

Introducing The 'Alaskan' Husky

An Iditarod sled dog looks different than what most people expect. They are rarely 'purebred', meaning that how they look can be traced back to many different 'types' of dogs. While most sled dogs are closely related to Siberian Huskies, nearly all have a variety of hounds or pointers as ancestors. These ancestors are why some sled dogs have 'floppy' ears, like a Labrador Retriever, instead of the pointed ears of a Siberian Husky. While Iditarod dogs are almost always 'mutts', meaning that they have many different types of dogs as ancestors, they are often referred to as 'Alaskan Huskies'.

Sled dogs come in many different sizes. Some are as small as 35 pounds; others weigh up to 70 pounds. Some teams are made up of both big and small dogs. The size of the dog matters a whole lot less than a race spectator would imagine; winning teams have used both big and small dogs.

Dogs must have good feet to race in the Iditarod. If their feet don't hold up over the course of the race they won't perform well and may have to be sent home early. When a dog is sore or tired, they get 'dropped' (sent home on an airplane) at the nearest checkpoint. The musher then has to continue with fewer dogs - this often slows them down.

Sled dogs must also be athletic. This means that they can't be overweight; if they are too heavy, in addition to overheating, they have a likelihood of getting sore. They must have good coats to keep them warm in the cold, but ideally, they must also be able to shed heat on warm winter days.

While the features listed above are important qualities of an Iditarod sled dog, physical build alone doesn't make a great sled dog: The dog's personality matters a lot, too!

Sled dogs must have good attitudes to perform well on the trail. Since happy dogs perform better than unhappy ones, mushers select dogs that enjoy traveling long distances. The best sled dogs are energetic and eager to please their musher - this too is an important quality. Consider it this way: Wouldn't you do better at school or in your job if you liked what you were doing and enjoyed your fellow students or co-workers? Mushers look for dogs that like to run and get along well with them.

One of the most important qualities that a musher looks for in a sled dog is how they eat. A sled dog on the Iditarod that doesn't eat is like a car with an empty tank of gas... Neither will go very far! At a young age, when the dogs are pups, teaching the dogs to eat is one of the first tasks for a musher. This training also helps a musher bond with their future athletes.

There are many physical and personality traits that mushers look for in a sled dog. Some qualities matter more to one musher than another - there is no right or wrong ordering of priorities. As a general rule, however, the Alaskan Husky is an energetic, fit and happy dog that loves running and wants to please its musher.