

# TOP DOGS

Cavan Scott joins world champion dog-sled musher **Steven Lindsay** as he trains his pack of Scandinavian hounds in the grounds of Drumlanrig Castle

## How to get mushing

Steven Lindsay's advice for would-be mushers

- ▶ Do your research and team up with a musher. There are races all around the country in the winter, especially in places like the New Forest, so go to a race and speak to the mushers there.
- ▶ Make sure you go for good working dogs, not just show dogs. A lot of people who get into it get really competitive, then they realise they've got the wrong dogs and they don't end up coming back.
- ▶ Prepare to give up your life. If you go for it properly you'll need to move house, find a place with no neighbours for the dogs to annoy, get a van and get friendly with a vet. It's a major life choice. It's not golf where you put the clubs away in the cupboard at the end of the day.



Steven believes that huskies are an anachronism and that the future of the sport lies with other breeds of dog

“Keep hold of the brake, otherwise you'll be off,” warns Steven Lindsay as I sit on top of his quad bike, one freezing

October morning in the forest of Drumlanrig Castle in Dumfries and Galloway. He's not kidding. Even with the brake firmly clutched in my gloved hands, the quad is slipping forward on the muddy track beneath.

The engine is in neutral, I'm not touching the throttle and yet we're threatening to leap forward. Why? It has something to do with the ten dogs that are currently straining at the cable-reinforced rope that connects them to the front of the all-terrain vehicle (ATV).

I'm with Steven Lindsay, three-time sled-racing world champion as he begins his season's training. The temperature has dipped beneath freezing but the adrenalin is keeping me warm. In front of me the dogs yap, bark and howl in excitement, eager to get going on our three-mile training run.

### A different breed

The pack isn't what you'd expect to see from a dog-sled team. First of all, they're not huskies. Steve is controversially a believer that huskies are an anachronism and the future of the sport lies with dogs such as his pack of Scandinavian hounds. A cross between a pointer and an Alaskan husky, the introduction of the hound into dog-sled racing has caused a schism in the sport. When Steven first decided to make the shift from huskies to hounds, the musher of 16-year standing discovered that he was even ostracised by close friends.

“The UK is very much backward when it comes to sled-dog racing, in that 99 percent who take part in the sport use pure breed Siberian huskies,” Steve explained as he taught me how to slip the harness over the dog's head. “Siberian huskies are mainly a show and snow breed. They're chocolate box dogs that look nice but have lost their competitive edge. A dog needs attitude. I don't care what my dog looks like. I'd run a poodle if I

thought it could keep up. As long as the dog is fit, loves me and loves to run, it's in my team.”

There's no doubt that these dogs want to run. From the moment Steven opened the door of his battered but well-loved van, the dogs streamed out, barking in anticipation of the run ahead. Unlike huskies, which are kept on chains before a race, the hounds are allowed to explore their area. “Letting them off the lead is a major advantage when travelling overseas to races,” says Steve,

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who checks them all before they go in the harness. “I can let them out to stretch their legs and see immediately if they've picked up an injury. You can't see a dog limp if it's on a chain.”

With the pack harnessed it's time for the off. Ken and Simon are the lead dogs. They steer the team, respond to the commands of the musher and set the pace. Behind them are swing dogs who guide the rest of the team around turns on the trail. The rest of the pack

are called team dogs, providing the raw power, while the wheel dogs at the rear need to be of a relatively calm temperament so as not to be spooked by the rig behind them.

There's nothing calm about the team as the brake is released and we are off. Steven has taken the controls and I am riding pillion on the back of the ATV. I'd expected us to be on a three-wheeled dry-land rig, but Steven explains that the quad is the safer option. I soon realise why. Even though we're still in neutral, we're shifting along at

19mph. As the team takes a sharp corner and the quad skids behind them, it feels much faster. Even Steven

admits that he finds rig-racing terrifying at times and his list of injuries only makes me appreciate the sturdy quad all the more. He's broken his pelvis, ruptured his kidney, and smashed his collarbone. “The worst,” he admits, “was when I scraped my toes off through my shoes. It was back in my younger days when I used to strap myself to the rig.”

He promises that later, back at the kennels, he'll let me run on a rig pulled by two of his retired

Alaskan huskies. His story of the last journalist, an attractive female newspaper reporter, who went out on a rig by herself does nothing to calm my nerves. “Well, she was pretty before she came off,” he jokes. At least I hope he's joking.

### Dog welfare

The one thing Steven doesn't laugh about is his dog's welfare. He refuses to race or even train them if the temperature rises above 10°C. At two or three points in our three-mile pelt, Steve brings the pack to a halt so that they can rest, and he walks among them to check that they're doing okay. In response he is nuzzled and playfully nipped. “I'm not the master of a pack,” he tells me as we accelerate away again, “but the coach for a team of athletes. I have to make sure that they do the job safely and don't get hurt. Dogs don't run to get fit. They run for the love of running and then the fitness follows naturally.”

I'm also surprised

by the fact that while we're running, Steven hardly issues any commands. When he wants Ken and Simon to lead the team to the right he calls “Gee” with “Haw” meaning go to the left. Other than the odd “Hike on” when he wants the team to speed up and some general encouragement, Steven enjoys the beautiful landscape of the forest flashing by with a cheerful whistle.

“The quieter I speak the more they need to listen,” he calls over his shoulder as we



Cavan puts a harness on Assam in preparation for the breathtaking journey ahead



Steven has a close relationship with his dogs. He treats them like pets, even though they're working dogs

▲ take the final corner. "If I keep yelling at them, they'll switch off and won't differentiate between that and a really important command."

### Pet-like relationship

Ten minutes later and we're back where we started, covered in mud and with the aroma of wet dog in our nostrils. One by one, the dogs are let off the harness, and given water. They seem as happy as ever, but gratefully jump back up into the van, tired from their exertions.

It's fascinating to watch Steven with them. Even though they're working dogs, he treats them like pets, and says that the benefit of having a small kennel of 16 dogs means that he can bring two of the hounds into the house per night, spending time with them to help forge the relationship.

The other recurring theme is that he often finds himself strapped for cash. His sponsorship from Burns Pet Nutrition provides the dogs with the high-quality food they need, and Steven has personal sponsorship from Scottish Power. Without this, he maintains he couldn't afford to race. His biggest blow came when funding for Dog Sport Scotland – a project

he managed with the Forestry Commission to maintain two training sites and race courses in Dumfries and Galloway – ran out earlier this year. The project wasn't able to generate enough income on its own. You can't charge for people to use Forestry Commission land and, as Steven admits, "The numbers just didn't add up."

"There does need to be somewhere in the UK for dog-sled racing," Steven continues back at the kennels as we prepare the team's food. "It's a growing sport with 800 of us in the UK, including genuine world champions, and it brings money into the area. Musers come to the tracks, stay in the local area, eat in local restaurants. We've even had 13 families move into the region because of the sport." However, as Steven's now been forced to take a new job to make ends meet, his quest for funding has become more ad-hoc. The centre is still there, but Steven fears the tracks will soon degrade. "A lot of these cool European funded projects do a lot for an area," he says sadly, as he leads me out to the two retired huskies that he's prepared for my solo run. "But when the funding stops

they close them down just as quickly."

In a lane behind the kennels, I have no time to ponder this. I'm standing on the £1,800 lightweight rig, while Buzz and Wendy wait patiently for me to let go of the brake. On Steve's signal, I find myself dragged quickly into stinging nettles and a dry stone wall. The power of these two canines is immense. There's no gentle acceleration. One minute you're standing still, the next you're speeding away. But despite my close encounter with the wall, I want to give it another go. Thankfully Buzz and Wendy don't seem to mind and off we go again. They love to run and, as I manage to keep the rig on the straight for the second attempt, so do I. ☺



The forest of Drumlanrig Castle is a stunning sight as it flashes by

### GET MORE INFO

#### DOG SPORT SCOTLAND

Get the lowdown on the Dog Sport Scotland training centres and tracks. [www.dogsportscotland.com](http://www.dogsportscotland.com)

#### SLED DOG ASSOCIATION OF SCOTLAND

Information for would-be and established mushers. [www.sdas.org.uk](http://www.sdas.org.uk)

#### SLED-DOG WELFARE

A sled-dog charity which includes a listing of races and events around the UK. [www.siberianrescue.co.uk](http://www.siberianrescue.co.uk)

#### ▶ NEXT MONTH

We traverse rock faces and jump off waterfalls as we go gorge walking in the Brecon Beacons.

### Going for gold



The sport of dog-sledding has its roots in the Alaskan gold rush of the 1920s. Sleds were used to get supplies and mail to the mining camps, while the gold itself was returned to the coast, again pulled by huskies. Then, in 1925, diphtheria hit the gold-mining community of Nome. Musers stepped in and created a network of sled teams that transported life-saving serums to the stricken area. Since 1973, the Iditarod dog-sled race in Alaska has commemorated this mercy mission, with dog teams covering the 1150 miles in 10 to 15 days.



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