Racer in a Dog's Blood  
By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD

MASSENA, N.Y. — Like any athlete, Winnie has a race-day routine. Four hours before the beginning of her sled-dog race in this upstate town, Winnie, a Siberian husky, laps up meat broth. Two hours before, she submits to pats from spectators. Forty minutes before, she settles into the snow for a final rest.

But her co-owner Diane Baskin-Wright said not to be fooled. “She morphs into psycho dog when she hits the line,” Baskin-Wright said.

There were about 200 sled dogs here on a recent Saturday, barking and howling alongside vehicles with license plates like Sib Box, Musers, Haw Gee and Ondasly. Winnie stood out not just for her calm race-day nerves — she is the lead dog on her team — and the spray of gray along her back. Unusual for a racing dog, Winnie is also a show dog, the top-ranked female Siberian in the nation. Her show name is Huskavarna's Destined to Win. She will appear at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show beginning Monday, competing alongside breeds that sat at pharaohs' feet or hunted with Hungarian kings.

Winnie's breed does not have royal roots, but her lineage is fierce. It dates to what some consider the finest feat in dog-and-human history, a 1925 race to deliver lifesaving diphtheria serum to icebound Nome, Alaska. The event gripped the nation and later became an inspiration for the Iditarod race.

But after the headlines ceased, what happened to two of the lead dogs — Winnie's forebear Togo and Balto, whose statue stands in Central Park — is a tale that reflects Americans' quick creation and destruction of celebrities, involving Hollywood, a 10-cent circus, a Cleveland zoo, a ruined friendship and a sports controversy that, almost 90 years later, still raises the hackles of sled-dog drivers everywhere.

“It's still very much in the mind of mushers,” said Bob Thomas, a Siberian musher and a historian for the International Siberian Husky Club.

In January 1925, an outbreak of diphtheria had killed two children and was spreading quickly in Nome, a town of about 1,400 that was icebound seven months a year.

A local doctor telegraphed Washington, urgently requesting serum to treat the diphtheria, and public health officials found a supply in Anchorage, according to Gay and Laney Salisbury's riveting book, “The Cruellest Miles.” Officials determined that dog sleds were the best way to transport the serum from Nenana, a northern railroad stop, to Nome, 674 miles west. A group of top mushers and sled-dog racers would hand off the serum at roadhouses along the route. That distance usually took a few weeks to cover. By then, public health officials feared, much of Nome would be dead.

As the dog-sled teams raced west, roadhouse owners provided near-real-time updates over telephone and telegraph lines. Front-page headlines from The New York Times included “Nome Relief Dogs Speed 192 Miles,” “Serum Relief Near for Stricken Nome,” and “Blizzard Delays Nome Relief Dogs in the Final Dash.”

“It came right down to just the spirit of men and dogs against nature,” Gay Salisbury said.

A noted racer and mining-company dog driver named Leonhard Seppala was originally assigned half of the Nenana-Nome distance. Seppala’s lead dog, a gray and brown Siberian husky named Togo, had covered 4,000 miles in one year alone, guided a famed polar explorer around Alaska, and won major races. Togo had been Seppala’s lead dog since he was 8 months old; now, at age 12, Togo would have one of his final Alaska outings with his driver.

Seppala, Togo and the team set out at high speeds, running a total of 261 miles — they carried the serum for almost double the length any other team did. Twice, to save time, they violated warnings to avoid Norton Sound, a dangerous inlet of the Bering Sea, and instead went straight over the frozen sea, where ice often separated from shore, stranding travelers on floes. In the dark, in 85-below temperatures with wind chill, Seppala could not see or hear the cracking ice, and was dependent on Togo, the Salisburys wrote.

Meanwhile, worried that Seppala’s dogs would get too tired, Alaska’s governor called in additional drivers for the final portion. Just five and a half days after the serum left Nenana, a driver named Gunnar Kaasen and a lead dog named Balto pulled into Nome, serum in hand.

“It was Balto who led the way,” Kaasen told a reporter. “The credit is his.”

Kaasen and Balto, a handsome black Siberian with white paws, became instant heroes. There were front-page articles; commendations from the president; tributes from the Senate; newspapers (including The Times) printing a report that Balto had died from frozen lungs, then quickly rescinding it; wishful editorials proposing that Balto appear at Westminster; a national tour; a Hollywood contract.

But as Kaasen, Balto and that team of dogs were becoming celebrities, the other mushers from the relay straggled into Nome with a different story. Kaasen was assigned the next-to-last leg. But, in an account that some mushers still doubt, Kaasen said the lights were off in the cabin where he was to hand off the serum, so he headed for Nome himself.

Seppala was already broken when he arrived — he had lost Togo when the dog ran off after a reindeer. Then he found that not only were Kaasen and Balto on their way

to Hollywood, but the newspapers had attributed Togo's lifetime feats to Balto, a dog he had not considered decent enough to put on his 20-dog team.

"The story had already heralded a winner by the time Seppala made the 100 miles home," Gay Salisbury said. "It was too complicated to showcase 20 drivers and 150 dogs. The relay as a concept was not as exciting as 'Balto crossed the finish line.'"

Sol Lesser, a Hollywood producer, shot Balto and Kaasen for a short film, and Balto made joint appearances with Mary Pickford and other celebrities, Salisbury wrote. In December 1925, Balto was immortalized with a Central Park statue; news coverage by then was giving Balto credit for taking the serum all 600-plus miles.

Togo limped back into Nome about a week after the serum run ended. Later, wanting the acclaim due his dogs, Seppala embarked on his own tour of the States in 1926. It culminated with a Madison Square Garden ice-rink appearance, where the explorer Roald Amundsen awarded Togo a medal of honor.

In Maine, Seppala bred Togo and other serum-run dogs he had taken East, essentially introducing the Siberian breed to the States.

"That was the foundation kennel, pretty much — all the mushers in the Northeast at that point, most had never seen a Siberian when he showed up," Thomas, the Siberian historian, said. In 1930, the American Kennel Club admitted Siberian huskies.

Seppala sold some dogs, and a few had strange fates — Fritz, Togo's half-brother and a serum run veteran, died at Gimbel's in Manhattan, where he was part of a holiday exhibit — but he protected Togo, who lived his final years in Maine, dying in 1929.

Togo's body was initially displayed in a Yale exhibit about notable dogs. Later, his mount was transferred to another museum and forgotten in storage; an employee and sled-dog enthusiast stumbled across it in the early 1980s. When Alaskans found out it was Togo, they demanded his repatriation, and the dog's body is now on display at the Iditarod Trail Headquarters in Wasilla.

Balto's life was sadder in many ways. He and his teammates were bought and sold, to the vaudeville circuit, then down another notch. In early 1927, just two years after the run, a Cleveland businessman stumbled upon the team in Los Angeles. "A guy who ran a dime museum, Sam Houston, had the team chained to a sled on a stage, in this dingy tent," said Harvey Webster, the director of the wildlife resource center at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History.

The businessman announced he would raise \$2,000 within two weeks to buy Balto and the team. He turned to The Cleveland Plain Dealer, which exhorted citizens to help save Balto. "It's schoolkids giving their lunch money; kennel clubs that are

making contributions in the name of champions,” Webster said. Cleveland succeeded, and Balto and his teammates became popular fixtures at the Cleveland Zoo.

Balto was aging. Neutered as a puppy because Seppala did not think he showed much promise, he never had offspring and he died in 1933. His body was transferred to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, where he is on permanent display next to an exhibit about Inuits.

Seppala and Kaasen, who were good friends — their brothers died in a fire together and are buried side by side, Salisbury said — never spoke again, as far as Salisbury found.

As for the dogs, in 1998, an Alaska legislator proposed a bill that would return Balto to stand alongside Togo at Iditarod headquarters. “They were imploring the museum to send our doggie home,” Webster, of the Cleveland museum, said. “And we said: ‘Wait a minute. He spent a majority of his life, actually, in Cleveland, and it was the community of Cleveland that saved him from a pretty despicable fate.’ ”

A museum in Anchorage suggested a compromise — it would borrow Balto for an exhibition — and after two rounds of failed negotiations, Cleveland agreed, conditionally. “We made them insure the dog for some huge amount of money, and created this custom-made crate for Balto and the cabinet in which he’s displayed, with his plexiglass top,” Webster said. “He and a museum representative went up to Anchorage, and on the side of the box was ‘Contents: One Hero Dog.’ ”

In 1997, Togo finally got his statue, at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, sitting alongside a statue of Balto. A couple of years later, Togo got a standalone statue, though in a small playground in New York’s Lower East Side that is hardly a tourist destination.

The overlooking of Togo still infuriates mushers. “It rankles a lot,” said Jonathan Nathaniel Hayes, who breeds and mushes Siberians based on Seppala’s stock, who says he winces when his kids watch “Balto,” an animated 1995 movie.

The Iditarod, which starts this year in March, will commemorate the 1925 event, meeting up with the serum-run route along the Yukon, “except for the portion where Seppala went across the sea ice,” said Erin McLarnon, an Iditarod spokeswoman; that section is still considered too dangerous. Each year, the Iditarod gives a prestigious award named after Seppala to the musher who treats his or her dogs with extraordinary care.

Seppala, according to “The Cruellest Miles,” wrote a journal entry when he was 81, about 30 years after his lead dog’s death:

“When I come to the end of the trail, I feel that along with my many friends, Togo will be waiting and I know that everything will be all right.”

Back in Massena, Frank Wright ruffled the fur on Winnie’s head and bent down to whisper, “Gonna be good today.” As Wright and Baskin-Wright attached the dogs to the line, Winnie started howling. She wanted to race.

Wright was not expecting the fastest time in the six-dog category. Siberians that compete in shows, like Winnie and her crew, are too stocky to beat Siberians bred for racing and the mixed-breed hounds that are even speedier.

But at the starting line, as the timer started counting back from 10, Baskin-Wright could barely hold back Winnie, as the dog was tugging so hard. Balto may live on in the movies, but Togo’s descendant is still running.