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**Dog Mushing, Gareth Wright?**

**Summary created by: Varpu Lotvonen**

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**Notes: Original in 7-inch tape, master copy on CD. Produced by Roger McPherson.** THESE TAPES WERE PRODUCED AS A PART OF AN EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM NOW DEFUNCT AND WERE BROADCAST OVER THE RADIO FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES.

The interviewer asks the interviewee [Gareth] how he first started dog mushing and he tells that when he was a little boy, their dad had a dog team with which they got around. They were living at Nenana at the time and his dad always had dogs. In those days there used to be big races in Ruby and Nome and they were just starting racing in Fairbanks. There was the Livengood Race and the Signal Corps Race. They sold tickets to dog races to finance them and they talked about who had the best dog team and who was going to win the race. Ever since he was a boy, racing was his big ambition and when he was 13 he got his very first own dog.

He was lucky to get one of the John Allen breed dogs that come from Ruby. John Allen was one of the best dog mushers of all times and a breeder of dogs. He wasn't a harsh whip driver, but a man who demanded his dogs to do their job without whipping them or hitting them. Gareth has heard from other early day dog mushers that John Allen could stand in one spot and make a figure-8 with his dog team.

The interviewer asks if Johnny Allen did lots of mushing in the Ruby area. Gareth says he mushed and raced in Ruby area, but got well-known "here." He won races in 1937-1939 and broke the 15-miles an hour record on 30 miles. At that time he had a cross-breed of wolf, husky and Irish Setter. Gareth has tried to re-duplicate his breed of dogs. Johnny isn't in the country anymore.

2:48The interviewer asks Gareth to tell more about how he got his first dog and asks if Gareth knew Johnny well enough so he would have given Gareth the dog.

Gareth tells he got his first dog from Jimmy Bruce who was from Minto. Those days they didn't fly dogs around. The dog originally came out of Johnny Allen breed and it was through Harry Riley who still lives in Minto and has a good team. People drove the dog teams from one place to another and [exchanged dogs]. This dog, that was the ancestor of Gareth's dogs, happened to be pregnant and he [Johnny Allen] didn't know it at the time and left the dog with Harry Riley since it was too slow. "And that's how the breed got out." In later years, the whole team of Johnny Allen's got drowned while going across the river with an overflow. The whole team went under. There's very few dogs of that breed left.

Gareth says the breed can "be told very well" because they have black spots on their tongue. They have tried to figure out where that comes from and lots of people say it comes from the wolves, but Gareth doesn't know for sure.

4:57 The interviewer asks how many dogs he began running when he was 13 years old and what did he do with them. He says he just had the one dog when he was 13, but the next year he got 3 more brothers of the same mother. With 4 dogs, he "was really in business." He used them to trap after school on his 8 mile trap-line and on Sunday he would go out extra 5 miles and go all Saturday and Sunday. Those days they used to get \$60-70 dollars for fox and mink was the same. Muskrats were \$3-4 dollars. Lots of time Gareth was making more money than his father was making at the railroad. He got out from shoveling coal and other hard work he didn't like.

He raised the team himself and trained the best leader he has ever had. He had the leader with him all the time and the dog would go gee and haw so that it would jump into the trees if one said gee. When he came to Fairbanks to go to high school, he drove the dogs from Nenana to Fairbanks and those 4 dogs were his transportation. They lived 3 miles out of town and he drove the dogs to school, tied them at the school house, and then drove back. They didn't have many cars in Fairbanks, but his team was going faster than the cars.

The interviewer asks if he trained the dogs in special way for trapping. Gareth says the training was the same, but one spent more time with the dogs those days. He had them trained so they would stay all the while when he was setting his 8 or so traps off the trail. After he got up some 1000 feet away and called the dogs, they'd

come right there. That's the way most of the people had trained their dogs for trapping. They lived right with the dogs and there was mutual understanding.

At 8:02 the interviewer asks how Gareth taught the commands to the dogs. He tells that it's just repetition. If the dogs don't stay, one reprimands them with a switch or whatever and keep doing this over and over again until the dog learns. Some dogs are more intelligent than others and easier to train. If they don't learn, "it's just like people: You get rid of them."

Discussing dog breeding: Some dogs have been bred for hundreds of years for pulling and working in the cold so it comes natural for them just like some breeds are for retrieving.

Gareth has now 13 grown dogs which is the lowest number he's ever had, but they are the best. Lots of times people have a big yardful of dogs, but only 6 or 7 dogs that are top dogs. Gareth has about 20 pups that he is raising in hopes of building a team up to 20 dogs. Most people keep anywhere from 15 to 40 dogs, depending on what they can afford. Having pups is a hard thing because one can't know whether they will do the job or not until they are 2 years old. Dogs don't get their peak until they are about 3 ½ to 4 years old. Lots of time one uses lots of time to raise a dog and it's a big disappointment because the dog runs only 60 miles an hour instead of 70 miles an hour. One can't know this until the dog has grown up.

Best way [to ensure having good dogs] is to acquire dogs with good background. Lots of people mistakenly think that a dog is a dog, but it isn't so. It's the same thing with other animals, too: breeding matters. If one is raising freighting dogs, that's a different thing than a racing dog.

11:28The interviewer asks if Gareth has always been careful about the kinds of dogs he breeds. He says it's one of the most important things. Some people start with a good breed, but don't watch out and in a generation or two, they lose all the good genes of that breed. When female gets into heat, they have to have a separate pen so that one can be sure that they are bred with the right male. That's one of the biggest problems some of the villages have and towns, too.

The interviewer asks if one can say a good sled dog is a good breeder. Gareth says it's not so easy and that the two best dogs can have offspring that's not worth

much, but they can then produce a super-dog. Nobody knows until one tries. Genes are held more in females and if one has a female who gets good pups, one better hold onto that female. The female can give 6 to 8 pups and in a couple of years one can have a good team. To find a good male is harder than finding a female and there might be one good male in 500 whereas one might have one good female in every 50. Lots of people don't realize that they have a good breeding dog and kill it if it's slow.

14:51 The interviewer asks what Gareth does with puppies from a good litter to make sure they are strong and healthy. He tells they should be fed 2-3 times a day once they are weaned and most all young dogs are born with worms so they need to be de-wormed. The main thing is to have them plenty of food and water and then when they grow up, one can cut back to twice a day and then once a day.

One has to have distemper shots and in distemper years, one should get a puppy shot. The dogs are usually immune to it from 6-weeks to 2-months old because of the mother's milk. Gareth feeds his dogs High Energy Purina, but it's not sufficient in wintertime if one is racing and the dogs need to be supplemented with protein through fish and the dogs need fat when it's cold. Most of the commercial foods have proper vitamins and such, but that's not sufficient when the dogs are under extreme stress so one has to add fish and fat. Now Gareth is feeding his dogs whale blubber which can be used in lesser quantities than if one used beef fat. He feeds the blubber to the dogs raw. He just cuts it like muktuk.

18:29 The interviewer asks when Gareth starts working with a puppy. He says there are lots of different theories on that, but the one that he finds most compelling and that is used by most dog trainers of all types of dogs is that the sooner one takes a pup and starts training it, the better. If one leaves the puppy group together, there are stronger ones that dominate and the other's strengths won't develop. The sooner one takes the dominant ones out and works with them individually, the better off one is.

Gareth tells about some tests on German Shepherds and that out of a litter of 6, there was one that was exceptional seeing eye dog. When the puppies were separated at 6-weeks of age, 90% of those dogs developed into top eye seeing dogs. The psychological effect is clear. Some dogs are aggressive and others timid

and lots of those timid ones might become more aggressive and be one of the top lead dogs if they were given the time at an earlier age. Gareth starts training his dogs to follow him when they are about 2 months old. He walks out 1,000 feet, plays with the puppies and brings them back. As they get older, he takes them to chase his snow-go and even with 8 month old dogs he goes as fast as 15-16 miles/hr. He had 19 puppies following him once and they were already so well trained that Gareth could run through dog kennels, horses, or anything and the dogs would follow only him.

He thinks it's very important to see which ones are the fastest, which ones most aggressive and which ones are quitters. It's one of his methods. When the dogs are 8-10 months old, he starts to put them in harness. Usually the ones who like to run like to run in a team.

21:42 The interviewer asks if he puts pups with a more experienced team or if he starts training them without experienced dogs. Gareth says one is better off with good lead dogs and swing dogs with the pups. If one has a team of pups, they "just about chew your tow-line up before you get out of the yard."

When he starts training pups, he has usually a smaller team so they won't go fast since putting puppies in a fast team can ruin the dogs because they will start getting choked and become afraid. The best bet is to have a good lead dog, a couple of swing dogs, and then put a couple of puppies on that so that one takes 5-7 dogs out at the time. Then if the dog lays down, one has to reassure the dog that everything is fine and as time goes by they start working and one can increase the number of dogs in the team. It's better to start with a small team because if one has a dog fight or any trouble, one can stop and handle the team. Big teams are for experienced dogs.

The interviewer asks what Gareth does to bring the dogs to their peak so they can run longer races. He tells the main thing is to start as early as possible, even in summer if possible. He starts usually in October and November when he starts running them for 7 or 8 miles and runs them like that for about a month and when they start being in shape, he puts weights on them so they really have to work.

If one has a good dog, one doesn't have to run it for 30 miles to get in shape to run a 30-mile race. Gareth tells that he ran a race with 19-month old pups and came

second even though the furthest he ran them was 9 miles. On those 9 ½ miles they were constantly working on pulling.

24:42 Gareth has a rather rough training trail where he has to cross a major highway and then go through a rather brushy country next to the Tanana River. He doesn't keep a really smooth trail although some people feel that in training race dogs that's a must. It's debatable, but Gareth feels that if he is training on a rough trail, smooth race trails will be so much faster and if he hits rough trails in a race, it's not so bad. His trails range from 7 up to 15-miles and even up to 26 miles if he wants to, but the ones he uses are the 7-mile and the 12-mile trails. He makes it 3 snow-go's wide so he can practice passing. One can ruin young dogs if they can't pass without getting bitten.

Another aspect of training is that feet. Oftentimes people get their dogs into shape, but "their feet fall out." If there is ice frost on the snow, it can freeze dog's feet so that the musher doesn't even notice before the dogs stop running due to sore feet. Lots of times one has to clear their trails previous to running if this condition exists. Gareth usually runs 2-3 teams a day, starting with his slower dogs and dragging a tire tends to clear the snow off.

28:04 The interviewer asks about equipment that he has when he trains and races. Gareth tells that he uses a heavier sled when he is training and he uses steel runners because they are harder to pull and never wear out. For harnesses, they use siwash harnesses that go over the head and under the arms. Those are used by mostly everybody and they originate from Huslia. For tow-lines, they run 2 dogs side by side and not in single file like they do in Canada or in Eskimo-style, where dogs are run in a fan [wide formation, probably great for open tundra. I've heard that the fan formation is particularly good for sea ice since if one dog breaks through, the whole team won't go under.]. Neither one of those is practical. The trails are often quite crooked so one wants to have dogs as close as possible, but the tow-line can't be too short either because that tends to pull the dogs down. 7-10 feet is good, depending on the size of the dogs.

He makes his own dog-lines and then there's Jim Binkerton who builds good harnesses out of nylon and has padding on them. Up until he came up a couple of years ago, everybody made their own. They use polyethylene, 3/16-inch for the

neck-lines and tug-lines and 3/8-inch for the tow-line. If one has a long line, one can use ¼-inch rope for the lead dog and the swing dogs and if one has a big team, one might make the back dog's lines out of ½-inch line.

31:11 The interviewer wants to know more about the sleds. Gareth tells that for training he has 4-6 foot basket so they can haul weight if they want to and carry extra gear. For racing they have 3 ½ to 4-foot basket. Training sled usually has shorter runners on back and racing sled's runners usually equal the basket. Most people use Petex for skis and that's about the fastest there is. Before they used different ski-waxes and metal if it was warmer, but Petex is for all weather.

There are birch sleds that are made in Nenana right now and if one gets a good, straight birch and seasons it right, they are as good as hickory and lighter. Often people don't build with straight grain birch and they complain that they are no good. Usually the runners are bent when the birch is green and the other stuff is allowed to dry. It takes a full season to age the birch right and lots of people dry the birch for a month and then expect it to stay straight. Hickory and ash are heavier and the material is hard to get. Then there are "Moody Sleds" that are built in New England. They cost \$250 dollars.

34:15 The interviewer asks Gareth his opinion on dog mushing today. Gareth tells it's the only way to go since snow-go's are not fun when one gets noise and smoke on their face. People want to get back to nature and dogs are a good way. There is a feeling of a responsibility on the part of the musher and feeling of achievement that comes from working with dogs. They are unlike horses because one just trains a horse, but with dogs, there are many and each one is an individual and to get them working as a team induces a sense of achievement that involves not only oneself, but the whole group, other living things. Gareth thinks that that's the best thing kids can get into because they have another living creature that they need to feed and who is looking to them as lots of people are looking to God. The animals are dependent upon the person who is feeding, watering, and driving them.

For trapping, or just going outside, the dogs are the way to go since they are natural to the country. It's wonderful and it teaches kids the responsibility that

they have to take later in life and Gareth thinks the children should be encouraged to have dogs. In villages, the children fish and dry fish, trap and utilize the carcasses as dog food, and it gives person a sense of well-being to know that they are self-sufficient. With snow-machines, one gets smelly mittens from pouring gas, then “the darn spark-plug quits” and one can’t have the feeling of in-natureness like one can have with dogs.

[End of the recording.]