

# Sketchbook



John van Rossum

Johann van Rossum

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Initially my drawings were intended as illustrations for some cynologic magazines. The pointilism technique with the Rotring Rapidoliner pen enabled me to make my drawings suitable for various printing techniques.

The organizers of sled dog races soon became interested in my drawings and I was soon designing certificates and posters for many competitions. During the twenty-five years that I was active in this sport, I was often the one who calligraphed the certificates in a quiet corner of a multi-purpose sports hall on the last day of a race before the prize-giving ceremony.

It did not stop at drawings of sled dogs, and sometimes 'conté à Paris' pencils replaced the Rotring drawing pen.

For the illustrations in the novel 'Hadewych/Dominique' and the non-fiction trilogy 'My dogs never let me down', I exclusively used Derwent pencils B to 9H.



Johann van Rossijn

true to the trail

# Winterberg

## Ausreichend Schnee

### *Plenty of snow*

This is the first time I have seen them working in the woods: Siberian huskies being trained for races. The driver sits on a sort of go-cart, pulled by ten dogs. The dogs are a bit like wolves, I think.

I have always been fascinated by working dogs. My grandfather was a brigade-major in the national field police. He had a well-trained police dog. Herta, the beautiful German shepherd, immediately stole my heart; I was about six years old and wanted a dog of my own.

A friend of mine had a kennel of greyhounds, trained on a track to chase a fake rabbit. I see the same enthusiasm for being able to run so fast in these sled dogs in the forest. As soon as they are harnessed to the tug line, they jump almost a metre high. They drag the training cart along the dirt tracks at high speed. To keep the speed down, the sled dog driver's wife stands on a running board at the back of the sled as an extra weight. In unexpected situations, such as stray dogs or riders on the track, she can intervene immediately without the driver having to get off the cart. I always come back on Saturday and Sunday mornings to watch the departure and return of the sled dog team. Later in the season, more teams come to train in this forest. I really like the breed! I have hundreds of questions over the huskies. I really had to come to the Sauerland at the beginning of January to see what a race in the snow looks like, Kjeld tells me. He printed out a copy of the race notice for me.

We are travelling on a Friday morning. There is a lot of traffic on the motorway through the Ruhr area. All the through traffic has to pass through the cities of Duisburg, Essen, Bochum and Dortmund, and with the roadworks going on all the time, we get stuck in traffic jams. After the German industrial cities, the motorway becomes remarkably quieter. Then, after an hour and a half of driving, we suddenly see the first snow on the verges. Very little at first, but gradually it becomes reassuringly more.

# *Mushing*



Then we have to get through a good chase of snow; we need snow badly, so we take it in our stride. I had good winter tyres fitted before we left, and just in case I have a set of snow chains handy. After the motorway exit we continue on inland roads. From the exit there are small signs with an arrow at the most critical points: 'Schlittenhunderennen'. The amount of snow on the roads is increasing. This morning we called the race director and asked about the snow conditions: they are fine, at least the race will go on, unless it starts raining hot water....

We drive into the town of Winterberg under a banner announcing the sled dog contest. There are posters at some shops with a beautiful drawing of a husky. It starts to itch a bit, we get a bit nervous. We look forward to the contest. And that while we ourselves are not participating at all. Slowly we drive on and see cars with dog trailers in front of hotels and guesthouses. Some vehicles have race sleds on the roof racks. We head for our guesthouse. Fortunately, we booked the overnight accommodation in good time. Then we rush straight to the musher meeting, the meeting for participants. That starts at 8pm. Where and when, you find out through the 'Rennausschreibung', which you get from the sled dog association. If you want to be there as a spectator, pay attention to which building in the village has the most striking vehicles: vans, estate cars, Range and Landrovers, small trucks and trailers with dog boxes.

# Internationales Schlittenhunderennen

Austragung der niederländischen Meisterschaften

## Winterberg

Samstag 7.1 + Sonntag 8.1

Anfang 10.00 Uhr



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Johann van Rossum

organisiert von Mushing Holland  
+ Gemeinde Winterberg



## Musher meeting

We were greeted by warmth and murmurs from the main hall. I go to greet some friends. On the other side of the room, a few tables have been pushed together, with boxes of plastic bags behind them. They contain the start numbers and all the important information for the participants. Start number 80 is on the table next to me. The musher quickly sorts through the rest of the bag: parking stickers for his car to get access to the musher car park, leaflets from the local tourist office, a drawing of the race course and the start list for the first race on Saturday. Each musher immediately dives into the start list to see when he has to start and - perhaps more importantly - when the competition starts.

As non-participants we also got a list with difficulties and exceptions. "We never have enough start lists! No matter how many we have printed," an official told us. On the start list we see that number 80 is Rolf Francken and he will start tomorrow with six Siberian huskies in the B1 class.

"Hey, Werner!" he calls through the hall, "I'll start behind you tomorrow! When I overtake you, hit the brakes immediately, OK?"

"My dogs are in top form this year, try to catch me first!" comes the reply.

This is how it goes at all the tables, but not everyone is joking. Claus Schuster, for example, who sits directly opposite us, will be competing with his four Greenland dogs for the first time tomorrow. He is in no mood for jokes. He asks everyone about the trail: "Is the bend after the start easy? How steep is the last slope? Is there a lot of wildlife in the forest? Are there any signposts at the crossings?" Questions and more questions. By tomorrow evening we will all be a lot wiser.

The hall is now full. Most of the bags have been collected. Some mushers have ordered food. We should do the same.

The Race Marshal and his helpers collected the entry fees at the tables in front, the papers were handed out and changes in the start list were noted, cancellations on the participant list were crossed out and the corrected lists for the checkpoints were ready.



# Schlittenhunderennen Schlittenhundenchampionat von Osttirol



Prägraten 23./24. Januar  
Matrei 26./27. Januar  
Sillian 29./30. Januar



Anfang 10.30 Uhr

Ende 15.00 Uhr

*Osttirol*  
Dein Berg Tirol.

Bitte keine Hunde mit zur Veranstaltung bringen!

The timekeeper and the speaker have been paid. They pause for a moment while the mayor of the village comes to the microphone to welcome the competitors and their families and friends.

Then the Trail Boss takes the floor and gives details of the trail: "This bridge is narrow. Please slow down! There are checkpoints at all the important places. They will only help if you ask for it and remember, only sled assistance is allowed. You must get the dogs back on the trail and untangle the lines yourself! The turnoffs for classes C, S and B are clearly marked and you can't really go wrong. When overtaking, the overtaken must stop if necessary and you must at least move aside to make way. The track is fairly firm and the snow is in very good condition this year. Just after the farm, the trail makes a sharp left turn. You don't see it until late. There is a red sign on the left well in advance. The blue signs indicate that you are on the right track and that you are before the crossroads where you have to go 'straight on'. This goes on for a while until all the confusion is cleared up. By 22:00 most of the mushers are gone. A few still have to walk and feed their dogs. They prefer to go to bed early themselves. I think we'd better go too, we have to get up at seven in the morning!



# 1. Renntag

## *First day of race*

A long line of cars shuffled by as we walked to the start area the next morning after a hearty breakfast. We parked the car just outside the village as the car park at the start is for mushers only. We don't have to put our snow chains on, the through roads are clean. The parking areas are well marked for the C and S teams, the B and A teams and there is an extra area for the Open class. From the parking cards on the windscreen, the helpers can immediately see which class a musher is in and direct him or her to the parking area. No car will get through without a card. Cars and trailers take up a lot of space; all parking spaces are soon full. Next to the car park is the stake-out area. Some mushers are busy hammering steel stakes into the snow and attaching the stake-out chain to them, obviously as close to the car as possible. The stake-out is a long chain to which short chains are attached to which the dogs are tied. At the stake-out the dogs should be able to stretch their legs and do their business. When a dog has done its business, the musher comes with a shovel and cleans up the mess. Everything disappears neatly into a rubbish bag, because with hundreds of dogs in such an area it is hard to leave it there.

As we walked past the stake-outs, we could hear the speakers crackling as they were being tested for a while. "Eins, zwei, eins, zwei!" It works. We hear music and the clocks are set: "It's now 9.30, in thirty minutes the first competitor will start!"

A snowmobile drives along the trail, the signs are checked once more and the drop-off tapes are attached.

Slowly we approach the cordoned-off rectangle of the start area. Several sleds are already ready, the lines spread out on the ground. The sled is attached to a pole with a line. It was 9.50 am. Three people came running, panting, with three dogs.



*"Valik"*  
*Hans van der Meulen*

The dogs are already harnessed and attached to the tow line. The musher gives instructions to his helpers: "Igor comes right, Ayka left, make sure she doesn't bite the lines!"

One of the organisers joins in and crosses out the start number on his list and marks the dogs with a marker; on the second day of the race, only the dogs that ran on the first day may be harnessed. The musher stands on the runners of his sled and presses the brake into the snow with one foot. The dogs jump into the tow lines and pull on the sled, and it is now clear why the sled is attached to the pole.

The first competitor is already on the track and the next team starts at one-minute intervals. The teams start in order of speed, so unnecessary overtaking is avoided as much as possible.

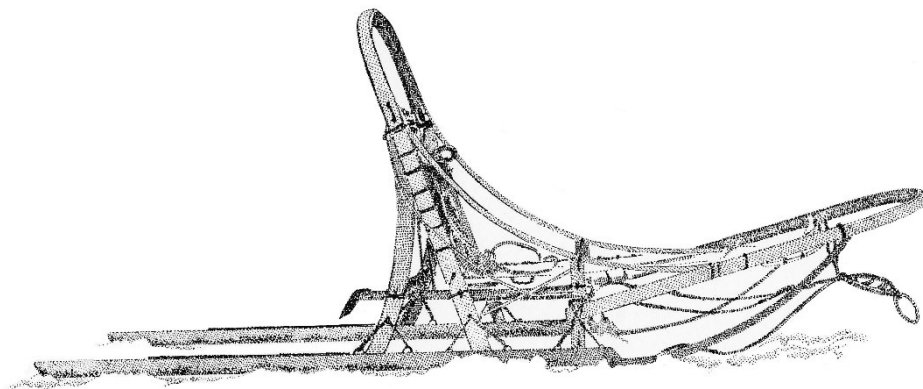
The announcer explains a few things about some mushers and their dogs. In the C1 class only teams with three Siberian huskies start. A short break is followed by the C2 class, also with three dogs, but now they are Samoyeds, Greenland sled dogs and Alaskan malamutes. The Siberian husky is a real sprinter, while the dogs in the C2 class are known as marathon runners; they don't run as fast, but they last longer. Almost all of the dogs are almost unmanageable at the start, throwing themselves into the harnesses and needing to be held by several helpers. It is interesting to watch a sled dog team go to the start and we are always amazed at the power and speed with which the dogs take off after the start command! The noise at the start is truly remarkable! As soon as the dogs are loose, you can hear nothing at all. We walk along the trail. On the way you hear only the commands of the musher.

A little hunting snow is falling and it is quite cold. The mushers in their thin sweaters, light windbreakers and trainers do not seem to mind the cold. They keep their thick parka jackets and often padded ski pants on until just before the start, but on the trail they need to help their team as much as possible. On the flat, they stalk along; on the slopes, they walk alongside and push the sled. Those who simply stay on the runners and let themselves be pulled forward have little chance of competing in today's races!



*“Loschadej”*

*René Minartz with his beautiful mix of Siberian huskies and Greenland sled dogs*



*race sled*



It really is a sport, not only for the dogs, but certainly for the musher. We go to the finish and watch the teams coming in. It is very different from the start; after about eight kilometres on the C trail, many dogs may still be galloping on the last straight, but after crossing the finish line they willingly let themselves be stopped and then stand panting very quietly. Some lie down in the snow and roll over on their backs. Of course they are praised and quoted extensively. You can see that the dogs have achieved something. Sometimes the mushers look as if they could collapse at any moment; gasping for breath, sweating and glad of any help to bring the dogs back to the stake-out. But most mushers are better trained, more athletic. Many teams need little help and some husky mixes send their team back to the car in a slalom across the car park with 'gee-gee-haw' - 'right-right-left' - showing how well lead dogs can respond to commands. At the finish line the timekeepers are waiting with their stopwatches. In a construction shed, which has now taken on a different function, the times of the arriving teams are immediately calculated and the start cards are issued. In the meantime, the results are written on a large board, around which mushers and helpers are constantly buzzing.

After the C teams, the Scandinavia class went out on the trail. Here the musher follows the dogs on cross-country skis. The start of the S-class, with one or two dogs in front of the pulka, is a little quieter. They have about nine to 12 kilometres ahead of them. A remarkable achievement for both musher and dog! Anyone who has not mastered skiing perfectly will get into real trouble when climbing and descending!



*Siberian huskies*

Does the Samoyed walk with a slight limp? Yes, but it's not too bad. As we get closer, we see the musher kneeling beside him, removing a small clump of ice from between the pads of his feet.

Samoyeds are particularly prone to developing such lumps in the hair between the pads of their feet.

We walk around to get a bit warmer. Fortunately, there are stalls selling sausages, goulash soup and mulled wine. With something warm in our stomachs, we quickly regain our temperature.

The first B teams are getting ready to start. I think we should go and see Rolf, as we promised him last night that we would help him at the start. When we arrive at his stake-out he has already taken the dogs out of the trailer and given them some water. They are not thirsty.

"They'll be chewing on snow later on," Rolf hums.

"How are you?" we greet him cheerfully.

No answer.

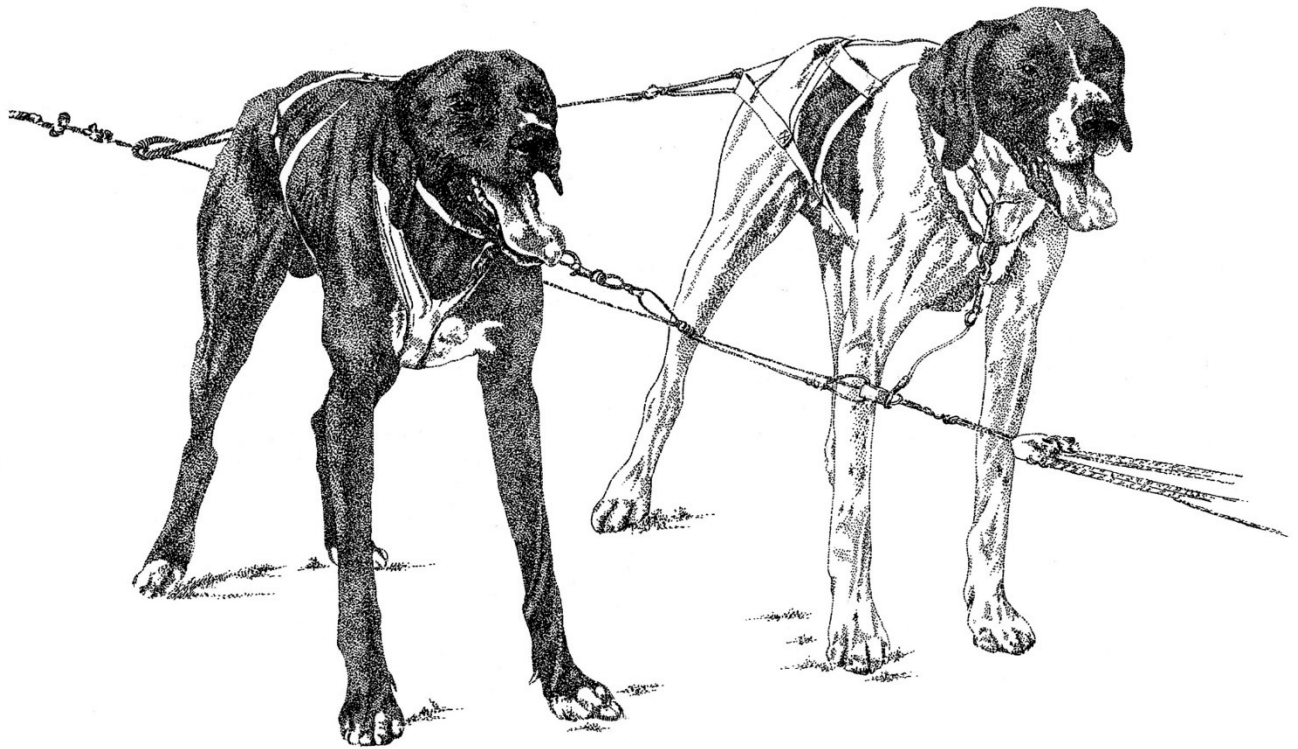
"How are the dogs?" we try again.

Rolf is silent, looks for his start number, curses something unintelligible to himself, adjusts the harnesses and changes his snow boots for sturdy sports shoes. It is better to say nothing and wait until he needs our help. His sled is already in the starting area, the tow lines are already there. In the usual order, deliberately quiet and calm, Rolf puts the harnesses on the dogs, who run excitedly on their chains and bark. You can't fool them, they know exactly when it's time to start. A furtive glance at the clock: eight minutes to go. We're getting a bit nervous ourselves, and we're not even taking part!

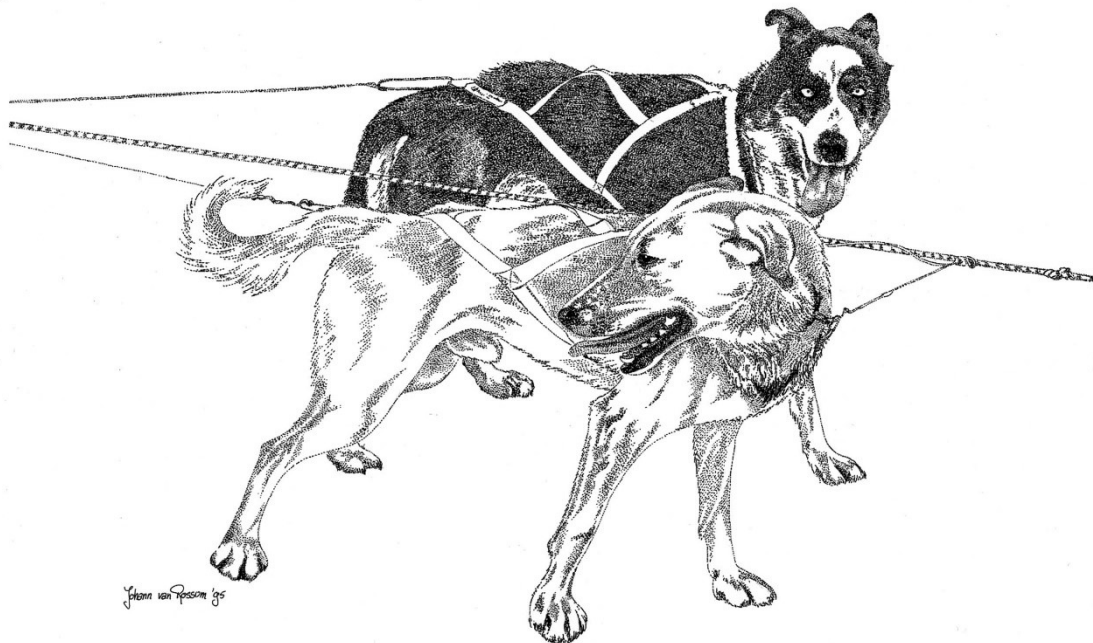
"Would you take the male here and the female there?"

We take the dogs by the collar and release the musketon hooks. The dogs pull us forward like mad.

The two dogs at the back howl and bark defiantly. We trot between the parked cars, past the spectators with and without children and dogs - we have to politely push some people aside now and then - and under the tape into the start area. Rolf and his two dogs were there earlier!



Johann van Rossum '95



Johann van Rossum '95

*Hounds and Alaskan huskies*

Five more minutes! Another helper brings the fifth and sixth dogs. Damn, the muskets are frozen. Breathing over them helps. Finally, all the dogs are harnessed and marked with a thick marker.

"Number 80, start!" comes over the loudspeakers.

The dogs throw themselves into the harnesses, the helpers hold them back, we grab their harnesses and tethers. The dogs are ready. In front of the start line the sled is stopped by three strong men. Rolf walks over to his dogs again, speaks to them calmly, pats them all on the back for a moment and then gets back on the runners of his sled. The dogs go wild in their harnesses.

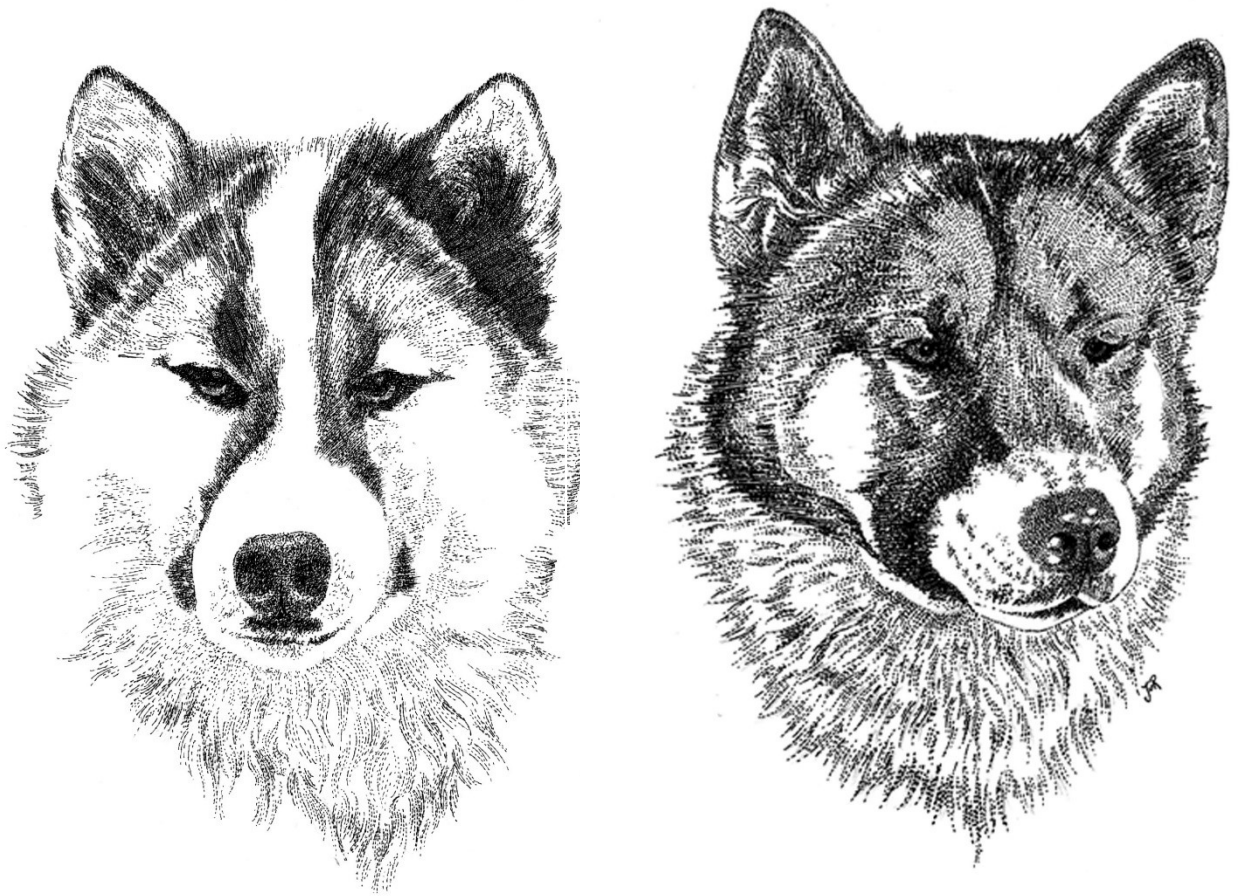
They can barely understand what the starter is saying: "Five, four, three, two, one, go!"

"OK!" shouts Rolf and we jump back. The dogs take off like an arrow. A whisper goes through the crowd. The sledge is pulled up the first part from the front. Rolf kneels down to cushion the impact. The springy part of the central drag line is very important! It cushions the initial shock for the dogs and the musher. You should also use such a shock absorber when training, because the training sled is much heavier than the sled.

Come on, we have to get out of here. We pick up the leashes and Rolf's parka and make way for the next team. Now we are really hot! Unbelievable the power a dog like this can develop. The B teams have to cover a distance of between 12 and 15 kilometres. In half an hour we will be at the finish line to pick up our team.

There are a lot of spectators along the narrow path before the finish line. It must look like a wall to the dogs from a distance. The stewards do their best to keep the people behind the barrier. Not everyone understands this and they often need to be patient. Parents let their small children play carefree on or along the track. Dachshunds, poodles, etc. stand next to the trail so they can get a good look at their peers. It is difficult to explain to onlookers that they are endangering both children and dogs. "He won't do anything," assures a man with a giant schnauzer on a lead. Good, now we know! A team is a pack, which can get into a fight with an unfamiliar dog, and may see very small dogs as prey.

A tape barrier is generally not an insurmountable obstacle.



*Grønlands slædehundene*

Rolf crosses the finish line, the dogs panting, tongues hanging far out of their mouths. The musher is out of breath. Shortly before the finish he overtook his predecessor. The latter now comes in. We make room for him and bring the dogs to the stake-out. In reverse order they are stretched out again and attached to the chains. They immediately begin to roll around in the snow. Rolf changes his sweaty shirt into a jumper, puts his parka back on and pulls on his snowshoes with clean socks.

The dogs are not panting as much and they are getting some water. They should not drink too much when they are so hot, it is dangerous. Some of the competitors approach Rolf and ask him how it went. He has regained his breath and is happy to answer their questions. His composure and humour seem to have returned. Before the start no musher is approachable. Friends and family stay in the background.

Later we watch the start of the A class. Again, the sound of the dogs is frightening. As sometimes with the smaller teams, there are many well-disciplined dogs standing relatively quietly at the start, waiting for the start signal. The lead dogs often look back at the musher and watch him closely. When the start command is given, the whole team just explodes. The immense joy of their work radiates from them! Shortly after the last big teams, the Trail Boss goes over the trail with the snowmobile again to check if the trail needs to be improved in certain places and if all signs are right. After the last team has entered, the race director also retires to write the lists for the next day. Starters, announcers, timekeepers, checkpoints, police, volunteer firefighters and all the other helpers can finally go home or to a cosy restaurant where the mushers are now starting to arrive.

The dogs have been fed and are now resting in the car or in the warm kennels of the trailer. Wherever you go, there is only one topic of conversation: today's race.

"At the end of that long climb, I thought I'd never make it!"

"Did you see how Jürgen ran up there? I think I should give up smoking."



*Iditarod,  
the greatest race on earth*



"Were you going so fast in that sharp bend after that little lake? There was a sheet of ice there!"

"I could barely hold on to the lifeline and it took me ages to get back on the sled!"

"That stretch through the woods was beautiful!"

"My dogs saw some deer and of course they wanted to chase them. Luckily I was able to keep them under control. I still ran towards them when they called me!"

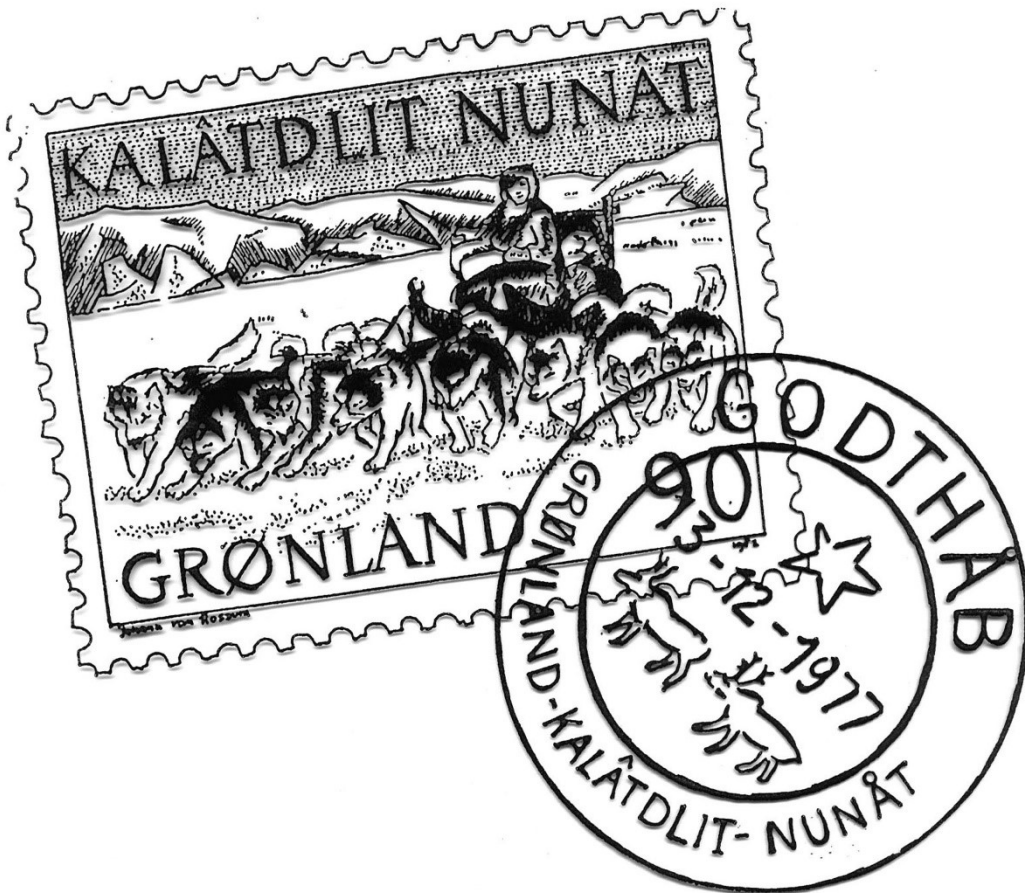
"I didn't have any problems overtaking, but then they just wouldn't go on. They kept turning back to the overtaken team behind us. There's just nothing more to do. I prefer to stay behind them from now on anyway".

"Halfway through the stage Rohleder overtook me, which was a great pace for me. Tomorrow the dragon won't fly, I'll start in front of him. Too bad..."

There are endless discussions. Tips are given on how to take the bends, whether or not to feed the dogs beforehand, whether or not to wax the runners of the sled. Tactics for tomorrow's decisive race are discussed and sometimes hushed up. Some mushers don't drink a drop of alcohol and are in bed by 10pm. Others just "need a beer" to be in good shape for the next day. They are not ready to go under sail until a little later. Before going to bed, everyone takes the dogs for a quick walk and gives them a drink. Then the race continues, right through dreamland.



*"Sirius"*  
Danmarks slædepartrulje i Nordøstgrønland



return to the website with the 'go back'-arrow on the left top of your screen.