

Forstal

still fit for function after forty years

An early 14 dog team with Sally driving, Liz and a friend passengering. Lead, Green Berets Snowy Lyscha and Fortsal's Roosalka; swing, Forstal's Roy-A-Lin Tochka and Forstal's Achotnik; team 4, Forstal's Zhenski and Ch Forstal Kooshak; team 3, Ch Forstal's Deki and Ch Forstal's Mikishar The Amarok; team 2, Choudaks Kimovitch of Forstal and Zoox Asheema; team 1, Forstal's Roy-A-Lin Chad and Forstal's Roy-A-Lin Chmara; wheel, Forstals Valkadav and Goosack of Kolyma.

Simon Parsons talks to Sally and Sheril Leich and Ali Koops

OVER THE years I've interviewed many of Britain's best known dog breeders but never before when making the appointment had I been told: "OK, we'll meet you in Thetford Forest at 6am."

So it was up with the lark that day and by six on a beautiful April morning I was turning into a track to meet up with the majority of the Forstal kennel of Siberian Huskies, out for one of their training sessions.

Depending upon the temperatures – and for serious Siberian owners global warming is definitely not something to be welcomed; the colder the better in fact – the dogs are loaded into the kennel van and driven a few miles to the forest up to four times a week.

As I arrived Sally Leich and Ali Koops, co-owners of the kennel along with Sally's sister Sheril, were taking the first team of eight from the van and hitching them carefully to a nylon line attached to a motor-less quad bike. This is the normal vehicle of choice for training the teams, although they do light rig training quite regularly too.

Thank goodness we were miles from any habitation – the dogs were making their enthusiasm and sense of anticipation very obvious. Finally all eight were firmly attached in pairs. Convention has the bigger dogs at the rear immediately in front of the rig, and experienced team leaders at the front who are used to obeying, instantly, any command. I clambered onto the quad bike, immediately behind Ali, the safety ropes were detached and off we went, me hanging on to the bike for dear life...

All I will say is that I instantly understood why sled dog racing has grown so much in popularity in recent years. The exhilaration is tremendous and for the connoisseur the knowledge that the dogs are enjoying as near as is practically possible in this country the task they were originally bred for must add immeasurably to the satisfaction. Fit for function is the buzz-phrase of today, well here it is.

The control exercised by experienced dog drivers like Ali and Sally is a pleasure to see, the lead dogs turning instantly left or right down a different forest path as they hear the word of command. Where the lead pair go, the others automatically follow.

Three miles later we were back at the van and it was time for a second team, then a third, to be put through their paces. I can promise you it's addictive!

On one team a couple of youngsters were, literally, learning the ropes. From four months or so they are brought to watch their fellows in training and once they are given their first opportunities it doesn't take them long to learn.

The third team consisted mainly of older dogs and the puppies and the pace was marginally slower. But only marginally, and many Siberians continue training well into double figures of years. And even when time begins to catch up with them physically, the enthusiasm and willingness are still there.

By 8am everyone was watered, it was back in the van and time to return home, with well earned breakfast for the human participants, though not, of course, until the dogs had been fed. Viewing the kennel at home was an education for me too, a triumph of socialisation, aided of course by a pack mentality in the dogs. This isn't a breed where, for example, you can't keep two males together, or whatever. Any deficiency in temperament of that sort simply wouldn't be tolerated. Nor indeed would any guarding instinct. That's quite foreign to the breed.

The Forstal kennel consists of around 30 dogs all of whom basically live together. I was invited to walk into the main run among them all, and need have had no worries. All were perfectly friendly, in a sensible way with no over-effusiveness.

Their dinners prepared, Ali opened a gate and six or seven dogs slid though and into the dog room. Them done, then another group and so on. No fuss, no undue impatience. Impressive. Not for nothing has Sally a degree in psychology, going on to specialise in animal behaviour.

Why was I visiting this kennel in particular? Competitive races nowadays can attract 150 or so teams. Like Forstal, a number of them are dual-purpose, also competing successfully in the show ring. Among the dogs out training were several champions or CC winners but that isn't unique.

What makes Forstal special is that they have been there from the beginning – it's 40 years now since they obtained their first Siberian – and throughout that time they have led the way, owning and/or breeding the first champions, the first group winner, the first and only general championship show BIS winner, the current CC record holder and so on. And at the same time insisting on dogs who can work and race too. Indeed that side is the priority, and one gets the feeling this is the partners' first love. Not all the dogs have seen the show ring; some, who may be slightly too big for example, they wouldn't bother to show, but still they will have their place in the team. Many who are not shown are vital members of the teams and the pack in general. They show only those dogs who they feel fit the Standard and who also enjoy it - some just can't see the point!

Let's go back to the '60s and Don and Liz Leich's working life took them to live for periods in a number of different countries, Nigeria, Trinidad, the Philippines, before spending some time in the US. Wherever they were, they always had a menagerie of animals of species galore, though not usually in a position to keep dogs.

This changed when, while in the US, the family had acquired a Whippet who was thoroughly spoiled when they got him, but a great character. When it was time to return to Britain, they felt he should have a companion to go through quarantine, so decided to get another dog.

Sheril, like sister Sally, had always been attracted to natural, wolfish looking breeds. When going through the American Kennel Club dog book, she was instantly drawn to the Siberian Husky. Don always had some sort of project in mind so they thought, why not get a breeding pair?

With no knowledge of bloodlines etc, the family then obtained an unrelated dog and bitch, whom they registered as **Ilya** and **Douschka of Northwood**. The dog, whom they found in the Bronx, was mainly from show lines, and was by an American champion. Douschka came from a small-scale breeder in Connecticut and her lines were more a mixture of Canadian and American show and working stock.

The dogs had to be sent to England younger than planned – this was the time following the rabies scare and they weren't sure how long they would have to stay in quarantine, if indeed they could come at all. In the event they served nine months but in spite of the mental and physical rigours this inflicted on the dogs – the bitch wouldn't eat and the dog developed a pacing habit – both Siberians eventually



Eager for a run: Ch Forstal's Nakal and Ch Forstal Meshka waiting for the 'off' while out training.
photo Eastern Daily Press



The Leich family's first two Siberians, Douschka and Ilya of Northwood, soon after coming out of quarantine.



The litter born in quarantine to Roy-A-Lin's Apatchy Girl of Forstal by Kulak's Moonshadow: front, Forstal's Roy-A-Lin Poorga and Chmara; behind, Zarnetsa, Chad and Tochka.



The two Dutch imports in quarantine: Green Beret's Snowy Lyscha and Goosack of Kolyma.



The kennel's original eight plus 'Patchy' and her three puppies: front, Ilya of Northwood, Forstal's Roy-A-Lin Poorga, Zarnetsa and Tochka, and Kenstaff Natasha; on sofa, Micnicroc's Nanuska, Forstals Sernik, Ch Forstal's Mikishar The Amarok, Choudaks Kimovitch of Forstal, Quinbury Kozachokane of Beagold, Roy-A-Lin's Apatchy Girl of Forstal and Douschka of Northwood.



Ch Valchonok Prince of Forstal. photo Freeman



Sheril Leich handling Forstal's Roy-A-Lin's Chad to a win at a club show under Diane Anderson.
photo Diane Pearce/Kennel Club Picture Library



One the the earliest big wins for the breed was RBIS at the Sutton International open show under RM James in 1976. Sally Leich is handling future Ch Forstal's Mikishar The Amarok who was not yet a year old. Rob Richardson handles a Belazieth Lhasa Apso to the top spot. photo Foyle

lived to a ripe old age, 15 in the case of Sally's favourite, Ilya, and 17 for Sheril's Douschka.

Although everyone would have had some idea what a 'Husky' was, and there was a small number of enthusiasts of some of the other sledding breeds, Siberians were very rare in Britain at the time. In fact there were just four others, two from the US and two from Norway. One of the latter was never bred from so the breed here was effectively founded on five animals, and certainly not with any grand plan.

There was a Husky Club, dealing with all the breeds, and secretary was the redoubtable Stella Colling-Mudge, whose own breed was what is now known as the Eskimo Dog. When the Leiches made contact, Stella encouraged, nay bullied, them into showing, and in due course became a good friend and adviser.

In those days the classes tended to be for 'AV sled dogs' and at first the Siberians didn't do very well up against the more imposing Malamutes and Eskimo Dogs. Judges didn't have much idea and one even said "What a shame he's blind in one eye" of Ilya who like Doushka had the perfectly acceptable split eye colours.

The breakthrough came when Ilya won best AV sled dog at Hammersmith's big open show, and thereafter judges took more notice. He enjoyed being shown, moved soundly and proved a good ambassador for the breed. He was perhaps shorter coupled than the well made Douschka, and his tail carriage could have been better but he had many good qualities and they complemented each other well when the family decided to mate them.

At first Liz wasn't keen to keep anything but when they did she never looked back. The family certainly never set out with the aim of pioneering the breed in this country but no one who remembers Liz will have doubted that in the hands of this intelligent and determined woman things would not have progressed sensibly. A great diplomat, she was excellent at keeping people working together for the good of the breed.

The family were not really told anything about the tendency for Siberians to roam and hunt, so they learned the hard way. Sally soon realised that the best way to exercise the dogs properly and safely was to work them in harness. She set out to learn as much as she could about this and the dogs themselves were excellent teachers. With much trial and error the first team in the country was soon up and running.

They also tried obedience and indeed trained with the great Charlie Wyant at Heelaway but this doesn't really suit the breed's temperament as they soon get bored once they know how to do something. They still do basic obedience with all their dogs, as individual control is essential when managing a pack and the dogs benefit from it anyway.

The Kennel Club wouldn't allow them to take out the Northwood affix so their next choice was Forstal, a characteristically Kentish place name and still appropriate now they spend so much time in the forest. From the mating of the original pair came **Forstals Kassan** who in the hands of Sandra Bayliss really got the breed noticed, especially by his best unclassified win at Crufts under Tom Horner – in those days none of the non-CC breeds had their own classes there so competition was tough indeed. Coals to Newcastle, and owner and dog went to live in Alaska where Sandra remains today.

Today much is written about preserving diversity of bloodlines so perhaps it was providential that the early Siberians in the UK were from differing lines. Not through any great plan, that was just how it was. Two of the earlier Siberians in the country were owned by an American serviceman, Bill Cracknell, who brought them over for his tour of duty and then took them back again. During that time he had two litters and from one of these **Micnicroc's Nanuska** joined the Leiches.

Again, though mainly unrelated they blended well for, mated to Kassan, she produced the next star, the memorable **Forstal's Mikishar The Amarok**. He set the pattern for what the family look for: "He was a delightful dog, with a mischievous laughing expression, alpha in character, very easygoing but with a natural authority. In harness he was a great command leader and ideal for training the next generation."

He was responsible for many show-ring landmarks: the breed's first open show BIS, judge Stuart Mallard, RBIS at the famous Sutton international show as a youngster under Bobby James, and winner of many BOBs at the few opportunities the breed had in those days.

Talk to the Leiches and a quality they invariably stress is the Siberian's ability to last. Not for them a dogs who looks mature already at a year or two – when properly mature they are bound to be too heavy and short on the leg. Many of their dogs have reached their peak by the time they are officially veterans, and for years the Pedigree veteran stakes finals didn't seem complete without a Forstal in competition. Mikishar qualified several times.

"The conditioning they receive from working in harness helps keep them looking young," say the partners. "We almost feel like we are cheating putting a seven-year-old Siberian in veteran. To us they are in their prime at that age."

The foundation stock was completed by a bitch, **Quinbury Kozachokane of Beagold**, who came from Ilya's litter ex another Micnicroc bitch, and **Kenstaff Natasha**, by Ilya ex one of the early Norwegian imports who came from very early American working lines.

Gradually the breed's numbers expanded in Britain and then the KC decided to award CC status. Liz and family were dead against it, not feeling that the time was yet appropriate. "We always had a very protective attitude to the breed, and



Sheril Leich with her four-dog team: Forstals Roosalka, Ch Forstal Kooshak, Chukchi Chara Poorga and Ch Valchonok Prince of Forstal.
photo Eastern Daily Press



The breed's only general championship show BIS win in the UK: Ch Forstal Meshka, handled by Ali Koops, wins at the Scottish Kennel Club in 1990 under Andrew Thomson. He also won group 2 at Crufts in the days before the working group was split. photo Lindsay.



Liz and Sally Leich about to set out with a 14-dog team, pulling a Morris 1000 chassis, the rig they formerly used for heavy training.

felt there weren't enough judges who really knew what the breed was about." But it was a losing battle and "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." It was in fact Sally who awarded the first set of CCs at Crufts 1986, where her BOB, future **Ch Zoox Gadheek**, remains one of her favourite Siberians from other kennels.

"Our ambition has always been to have functional dogs in the ring who are typical, so with CCs on offer it was even more important," she says.

By now Mikishar had been more or less retired apart from occasional veteran outings, but he was still looking the part and he competed at several championship shows that year, at Welsh KC becoming the first male champion, judge Ana Sanchez. He was ten years, ten months old. Even then he wasn't finished as the following year he won BIS at the Nordic show under Liz Cartledge, and lived to the grand age of 17 and a half.

The same day as he gained his title, the first bitch champion was also crowned, eight-year-old **Forstal's Noushka**, owned by Keith McCallum whose wife Beryl has the Glentops terriers. She was ex Kozachokane by a son of an imported dog, the red and white **Irlocon's Monadnock Kimo**, whom Liz borrowed for a year after his owners were unexpectedly posted back across the Atlantic. The previous year Noushka had become the first championship show group winner when Leonard Pagliero put her up at the first Working Breeds Association of Wales show.

Meanwhile the bloodlines were expanding, as the Leiches and others began to put more and more emphasis on working ability. Much sought after was the Alsakan Anadyr strain bred by Earl and Natalie Norris in Alaska and famed worldwide for its working qualities, proven by consistent success in events like the gruelling Iditarod race. And the Leiches liked the way they looked too, 'absolutely beautiful type'.

There was a keen musher who lived in Holland who, thanks to his job as an airline pilot, had the opportunity to fly the Alaska run and import dogs of this line, and Sally spent some time working at his kennel. From there they imported **Goosack of Kolyma**, bred in Europe but from Alaskan Anadyr parents, who had a considerable impact on breed development. Another source of this blood was the Roy-A-Lin's kennel in the US and from this **R Apatchy Girl** came to Forstal, producing a quarantine-born litter by a dog from the influential Seppala lines.

This produced successful show and working dogs and incidentally introduced different colour patterns, contributing to the whole rainbow that you can see in today's Siberian rings. Apatchy Girl and her litter, several of whom did well in pre-CC days, were all piebald, at that time not a popular colour even in the US where some breeders actually culled them.

There isn't space to feature all the Forstal stars but one who deserves a mention is the first piebald champion **Forstal Kooshak** (Goosack ex Apatchy Girl) who not only gained her title but produced four champions in three litters by different males. One of these, sired by Mikishar, was the incomparable **Ch Forstal Meshka** who took 13 CCs, three groups, the Pedigree champions final, runner-up in the veterans final and the breed's first and only general championship best in show win at the Scottish Kennel Club in May 1990. The judge was Andrew Thomson who admired him greatly, having given him his first CC and later group 2 at Crufts.

The family tells an amusing tale of his veteran stakes success when the judge commented that the winning Corgi scored on coat texture. Hardly surprising, as Meshka had been racing in Wales that morning in orange mud... And they left the Metropole at 3am to get back to the second day's racing.

He was a combination of all the significant imports and, the family feels, combined the best points of them all, with his father's character. And he was equally successful as a lead dog, one who 'learned his turns' right away and one you could never catch out.

He too lived to an active, healthy 17, in spite of having to be operated on for bloat in middle age when he uncharacteristically drank too much after a hot day at a show.

Although he produced well, the family now wish they'd used him more. At that stage their mind-set was continually to obtain 'new blood'.

Those who remember Meshka will recall the perfect partnership he made in the ring with another 'Dutch import', his handler Ali Koops. Ali had always been keen on dogs and first met the breed through her careers adviser who kept Siberians, and it was through him she met Sally during the time she spent in Holland in 1980, Ali came to Forstal to learn English and as a 'doggy au pair' the next winter. The following summer she returned to Holland, picking aubergines, and then came back to the dogs as the weather grew colder and after that 'they never got rid of me'. "I'd landed on my feet," she says.

Meshka wasn't originally meant to be staying at Forstal, as the family was already keeping his sister, but his allocated home fell through. "These things happen for a reason," says Ali and subsequent he became 'her dog'. As far as handling in the ring is concerned they taught each other as they went along. In fact he was a 'natural', one of those dogs who did just enough in the breed but really turned it on if he got into the group where his movement, something inherited from both parents, and Ali's long legs came into their own.

About the same time the family moved from Kent, where space to train was limited, to the Norfolk Brecklands, the location inevitably determined largely by the dogs' requirements. The sandy soils of the region, and the training opportunities granted by the local forests, make it as ideal as is likely to be achieved in England. Their home is adjacent to a redundant Victorian Catholic church built by the local lady of the manor, and not far away are lakeside walks ideal for less strenuous exercise, especially for the youngsters and oldies.

When Liz died in 1997 the dogs, previously just in her name for simplicity, came into the ownership of Sally, Sheril, Ali and Sheril's then partner Brian Skilton, all of whom were just as interested, if not more so, in their working qualities as in the ring. As Ali says, showing is just for one person's opinion, but you can't argue with the stopwatch. Brian was not involved in the showing, but raced Forstal's most competitive team in the six-dog (B) class for many seasons, and was always in the medals, often winning gold. Ali and Sally have had their fair share of race success too, over the years, competing with the remainder of the dogs, and more recently with all of them again.

Today the affix belongs to the three women.

Sheril's 'special dog' was **Ch Valchonok Prince of Forstal** – the rather un-Forstal 'Prince' part of his name was the Kennel Club's idea – a stud fee puppy by **Forstal's Valkadav** who was by Goosack ex **F Roosalka**, a daughter of Kozachokane and **Forstal's Roy-A-Lin Poorga**, who came from Apatchy Girl's first litter. His dam was by a Canadian import and also went back to Mikishar. Again differing colours as Valchonok's sire was a monochromatic black and he himself was a 'dirty faced wolf grey', a pattern he rather pioneered in the ring; all-rounders, especially, didn't always find it easy to 'see' dogs of less glamorous colours. In spite of this he won very well including BOB at Crufts and a group 2.

For Forstal, colour is incidental, through they do try not to lose pigment. The Standard allows any colour and the partners feel strongly this should be adhered to. "A good sled dog can't be a bad colour."

Another star was **Ch Snoshoe's Russky of Forstal** whose sire was a CC-winning son of the two Dutch imports, Goosack and **Green Beret's Snowy Lyscha**, bred by that great enthusiast Nancy van Gelderen Parker by an Alaskan Anadyr dog. His dam was linebred to the original Apatchy Girl litter, with some of the old lines too. With 16 CCs including Crufts and twice at the club show, he sired **Ch Forstal's Seegoo**, another good all-rounder doing well in the show ring and in harness, and sire of five champions.

Next was Seegoo's daughter **Ch Forstal's Kaska**, BOB at Crufts 2003, and her brother **Ch Loco** – their dam **Eskra** was sister to two more champions, **Nakal** and **Maska**, and from the Valchonok/Kooshak litter. Yet another Kooshak progeny was until very recently the bitch CC record holder with 20 and a group, **Ch Forstal Kike Mara**.

Meshka's best known son in the kennel was the showy **Ch Nikolaas**, so full of energy that he was a nightmare to show with a real 'souped up' attitude, so once he gained his title they semi-retired him, with some relief. He got slightly more sensible as a veteran and ended up with 19 CCs.

Both Nikolaas and Kikemara were grandchildren of the Littlejohns' (Skiivolk) first import **Charvak's Oneko**. Forstal used him on **Zhenski** (Miki ex Lyscha). Oneko was Alaskan/Anadyr lineage and came from Holland.

The Littlejohns imported several dogs of the Alaskan/Anadyr line from Europe and one from Alaska. The latter, **Alaskans Nikolai of Anadyr III**, Forstal used at stud as well, on **Laska** (Goosack ex Lyscha). They also had a puppy back when the Littlejohns used Laska's brother **Aladyn** on **Skiivolk Foolish Filly** who was from some of their other imports. More recently, they have used **Ch Skiivolk Sir Rufin** on their **Forstal's Robin** (F Xaros ex Ch F Kaska), a CC winner and a super lead dog. The two puppies kept have a CC and two RCCs between them so far.

So although Forstal have not imported themselves since 1980, they have brought into their programme several imported lines. Since the introduction of the passport scheme, there have been many more imports, many of them from very good working lines, so the partners say they will be spoilt for choice next time they decide to outcross.

"Early maturity is not an attribute sought by the Forstals, but they certainly last..."





Ch Snoshoe's Russky of Forstal at 13 months and nine years.





Ch Forstal's Nikolaas at one year and nine years.



Ch Forstal Kike Mara winning BOB at Crufts at two years and at eight years.



Next week we will meet the kennel's most successful show dog, and talk about type and function.