


arctic traveler

with Joe Henderson

Born Tough: A Story of Survival



Pete and Lupine have grown into two of the most resilient pups I've seen. They're warm, friendly and tough as grizzly bear cubs. I remember the night they were born. It was mid February, around -50°F , and the calm air felt piercing yet refreshing in my lungs as I inhaled. Toward the south, beyond my canvas tent, I noticed the low hills, faintly visible by the light of a half-moon. Above the hill tops, muted green northern lights ran in a stream, east to west, and wildly splashed upward like an ocean wave breaking against jagged rocks.

But the thing that struck me most was the thick ice-fog, created by the dogs' body heat lingering over them as they rested in the deep snow. Those malamutes were perfectly comfortable in the arctic environment.

Yet, one dog, Tikka, couldn't rest like the others. Her instincts were driving her to relentlessly dig beneath the snow down to the tundra where the soft reindeer moss lies. Once Tikka cleared an area the size of a coffee table, she pulled out the moss with her sharp canines, gathered a bunch in her mouth, shook her head back and forth until all the snow had fallen out and piled the moss in the center of the cleared area. Then she gently pawed at the moss to spread it around, and pulled a few twigs from the snow with her teeth. Finally, she circled around in her nest to pat it

all down, and gently lied down.

I knelt beside Tikka, pulled off my mitts, and ran my fingers through her grey fur. She felt warm; her wool undercoat was like thick velvet.

"It'll be fine, girl. Are you hungry?" I questioned softly.

I grabbed a piece of meat that was thawing beside the woodstove inside the tent and brought it to her. Tikka lifted her head, pushed her nose against it and then nudged the meat out of my hand. Without getting up, Tikka pushed moss over the meat with her muzzle, swiped a glance at me with dark, curious eyes then curled up and buried her face under her bushy tail.

I knew it was time and so did she, but Tikka's inexperience concerned me. She had never given birth before, let alone in the middle of an arctic winter. Yet, she was completely focused on her task. Ingrained in Tikka's soul were ancient instincts that guided her. These instincts provided her the sense of urgency and persistence in preparing a warm

nest for new life.

For thousands of years, Alaskan malamutes have given birth in the arctic just as Tikka was about to do. So, it would seem that I shouldn't have been worried at all. But the stress was killing me. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed that she was pregnant before I left on the expedition in January. I remember the shock in my wife's voice when I told her that Tikka was pregnant. The Iridium satellite phone connection was crystal clear that night.

"What?" she said in disbelief, "Joe, how are you going to care for them out there?"

We mulled over the situation and then Andrea remembered that a couple of months earlier, Mitch had gotten loose and ran around all day in the dog yard while we were out dog sledding on the local trails.

"At least we know who the father is and that they're a compatible match. That's one mystery solved," I said with a sigh of relief. But I had my hands full caring for 20 other malamutes on a dog sledding expedition in Alaska's Arctic. I had 100 days of supplies in



the sleds and hadn't exactly made any accommodations for extra passengers, especially not for newborn puppies.

Right around midnight, Tikka uttered a soft whispering howl, an ancient tune that seemed to come from within her soul. Her quiet song triggered the entire team's spirit and they broke into a wonderful howl. Bruno was first to raise his muzzle toward the distant stars, and let loose a low, wandering tone. Then the others jerked their muzzles upward and joined him. Some of the dogs sat on their haunches while howling and others stayed lying comfortably on their sides. The larger malamute's voices echoed with a bass-toned vibrato, and many of the younger dogs sang at a higher, clumsier pitch. Then their voices all joined together in one powerful crescendo after another. As the team continued their song, they strained their heads ever higher towards the closest stars until their howls reached their highest intensity. Then, the dogs simultaneously relaxed their voices, and their song gently fell silent. Moments later, Bruno claimed his second wind, and the team broke into another wonderful howl. Only this time, Tikka sat up on her haunches in the center of her soft bed and joined them. She raised her muzzle toward the glowing aurora, her thick chest expanded. She closed her jaws slightly together and allowed a light tune to escape. It started deep at first, and then rose in intensity, strength, and pitch. Her song overshadowed all the others. Even Bruno's finest work was dwarfed in comparison. She owned the ancient song that night. As Tikka went to grab her highest note, she suddenly stopped, turned her head, nipped at the base



of her tail as if she were snapping at a mosquito and lied back down. The time had come.

With my headlight illuminating the scene, I sat down in the snow beside Tikka, and watched her give birth. Lupine came first. She was wet and slimy but looked healthy. Tikka feverishly licked and cleaned her, rolled her over, and licked her again. Then she nudged the reddish white, wriggling, squeaking little creature with her muzzle inward toward her tummy. Clumsily, little Lupine pressed her head against Tikka's nipple and took hold.

An hour later, Pete arrived. Tikka rolled him around the same way she did Lupine. The poor little guy didn't know what hit him. Eventually, Pete wriggled, rolled and crawled to Tikka's nipple and started nursing alongside his twin sister. Finally, the squeaking quieted down to a satisfied grunting sound from the newborns. Tikka kept the two pups nestled tightly against her warm belly, covered them with her bushy tail, buried her nose beside them, and exhaled her warm breath on them. By the time the stars faded and the dark skies succumbed to the growing daylight, Lupine and Pete were dry and comfortable in their new environment.

But, the challenges had just begun. How could I travel with Tikka and the little ones? It was -50 F, the snow was deep and I was sure there would be a few blizzards before winter's end. Traveling with a large team of malamutes can be quite interesting anyway, let alone with two pups and their worried mom, because they pattern so fast, and they expect consistent and systematic routines. For example, when the evening sun shaves the

horizon and I halt traveling and make camp, they fully expect to make camp the following afternoon, precisely at the same time. My system of travel had to be the same every day so Tikka could adjust with the least amount of stress.

The following day, I constructed a small pouch from caribou fur and set it on the sled. I gently placed Pete and Lupine inside the pouch. Then I inserted a Heat Factory hand warmer pack in with them and hitched up the team. Pete and Lupine settled comfortably into the warm fur pouch right away. Tikka though, whined and moaned when she watched me set the pups in the pouch, but the moment I slipped the harness over her head she stepped into it and quickly regained her focus on her love for pulling in the team.

That evening I made camp on a small hill overlooking a wide, frozen river that seemed to cut right through the jagged mountains. The snow was exceptionally deep so I dug down to the tundra to save Tikka some work, and set the pups beside her. Well, she wasn't satisfied. Tikka took it a step further and dug a snow cave, lined it with moss, picked the pups up gently with her mouth one at a time and placed them in the little snow cave. Tikka crawled in with them, nudged the pups up close to her nipples and they started nursing.

I knew right then and there that Pete and Lupine would be healthy and strong adults some day, pulling with the other malamutes in the team and carrying on the ancient Alaskan malamute breed and tradition. •

Joe Henderson has been working with Alaskan malamutes for almost 30 years. He travels the arctic each winter with his team of 22 mals. For more information, please visit his website at www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com.