

with Joe Henderson

Farmer's Rodeo

With a name like Farmer, you might think that he would be just a regular, run of the mill, good ol' wheel dog—someone who just minded his own business, put their nose to the grindstone and pulled all day, and howled all night.

Nope, not Farmer. He has greater ambitions. He's like the guy that's built like an NFL lineman but wants to be a ballet dancer, or the man that couldn't carry a tune to save his life, but wants to sing opera.

Farmer started his career in wheel position. Early on I detected his desire to pull incredibly hard, and while wearing a smile, too. Although, most wheelers enjoy a good solid pull, Farmer pulled harder than the others, almost fanatically. Yet, I was reluctant to put him in lead position. He just didn't resemble a lean, agile, athletic leader. He didn't strike me as someone who could stay ahead of the team, maneuver over jumbled sea ice, or easily weave through brush. His 120 pound square-shouldered frame seemed clumsy. But his strong spirit is a true leader's trait.

Farmer, the team and I were camped at a place that I refer to as "the hell hole." This area alongside a high, gray and jagged bluff had an incredible tendency for high winds. I remember one wind storm when we were pinned down in a 60 mph blow with a -90 °F wind chill, I called my wife, Andrea, on the Iridium satellite phone.

"Hi honey, does NOAA weather have an estimate of when this damned wind storm will stop? It's been blowing for two solid days now," I griped.

"What windstorm, I just checked the NOAA website and it says you have clear skies and 20 mph winds up there," Andrea informed me.

And that's the way it was most the time. It was a true hell hole trapped in its own secret environment. But, the windswept tundra was hard packed for good traveling. And the river was wide and smooth, allowing my 22-dog freight team to pull a healthy load. Musk oxen thrived there as well, grazing on the brown grasses exposed along windblown river banks. They looked like a herd of buffalo in the distance, and sometimes they wandered so close to my tent that I could hear them

chew on the moss and grass. The dogs seemed to get used to them after a while, although Farmer whined like a baby when he saw those burly, long-haired beasts wander by.

As I was hitching up the team in the hell hole, a cool 30 mph breeze was freezing my fingers and turning my cheeks to ice, Farmer sat with his tail sweeping the snow, glaring at me intently.

"Okay Farmer, you win. I'll place you in lead next to Boss and Bear. But you'd better follow what they do!" I swear just then, Farmer smiled.

Lead dog in a large Alaskan malamute team is an important position, and is normally reserved for the superbly talented elites of the team. Not just any ol' dog can run lead, but Farmer didn't believe he was just any ol' dog. In his young canine brain he was the leader, the super dog, the invincible hero that would guide his comrades through blizzards, freezing ass cold, darkness, and across thin cracking ice. Farmer didn't know his limits—he wasn't aware that limits even existed.

Seriously though, a big team of malamutes packs a lot of power and trying to stop a runaway team with just a sled brake would be like throwing cotton balls to stop a charging bear. So that's where a good lead dog comes in. When you say stop, they stop. When you tell them to go, the entire team hits their harnesses, and if the leaders are out of control,



frankly, the team is out of control, regardless of how many cuss words you throw at them.

Anyhow, I thought the hell hole would be a fine area for Farmer to start training. The tundra was wide open and he couldn't get us in trouble, or so I thought. Farmer stepped into his harness. I slipped the neck piece over his head, hooked my finger under his collar and placed him between Boss and Bear, my other two leaders. Farmer immediately slobbered on Boss's neck and growled at Bear.

"Alright, Farmer! You behave or you'll be pulling with the wheelers again," I scolded him. He looked at me, wagged his brushy red and white tail, and straightened his huge, square shoulders. It was almost comical how he towered over Bear and Boss. Farmer tried unsuccessfully to look serious with one ear drooped over and the other ear stood up. The red bristles on his back stood up as straight as cut grass as he poised himself, ready for the command to go. He was beaming with pride.

"OK!" I yelled loudly over the wind. Bear, Boss and Farmer hit their harnesses and the team followed. Bear, the veteran leader, directed the team on a straight course alongside the river with Boss and Farmer pulling beside him. Farmer looked majestic with his vibrant reddish-white coat and his thick tail filtering the golden sunrise. His harness straps were



tight as a drum while he leaned forward and I started to wonder why I hadn't put him in lead earlier.

Just then, Farmer lowered his head, muzzle a few inches off the snow, and started pulling with every ounce of strength he could muster. The rest of the team felt his energy and followed. The pace picked up. I hopped onto the back sled as they sped up.

Farmer turned hard right, pulling Bear and Boss reluctantly along with him. "Haw, haw!" I yelled. It was no use. Farmer was on a mission, and he didn't give a rat's butt about what I had to say. He was going to pull the entire team with him, come hell or high water.

I held on tight as the sleds slid across glare ice, gaining speed as Farmer, still with his muzzle close to the ground, zigzagged like he was chasing the wind. The team followed his every nonsensical move and the three freight sleds fish-tailed back and forth.

Before I knew it we were cruising fast across the river and the entire team was absorbed in Farmer's fanatical scheme. I didn't know whether to laugh or scream. I stood on the brake and half-heartedly commanded the

team to slow down, but I knew Farmer was completely tuned out. Boss and Bear skidded a little on their butts when they heard the command, and a few of the others slacked their lines but Farmer's infectious energy had now captured the entire team.

What is cooking in Farmer's brain and why was he so crazed, I thought. Then I saw the reason for Farmer's insanity...musk ox turds. They rolled, bounced, slid and flew with the wind ahead of his nose. I couldn't believe it! We were chasing musk oxen turds across the arctic. And Farmer was determined to catch and eat those little black balls.

And, of course, where there's smoke there's fire. In the distance, and getting closer by the second, the turd-makers had already taken position in a circle to defend themselves from the maniac dog team approaching. I bet we looked like the most ungodly sight that those musk oxen had ever seen.

As we came nearer, the big bulls squeezed tighter together, protecting the cows and calves behind them. I felt like we were a fast flying baseball headed for a solid wooden bat.

Finally I saw the opportunity coming up to stop the team and get them headed away from the musk oxen. As the sled runners glided off the river ice, they dragged on a sand bar, just enough so that I could hop off the sled and sprint ahead of Farmer and turn him around. The musk oxen were so close I could hear the bulls grunting, probably saying, stay behind me kids, these fools have no clue what they have coming.

Now, two years after our arctic turd-chasing ordeal, Farmer has turned into quite a lead dog, busting trails across the arctic and a true testimony to the old saying: ordinary dogs have broken extraordinary trails because they didn't know they couldn't. •

Joe Henderson and his team of Alaskan malamutes have spent nearly 30 years traveling in the arctic together exploring otherwise inaccessible areas of the far north. On their multi-month expeditions, Joe spends a lot of time discovering his dogs' quirks: the good, the bad, and the ugly. For more information, please visit Joe's website at www.alaskanarcticexpeditions.com.