Forstal

still fit for function after forty years



Sally Leich competing with the six-dog team last season at Elveden, half-way round a six-mile trail. The team won both events that weekend and finished second overall (silver medal) in the championship that season. Left lead Forstal's Palka; right lead Forstal's Cher; left swing Forstal's Petka; right swing Forstal's Dusky, RCC winner; left wheel Forstal's Litso; right wheel Forstal's Zhahris hidden behind the other dogs.
photo Chris Wellstead www.digitalevents.photoreflect.com

Simon Parsons talks to Sally and Sheril Leich and Ali Koops Part 2

BRINGING almost all their best dogs together, **Ch Forstal Nikolaas** was mated to **Ch Forstal Kaska** and in this, the last litter officially bred by Liz Leich, the result, incorporating her name, was **Ch Forstal Kaliznik** who epitomises the kennel's ideal of a typical, Standard-fitting Siberian Husky, who is also a good sled dog, capable of running on the top teams. In the ring he regained the CC record for the kennel, with 40 plus two group wins and he proved an excellent sire too, producing among others the Huskidoo litter of five puppies – five UK champions. The Forstal partners – Sally and Sheril Leich and Ali Koops – think he might have done even better had he been a more traditional colour rather than wolf grey with closed mask, a pattern they are rather fond of.

For Ali he was a joy to show, one of those dogs with nothing to hide, full of type and 'as sound as a bell'. A great showman – squeaky toys were his downfall!

After the effort of campaigning him everywhere once attaining the record started to look possible, Ali has now gone back to attending a 'sensible' number of shows each year. Sally admits she rather lost the impetus for extensive showing some time ago, while Sheril is always happy to stay at home and care for horses and dogs.

Since Kaliznik's great run they have made up his son **Nikitinka** and **Ch Skiivolk Polyanthus**, who has a Forstal dam and whom her breeder Jenny Littlejohn let them have as a RCC winner when she disbanded her kennel. There are several currently with CCs or reserves and one can be assured that the teams which do so well include many who can and do win at shows.

"We can't show them all," says Sally and one such was **Forstal's Xaros** (by the Coynes' Seppala line dog **Chukchi Surgut of Sepp-Alta** ex **Forstal Ylyscha**), who didn't really like shows but 'is probably the best leader we have ever had', although some of his progeny are as good. He has proved outstanding at passing on his working attitiude, that hard-to-define desire to work which comes from within, not needing any outside motivation. "Until you get it, you don't appreciate what it is," they say. This 'inner motor' is definitely something you can select for, just like more physical qualities. Other lead dogs may not have this quality but may be motivated more by seeking something to hunt; these tend to be much less focused and always keep a lot in reserve, rather than giving their 'all'. It doesn't necessarily have any correlation with showmanship in the ring. A dog can be a dreary showman but a lion in harness, or vice versa.

Since Noushka, six more Forstals have gained UK titles for other kennels: **Chutki** for David Patterson, who won his title aged 11; **Annyka** for Simon and Sheila Luxmoore, dam of the one-time CC record holder **Ch Zima Toaki**; **Maska** for Tony and Helen Lightfoot; **Misha** for Nigel Egglestone; **Astro** for Mary Davidson; and Kaliznik's sister **Tpring** for Julia Sim. Others have gone overseas, including Australia, New Zealand and France.

All the family were founder members of the Siberian Husky Club of Great Britain in 1977, with Liz as chairman, but they haven't been involved in club affairs more recently. "Life's too short," says Sally. Sally, Sheril and Sandra Bayliss were instrumental in compiling the current breed Standard, combining the most appropriate bits of the American and Canadian Standards, the latter closest to the original vision of the breed.

The family were very active in the breed club initially, having been instrumental in setting up the first working teach-ins and races, as well as being involved in the breed historian role, the welfare (which they ran for many years), helping to write the club code of ethics, and helping run early judges' teach-ins. They and Sandra Bayliss also co-wrote the club's booklet explaining and interpreting the Standard.

After a slow start, racing began to take off in the '80s and now it's remarkably popular with various different organisations catering for the sport. The Forstals race almost exclusively now with the British Siberian Husky Racing Association which runs a very competitive championship series where fractions of seconds can separate the winners. Events take place all round the country, though many are in the east where sandy surfaces are kindest on the feet. Ideal surfaces are not easy to find, but the Forstals won't run their dogs on those they deem unsuitable. About half the owners who take part are also involved in the show scene.



Ch Forstal's Kaska winning BOB at Crufts, aged ten and a half, in 2003, handled by Ali Koops. photo Freeman



Ali handling breed CC record holder Ch Forstal's Kaliznik to a veteran stakes win under Brenda Banbury, aged eight years. photo Walker

Why has the breed tended to evolve rather differently in the UK show ring, compared with many other dog-showing countries where the heavier-built, short-legged 'American show type' is the rule. "It's largely down to people like ourselves," says Sally, "several of us over the years have really tried to keep the working type in the ring."

Indeed in some countries there are people who compete successfully in both the ring and in racing – but with two different sets of dogs! "How tragic is that?"

"It's an odd situation," they admit. "It does feel like an uphill struggle at times. A lot of our judges go overseas and see the 'American show type'. They are well-presented and showy dogs, and their flashy movement is apparently sound, but they don't have that functional working type of movement.

"With everything becoming more expensive, it is perhaps inevitable that many of the serious working people who also have nice typical Siberians are starting not to bother to enter them under some all-rounders. They feel that they are just throwing their money away and it is hard to argue with this perception sometimes!"

But equally, the partners have no time for the 'skin and bone' type of dog sometimes seen in the ring. The Forstal dogs, though in hard working condition, always look well nourished, and indeed well presented, in the ring. "It's sad that some people with a rangier type of dog don't have them in good condition, so a lot of judges do associate this sort of dog with being very skinny, with no muscle, and on the out and back their lack of fitness is all too apparent as their legs are sometimes all over the place. You can't blame judges for not wanting to put that up."

They believe firmly that a well conditioned working-type dog, with an attractive head, is ideally suited as a show dog too, and are proud that many of their champions have also been part of gold-medal winning teams. Over the years, they have tried to encourage judges to come and see the dogs at work, as has Caroline Kisko, now the Kennel Club secretary and still a keen working Siberian enthusiast though no longer able to show, but there was little, if any, interest.

They feel this is a pity as what the judges put up can be very important to how a breed develops. For this reason judges, in their view, do need to learn the 'ins and outs' of the breed, what they are all about. Sadly, they feel, all too many judges want simply to add breeds to their CV, certainly not something the partners, all purely breed specialists, can be accused of. All have judged at Crufts and the club show, and Sally and Ali overseas too, many times.

Some all-rounders, they feel, have closed their minds and will never change their view. "All you can do is to show dogs that you value highly and perhaps influence the judges that way." Sally still does judging seminars, and they have produced a video which tries to explain why some structures and movement patterns are more functional than others.

An extravagant movement, which may look stylish in the ring, is unlikely to be what's wanted in a good loping dog. Nor is 'tremendous and exaggerated reach and drive', with excessive kickback, often accompanied by a hollowing of the back, an indication of a very functional gait. It is wasteful of energy and, if anything, a slight arching of the loin is preferable, and sufficient drive with no wasted energy. A light-footed, effortless movement with a smooth topline and no jerkiness is typical, say the partners.

As is obvious from the above, longevity, and not just long life but a long active working life, is important and this has been a feature of the breed, and of the Forstals since their earliest days. Good health, ditto, and breeders are keen to maintain the breed's excellent reputation.

That's not to say that along the way there haven't been heartbreaks. **Zarnetsa**, one of the quarantine-born litter ex **Apatchy Girl**, developed glaucoma at four, after having produced the litter which included **Ch Deki**. The family had no idea the problem even existed in the breed, and indeed many in the US, and many other countries, still don't routinely test for it.

Thankfully they were able to get advice from Peter Bedford, whose specialism this problem was, and he advised against scrapping whole lines – be sensible and breed only from clears. Deki was clear in fact, but in the climate of the time they opted not to use him.

Later **Russky's** dam was from an accidental mating which was linebred to the original Apatchy Girl litter – thankfully when the whole litter was tested they all proved clear.

They feel strongly that breeders should be open about such problems as the only way forward.

Now eyes are tested, just once to check there is no predisposition to glaucoma, and every year in case any other problems, such as cataract, crop up. Cataract is not usually a serious problem in the Siberian as far as the dogs' vision is concerned but the kennel is taking no chances and when their top winning bitch **Kike Mara** failed her eye test for this reason, they opted not to breed from her – a considerable loss, especially as she loved helping other bitches with their pups. She still had excellent eyesight at 16 years.

Hips are scored too, indeed other than the German Shepherds they were among the earliest to use the scheme. Perhaps it's a bit of a formality because, as you'd expect and hope from real workers, scores in the breed are generally very low. Ten is the highest they've ever had and the sought after '0:0' is happily not unusual.

To what extent does the type of racing which is possible in the UK replicate the breed's original task? "It's as near as we're going to get. We do import from kennels where they can work-test them properly and try to keep in touch. In this country we're always going to be limited as we don't have the conditions to test them properly – it is never cold enough to go really long distances in this country. When some of our breeding have gone to colder climates, they have done well.

"Although we are limited to racing over shorter distances in this country, this does not mean that the best working dogs over here would not hold their own in competitions overseas. It is well known among experienced dog drivers who compete Siberian Huskies over sprint, middle, and long-distance races, that the best dogs for all these events are of the same basic conformation/build. It is the training that will be different, not the type of dog. Indeed there are numerous examples of individual dogs who excel over short and long



Forstals Candi and her litter in the puppy field.



Each evening the dogs spend time in the dog/utility room.



Ch Forstal's Nikitinka (front), Forstals Askal and Goosecreek Noski of Forstal relaxing in some of their favourite resting places in their run at home.

CH FORSTAL'S KALIZNIK, born April 4, 1997

Ch Forstal's Nikolaas	Ch Forstal Meshka	Ch Forstal Mikishar The Amarok	Forstal's Kassan	Ilya of Northwood (imp US)
				Douschka of Northwood (imp US)
			Micnicroc's Nanuska	Savdajaure's Samovar (imp US)
				Yeso Pac's Tasha (imp US)
		Ch Forstal Kooshak	Goosack of Kolyma (imp Holland)	Alaskan's Pala of Anadyr (imp US)
				Oleta of Kolyma
			Roy-A-Lin's Apatchy Girl of Forstal (imp US)	Am Ch Roy-A-Lin's Valentikko O'Snoshu CD
				Roy-A-Lins Valentina of Snoshu
	Forstal's Sasoolka	Charvak's Oneko of Skiivolk (imp US)	Takkalik's Yukon Comet	Alaskan's Nicolai of Anadyr II
				Takkalik's Beautiful Bashful
			Koko-Tengri's Lanlaki	Alaskan's Pala of Anadyr
				Klondike's J-Gihouli
		Forstal Zhenski	Ch Forstal Mikishar The Amarok	Forstals Kassan
				Micnicroc's Nanuska
			Green Beret's Snowy Lyscha (imp Holland)	Alaskan's Unik-Knik of Anadyr (imp US)
				Stanowoi's Siwaga (imp Norway)
Ch Forstal Kaska	Ch Forstal's Seegoo	Ch Snoshoes Russky of Forstal	Forstal's Aladyn	Goosack of Kolyma (imp Holland)
				Green Beret's Snowy Lyscha (imp Holland)
			Brattlid Petrushka	Danlee Godalka
				Forstal's Lakretsa
		Forstal's Laska	Goosack of Kolyma (imp Holland)	Alaskan's Pala of Anadyr (imp US)
				Oleta of Kolyma
			Green Beret's Snowy Lyscha (imp Holland)	Alaskan's Unik-Knik of Anadyr (imp US)
				Stanowoi's Siwaga (imp Norway)
	Forstal's Eskra	Ch Valchonok Prince of Forstal	Forstal's Valkadav	Goosack of Kolyma (imp Holland)
				Forstal's Roosalka
			Babushka Tamara	Wapahkwa's Avik (imp Can)
				Skimarque Lara
		Ch Forstal Kooshak	Goosack of Kolyma (imp Holland)	Alaskan's Pala of Anadyr (imp US)
				Oleta of Kolyma
			Roy-A-Lin's Apatchy Girl of Forstal (imp US)	Am Ch Roy-A-Lin's Valentikko O'Snoshu CD
				Roy-A-Lins Valentina of Snoshu

distances."

They reckon that if you are training on dirt, you could more or less double the achievable distances if you went onto snow in cold conditions. Many mushers overseas start training in the autumn on wheels, they go on to snow as it gets colder and quickly move up to far greater distances.

"It's amazing what a difference it makes on the rare occasions we can run on snow, it keeps them so much cooler and you can do a really long run. Then they come in and hardly need a drink."

The longest run they are likely to be able to do in the UK is about eight to ten miles and to do this it needs to be below freezing. In Alaska of course it would be many times that, perhaps even a hundred miles a day in something like the Iditarod.

It is not only the temperature but also the humidity that can cause dogs to get too hot. Britain seldom has that dry cold found in larger continents. It is inevitably the dogs who really push themselves and put in the most who will be most affected but dogs vary in their metabolism as well. Some are more affected than others, especially big dogs.

Food of choice is Skinner's and Anglia Meats, two local firms, both of which support the teams. A lot of meat is fed and the motto is as natural as possible: raw tripe, lamb and chicken plus complete feed, and one day of a week just meat. Twice a month or so, marrow bones from a local butcher are an important treat; they are the best way to keep teeth and gums healthy but can't be left with the dogs for more than about an hour at a time, otherwise they'd eat the whole thing! "They don't smell too wonderful that night, but they are completely crashed out, they put so much energy into chewing."

Various herbal supplements are used. They don't totally use the BARF method of feeding as with all the vegetables involved it would be difficult to stick to the diet on the dogs' frequent travels, but they do feed veg in the form of dried herbs. The natural abundance of things like dandelions, nettles and goosegrass (cleavers, which they love) is put to good use! Even in their own 'wilderness' run they graze on various desirable plants, especially in the spring. They are natural herbalists and they love chewing wood too, having been known to demolish whole trees. "They are part termite."

There's a dog room with plenty of sofas where the oldies sleep and where the entire pack spends the evenings. Outside there are wooden kennels with bedding on various levels. Needless to say the dogs are never shut in them, not even on the coldest nights. They have benches built up in pyramid form where they enjoy sunning themselves, and special favourites for snoozing in are open ended barrels. The main concrete run leads to another with a gravel surface and then to a forest playground shaded by trees, that is those the dogs haven't yet eaten! Somewhat separate are a few more kennels and runs suitable for bitches in season, though the rest of the time the whole gang live as one. Additional use is made of one of the horse paddocks for extra space, which has been fenced to contain puppies, 'oldies' and for agility activities.

Are they a suitable breed as a pet? "As long as they are with an active family who know what they are taking on, yes, but they hate being left on their own." The partners prefer to sell dogs as pets, to owners who might perhaps later develop a team, rather than to those who are setting out to build up a team: what happens if they suddenly lose interest?

Talking of which, the family used to run breed rescue single handed in the early days, but the job became too big. Currently the breed has a rescuing and fostering service to deal with a growing problem. Forstal, of course, would have back not only any puppy they sell, but also any by their stud dogs, if needed, and buyers sign a contract to this effect. Registrations are endorsed against export, and 'progeny not eligible for registration' until such time as the health tests are completed and no major faults have appeared. They aren't keen on breeding terms – 'guaranteed to make people fall out' – but will advise if asked on possible mates for any they sell.

They have recently joined the Accredited Breeder Scheme, all of whose requirements they did anyway. Microchipping originally worried them a little but they accept that it make sense for dogs who go through health schemes to be positively identified.

Seldom are there any whelping difficulties, even though first litters may be bred later than in some breeds, perhaps at five or six years old. Often bitches will come in heat just once a year, and then usually will whelp in the middle of a racing season, so if a bitch is a good racing lead it's tempting to leave her for a few years before breeding from her.

Breeding is done only with the intention of keeping something, and they would only use an outside dog if they had seen him working. Occasionally more than one stays if the partners develop different favourites. Some say it's a mistake to keep siblings but with the sophisticated pack structure at Forstal there's never been any problem as they are treated as individuals.

They start feeding puppies at three weeks, hand-feeding them with small bits of meat. This they finds helps with socialisation, especially if accompanied by a 'puppy call' which they associate with feeding and which comes in handy when they want to see how they move during 'puppy races' in the field. Puppies are raised in as natural a way as possible. They start to feed solids from three weeks, but leave mothers to wean their pups in their own time, never separating a bitch from her litter. "The lessons pups learn from their mother are an important element of their social development and this often doesn't start much before seven weeks."

The puppies also meet other pack members from about four to five weeks onwards, and learn a lot from these encounters. Most of the mothers regurgitate for their puppies also, as they begin to wean them, in the same way as wild canids.

Puppies don't go before ten weeks, so when do they choose? "Nine weeks, six days!" Seriously, they usually begin to decide at eight weeks but it's isn't always easy. Much time is spent watching them move. The ones who are kept first start going to watch the training sessions at four or five months, when they are introduced to the harness. At about six months they are gradually introduced to the teams, running alongside a sensible partner, perhaps for the last half mile at first. They feel this early training helps to get puppies' heads 'into gear', so they learn from an early age that when in harness, they remain focused. No demands are made on them physically – just enough to start to develop the correct muscling. The puppies and youngsters get a lot of free running in the fenced paddock, so they are fairly fit by the time they first go in harness on a team.

Regardless of whether they excel in work and/or show, all their dogs are much loved family members and are also valued pack members, where each plays an important role. Once the partners keep a pup, it is with them for life; they do basic obedience with all their dogs, and they all work in harness. The older generation is vital for pack stability and, once retired from harness, the oldies greatly enjoy going for walks or jogging and helping to keep their owners fit!

In spite of the breed's propensity to boredom if asked to repeat exercises too often, they tried a bit of competitive obedience in the early days, and like many owners of 'non-Collie' breeds wish there was a system as in the US where reaching a certain standard is recognised, rather than just success in competition. Agility training is done for fun, the challenge, of course, being letting them off the lead, so a fenced arena is essential!

While the family enjoy competing with their teams and have had considerable success over the years, their greatest satisfaction comes from training their dogs in harness. They say: "The pleasure is in seeing the improvement over successive generations; in tailoring training and feeding to bring out the best in each individual; and in seeing the dogs' huge enjoyment, as well as their drive and athleticism. It is tremendously rewarding and you never stop learning. Success in competitions is the icing on the cake, but so long as the teams perform at *their* best, that is all that really matters."



Out training, with Xaros and his daughter Robin in the lead.



Ali racing in the four-dog class: left lead CC record holder Ch Forstal's Kaliznik; right lead RCC winner Forstal's Xaros; left wheel Forstal's Parosha; right wheel Skiivolk N'Ladya of Forstal.



Brian Skilton racing one of the top teams of the time: left lead CC winner Forstal's Robin; right lead Crufts BOB winner Ch Forstal's Nikitinka; left swing Forstal's Parosha; right swing Forstal's Katinka; left wheel Tovarysch Dillon; right wheel Forstal's Sepp.





Forstals Xaros at six years. He was rarely shown, although he did win a RCC at the club show, as he couldn't see the point of it, he proved one of the kennel's best ever lead dogs. Not only that but he has been a prepotent sire in this respect and many of his progeny are as good as him.



The dogs relaxing at home in their enclosures.