

Summary for H87-82-17

Dr. Roland Lombard is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 3/15/85

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Gayle Maloy interviews Dr. Roland Lombard in Fairbanks, AK on 3/15/85. Maloy says he's an honorary Fairbanksan from Whalen, MA, best known for his 57-year long dog mushing career, winning every major title in North America.

He's been coming up to AK since 1958. He was born September 17, 1911, in Raymond, ME. He had 3 sisters, and he was the oldest. They were very close. They all had to work to a certain extent. He paid for veterinary school with saved money and also won \$2,000 in a large race (around 1930). He still had to work to get by, though. His father couldn't give him any help, though he worked very hard. The race Lombard won was the Laconia, in 1930. The school he went to was in Canada.

Lombard was about 15 or 16 when he started to race dogs. In those days, most teams were 2- or 3-dog teams. Later, Leonard Seppala came to ME, after the big diphtheria run to Nome. At first Seppala was going to go to Fairbanks, pick up the vaccine, and mush to Nome. But that wouldn't be quick enough, it was decided, so there were 15 different runners who helped. That was around 1923. Seppala was a hero to Lombard as a boy. Seppala came to Poland Springs, speaking, and that's where they met. Seppala stayed at hotels there for quite a while. Lombard was too young to take a car, so he'd take 1 dog and mush over (12 miles).

Lombard has had lifelong interest in animals: cows, horses, and all. When he finished high school, he saw a lot of people going to college who couldn't really afford it and didn't use their education when they were done anyway. Lombard stayed out of college for 1 year. There were two or three things he thought he might want to do but finally he decided to become a veterinarian.

He couldn't get any jobs during school, because locals (in Canada) didn't want to hire outsiders; they'd rather hire locals. His dad couldn't help him either, since he only had enough to take care of the family at home.

Lombard got rid of all his dogs except one, a mongrel about the size of a cocker spaniel. After a while, Seppala allowed Lombard to have two Siberian dogs (on loan) out of his kennel of 125 dogs. After Lombard won the race (Laconia?), Seppala said the dogs were his, and gave him another one, too. Lombard says the Siberians didn't want to work, and were fighters, and didn't like the little mongrel dog (Bucky)--they never fought him, though.

When Lombard started his veterinary office in Whalen, MA, around 1938, Bucky came with him. They worked with large animals as well as small. Eventually he had four veterinarians working under him. After business was going well, he got back into mushing.

Mushing was mainly a big sport in the New England area. The average team was 7 dogs. Sleds were nearly as good as now, but dogs and harnesses were not quite as good as now. Usually made of webbing (?). For Lombard, mushing was mainly about racing, it wasn't utilitarian for him, except when he was in high school: When there was snow (and it wasn't plowed like it is now), he couldn't take the car, so he'd mush. Other

people would be taking horses and sleighs. He chained his dogs in a stall when he got to school.

A number of people had asked Lombard to come up to AK and mush. It used to be that people used to stop mushing around age 40, and he was approaching 45, so he told himself if he was going to go, he'd better go now. He came up the first four times by air, and then had to get a truck to haul the dogs around.

Lombard has developed some ideas for making a better racing dog, with feeding and watering, for example. If there's plenty of good snow, dogs can go without drinking water, but they don't get as much as they should. Dogs used to be hauled in the back of an open pickup truck, without hay.

He entered the North American Classic in 1958, and came in fourth. He got lost, broke his sled, and the dogs got away on that trip. Al Ake got him back on track.

A man named Earl offered to take him around the race trail on a big sled. There were no snowmachines, just sleds and snowshoes to pack it down. It was a very bumpy ride for Lombard in the sled. He asked, "How much of this trail can you run the dogs wide open?" Earl replied, "We're running them wide open."

Maloy says that Lombard has been referred to as the Babe Ruth of AK dog mushing. Lombard won his first AK title in 1959. He almost won the first time, but did win on the second try. It was thrilling. He knew he'd come back after the first year. The trails were better and longer, and there were more chances to race against big names. Some of the people he raced against were: Atla, Bergman Sam, Doc Harris, Gareth Wright, Wilbur Samson. Maloy shows him an article from 1958.

Lombard raced Siberians when he raced in AK. He'd bred these dogs in MA. At some point he switched to AK huskies. There were more of them, and they were easier to get. It takes a lot of dogs to get a good one, he says. A good sled dog has to be very courageous, and want to run. The dogs cannot be made to run, it has to want to run, itself.

Lombard talks about the musher's mental link with the dogs. The musher's concentration and thoughts affect the way the dogs run. The people that he has had help him are also special, they liked the dogs; it wasn't just a job for them.

He never did any of the longer races. By the time the longer races were started, he felt too old to stay out in the cold that long, and his hands are arthritic and he has to be very careful with them. AK is good for long races though, because there's so much space. Lombard favors three-heat races.

He sold his veterinary practice and worked with other vets until about 3 or 4 years ago. Now he's got all he can handle just maintaining his dogs (about 40). He isn't racing in AK this year. He was just in a race last week; he came in third. He only has 11 good dogs this year, but he'll be back next year.

He's satisfied as long as he'd not in last place. When he starts hanging way back, he'll quit. He's said he feels it's his responsibility to show his dogs he's excited and wants to win, as a coach and a leader.

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Lombard does a lot of different little things to excite the dogs, for example, if he goes around the truck and claps his hands, that will excite some of them.

Once after a race in Fairbanks, he went across the Tanana to get some running on the flats. He'd bought two new dogs and wanted to get some running in. He hooked one of them up, and there was a lot of snow, so he couldn't see the water until they were right on it. Since the dog was new he didn't know if she'd come around, but he called her and she did turn around. That's the closest he's ever come to an awful mushing situation.

When they got home, the dog had a cough. He did everything he could for her, and then brought her to a large veterinary hospital. She had tuberculosis, and the doctors couldn't do anything for her, so she was put down. Lombard tries to let all his dogs live to a ripe old age. Only when they're very ill does he put them down.

Lombard's most cherished memory is when he first got to race here, in AK. He says there's nothing like racing up here. Racing down south it doesn't really seem like it's winter.

He sees the future of mushing as continuing. The people in it are good people, who take care of their dogs. Lombard is the honorary race marshal of the North American Classic, which starts today.