

Interview: George Attla part 1

Story and images by Greg Sellentin

Recently, I had the enviable opportunity to spend almost a week with mushing legend George Attla at his home in the Alaskan Koyukuk river village of Huslia.

If you are a fan of mushing, George Attla likely needs no introduction, but here is a brief re-cap of his racing career: 8-time winner of the Open North American Championships, 10-time winner of the Rony World Championships, two-time Iditarod finisher, Alaska Sports Hall of Fame Inductee and winner of almost every other sprint race that has ever been run. That's his record as George Attla the sled dog racer. George Attla the man is also a very interesting and intriguing personality. Having been launched into the spotlight after winning the 1958 Rony World Championships as a rookie and young man, he continued on as the first musher to take the sport into the modern era by working with corporate sponsors and working the public relations angle to bring the sport to the masses. In 1979 the movie of his life story, *Spirit of the Wind* was produced but never distributed in the U.S. The film is an excellent summary of his rise from village trapline musher to world class racer, as well as an insight into the culture and lifestyle of the region at the time. The film has become a hard to find cult classic among mushers and fans of the sport. I had the enjoyable and somewhat surreal experience of watching a crystal clear digital copy from the master film at George's house with him and Eliza Jones—George's cousin. They laughed and commented on most of the scenes, as the movie employed many local actors that are now elders in the village. George's sister Rose Ambrose actually played his mom in the film, and Curtis Erhart played his younger brother.

I came up to Huslia to talk with George and to cover the Huslia New Years sprint race,



Left to right: Harold David of Allakaket visits with George. Nearly every musher who comes into town stops by to talk dogs over coffee. • George feeding his dogs at 50°F below zero. • George has always made his own sleds, and still does. Here he works on one in his living room.



which is one of the oldest village races in the Koyukuk region. All of us mushers were a bit disappointed that the temperatures for the 5 days I was there never reached much above 50F below zero, and as such, the races couldn't happen. However, the upside was that I had a lot of time to talk dogs, mushing, and life in general with George—a few important days I feel fortunate and lucky to have spent.

I knew of George's exploits as a racer, but I knew less about him personally. The reputation George has as a fierce, intense, and aggressive racer belies his calm, intelligent and introspective off-trail personality. During this visit I learned many things, including his desire, passion and selfless dedication to see the sport of sprint mushing continue into the future. This is really something to see in him at his age, and I asked him how

and why he cares so much about the sport now that he is long retired from the big races. After a brief, thoughtful pause that precedes most of his answers, he leans closer over the kitchen table and tries to impart that the pride of the Alaskan Village Native had a lot to do with their dogs. Most of the Athabaskan natives were nomadic people, and George's family was one of the last ones to settle down. It takes an immense amount of community effort to hunt, fish and trap to survive the winters in this region. "The people here help each other out for the most part. It's not about me anymore, I want to see the whole region do well, I would like to see better dog teams up and down the river, I think I can help them achieve that," George explains. "The federal government came in and thought it was helping the people here by providing incentives for them to live in

villages, and with funding, and welfare and all that. And they were helping, but in some ways it hurt the people here. We are hard working proud people, and we lost some of that."

George loans his own race dogs out to junior mushers in the village in an effort to see more youth involvement in the sport. He still keeps up with the racing bloodlines and is as sharp and knowledgeable about racing at the present time as most mushers I know. His current collection of dogs includes the bloodlines of Ropertz, Reynolds, Ellis, Taylors, Erharts and other top level sprint racers, but he also has kept the hound influence to a minimum and has made an effort to maintain the village dog strain in his dogs. In his desire to see other village racers build good teams, he has outright

given pups and adult dogs to other mushers in the area who are in need of dogs.

At 79 years old, it is no surprise to see that George Attla is not able to do what he used to. It is very surprising, however, to see him do so much with the dogs. George keeps about 20 Alaskan Huskies at this home now. Every day he cooks dog food, waters, scoops and takes care of the dogs himself and with the sometime help of his partner Kathy Turco. He also trains his dogs and maintains the trails around the village. Huslia used to be the epicenter of the Koyukuk region for sled dogs. In the heyday before snowmachines, TV, and modernity in general, there were maybe 30 teams in this small village of less than 400 people. Now there are only a handful up and down the Koyukuk river including Huslia,

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Huslia Hospitality

I hopped out of the 7 passenger cargo Cessna 208 Caravan at 50°F below zero on a snow covered runway just outside the village of Huslia. I pulled my bags out of the belly of the plane and wondered how I would get to George's. There was a snowmachine with a large freight dog sled attached via a solid hitch. It was the baggage vehicle. "Where you goin'?" Wright's air agent Joss Olin asked. "George Attla's house." I said. "I can take you there." he said as he pointed to the back of the dog sled. There was already one passenger sitting on the machine ready for her ride, and I didn't want to hold things up. In Fairbanks I had the foresight to put on my insulated pants over my jeans, and my heavy jacket, but wasn't prepared for a 2.5 mile snowmachine ride from the airstrip to George's house. I had only light weight gloves on, so I quickly opened up my bags and dug out my heavy mitts, but didn't grab my mushers hat or neck gaiter. I pulled the hood of my jacket as far as I could down over my face, but as soon as we took off I knew this was a bad mistake.

The cold air, and the fine snow drift kicking up from the machine in front of me was freezing to my face. I tried to cover my face with my hand, but it didn't help. I yelled to Joss to stop, but he couldn't hear me from back of the sled. We arrived a short time later at George's house, and Joss got off the machine and walked back to me. "Holy Cow! It looks like you froze your face it's all white" was all he said. Luckily the frost nip didn't have a chance to freeze too deep and just a little redness remained after a day.

Word got out in town pretty quickly that the cheechako mushing reporter didn't have a fur ruff. I felt a bit embarrassed. That afternoon George's cousin Eliza Jones, came over to visit. A very interesting lady from the village of Koyukuk, we talked about the book she authored on Athabaskan languages. She earned an honorary doctorate from the University of Alaska for her 20 year work of compiling this amazing encyclopedia and dictionary of the language and culture of her people. I was fascinated by her descriptions of the different languages and dialects of the tribes up and down the Koyukuk and Yukon rivers. She had also heard the story of my ride from the airstrip. At 50F below zero, she decided she was going to go for a walk to visit with friends and relatives around town. About 4 hours later she returned from her walk. She had collected some wolf fur from friends in town, set about tanning the hide a bit more, and sewing me a genuine Athabaskan fur ruff for my parka. It was a gesture that summarized the generosity and hospitality of this community, and a touching memory I will carry with me for a long, long time.





Musher	# Dogs	Time	Sponsor	Buyer	Amount
1) Floyd Vent Sr.	11	2 min	Rob, Jerry, Doug	Ricky Vent	\$300
2) Harold David	16		Machine, Will, etc		
3) George Atlla Jr.	11	0 min	Veracity - Morris Sr	Al Yatin Jr.	\$400
4) Al Yatin Sr.	8	11 min	Al Yatin Jr.	Elsie Vent	\$150
5) Jackie Wholecheese	11	11 min	Elvis Smith	Teri Vent	\$100
6)					

60% 570
30% 285
10% 95



Left to right: George cooks food for his dogs everyday. He mixes beef, beaver, rice, and fish with water and lets it simmer for several hours before mixing it with kibble and fish oil and serving to his dogs. • The starting order for the Huslia New Years Race, along with the calcutta and handicap times for each musher. • L to R: Ricky Vent Sr., Floyd Vent Sr., George Atlla Jr., Jackie Wholecheese, and Al Yatin Sr. are in the Huslia Community Center signing up and drawing for start positions. Not pictured is Harold David, who was late flying in from Allakaket because of the cold temperatures. The race didn't happen as scheduled because of extremely cold temperatures that hovered around 50F below zero and colder all weekend and through the next week.

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Hughes, Allakaket and Bettles. Despite the dwindling number of teams, there is still friendly competition all around the Koyukon Region from Galena to Tanana. When there is a race in Huslia, however, George Atlla is still the man to beat, and every musher stops by his house to talk dogs, get some advice and feel out their chances of beating George on his home turf.

The following is Part One of my interview with George:

GS: In the last issue we had a story about Alaska Village Dogs. Do you think there is such a thing today and where do you think the village dogs of the past came from?

GA: There are so many dogs mixed in now. Back before we knew we had good dogs in Huslia, we got breedings from Koyukuk and breedings from Ruby. There is no telling where those dogs came from. We didn't know we had good dogs back then. They were working animals. One of the ways we found out that the village dogs from Huslia were good was from a guy named Raymond Paul who was racing in the early 50s. He won the Rondy and the ONAC one year and then went up to Hughes for the Spring Carnival. Three of our local teams beat him! And here he was, the World Champion. A light came on and we thought, "Wow, we have good dogs." Cue Bifelt here bred to one of his dogs, the dog was out of the village of Ruby. It was called Johnny Horney's dog. There were 4 super dogs from that litter. All of us, including Jimmy Huntington and Bergman Sam built our kennels around those 4 dogs. The first time Jimmy won the Rondy and Bergman Sam won the ONAC, they had those 4 dogs in their team. I got to use them in the 1958 Rondy.

As far as where they came from, I don't know. My grandmother had dogs. That was close to 100 years ago. They've been here for a long time. I've heard dog stories that go way back. One of them was from a guy who was my father's age. He lived up in Allakaket. He was hauling wood with his team and his father. He said, "Dad it's 70 below according to the thermometer." His dad said, "That's not cold, it used to get much colder." The son said, "How do you know how cold it was back then, you had no thermometer." "When the dogs' tails freeze and fall off, that's how you know when it is cold." The dad said, ending the conversation.

Nowadays there are a lot of different breeds mixed in. Especially in the sprint racing hounds.

GS: Well most of the hound crosses are still way over half Alaskan Husky.

GA: That is the important part, the heart, of the sled dog. The Alaskan Husky is very mentally tough. I've raised and trained all sorts of crosses. The Alaskan Huskies are really dedicated dogs. They would die for you. When I was younger, and driving dogs hard, when a dog went down in a team, he would often be passed out. If he had to finish the race in the basket, that dog was passed out. Now you see the dogs coming in in the basket, they're looking around taking in the sights. Today's dogs are like today's people: they're soft.

During the ONAC one year, I had a leader that broke the middle toe on each front foot during the final heat. I won the race with that dog, she kept running. I didn't realize it until after the race when her feet swelled up.

GS: Lingo was probably your best and most famous dog. Was he a village dog from Huslia?

GA: I crossed one of our bitches with Gareth Wright's dogs. That's where he came from. Gareth was trying to develop a new strain of dogs. I knew from a pup he was something special the first year. I actually never raced him as a yearling until the Tanana spring carnival and I put him in lead there. He didn't know what was going on—he wasn't trained for it. He started to get hot and jumped off the trail and rolled around in the snow for a while. Mentally he grew up pretty easy. I raced him until he was very old. Towards the end of his career I leased him to a fellow in Europe to be bred. His father, Scotty, had a longer career. Lingo had pretty bad arthritis towards the end, but he would still go, and once he warmed up, he was as good as any dog in the team. His mother was a dog named Queenie, who was half from Gareth Wright. Lonely was a dog in his background also. Lonely was so lazy that he would back out of his harness. I got him from someone who couldn't get the dog to run. The Taylors had him also, but couldn't get him to run. I could see he was athletic, he would scream to go, but when you put him in harness he wouldn't want to go. I chained him up right near where the team hooks up to leave the yard. After a bunch of times seeing the teams leave, I hooked him up and he went. Back to Lingo—he would work so hard, that he would lather up from his head to his tail. I've seen a lot of hard working dogs, but never seen another one like that. He was a once-in-

a-lifetime dog. He was an amazing dog. In a race, about 4 or 5 miles from the finish, he would look back over his shoulder at his teammates, almost to say, "Is that the best you can do?"

Back in the 80s I had a pair of females out of him that were very good also. Chris and Moses, they were leaders.

GS: We just watched some old footage of the ONAC and Rondy. I've seen some others of older races too. There used to be more dog teams ducking down side streets on the way out. Why do you think that doesn't happen, or rarely happens in today's races?

GA: It's a different type of dog. Today's dogs are running out of desire to run, desire to please. I'd say 30 years ago, there was a certain amount of fear in them. The training styles were different. So the second or third day, they weren't that anxious to go. We used to have a lot of teams off the side roads. I've been down side streets.

GS: Do you see any other difference in the dogs today compared to the dogs back then?

GA: I think the dogs today have a shorter jump. When I came from the village, at the beginning, all the dogs were off the trapline. The gait they had was a nice easy, relaxed gait. I call it a jump. They could jump or stride a long way. On the trapline they would trot, but they had a nice long jump or gait when loping. Then when I started winning in Fairbanks, I was okay, and on par with Doc Lombard. Then a guy named Harvey Drake came along and he had faster dogs. My dogs jumped so far that sometimes they couldn't make the turns. You had to hold back because they couldn't make the turns because of their long strides. Harvey had dogs that jumped shorter. I started doing some training runs real short and fast and it helped to shorten up their gait and they could run faster.

GS: A lot has been written about your rivalries with Doc, Gareth, and Harvey. Did you have rivalries with other village mushers also?

GA: Yes, we had a lot of rivalry and we expressed our feelings towards each other publicly. We did it because we knew it was good for the sport and created more interest. For example with Carl Huntington, he would express what he thought of me, which wasn't much, and I would say what I thought of him. The papers really got into it. We had a lot of respect for each other also. Carl's mom and dad came from Huslia, but he was from Galena.

GS: Who were some of the other village mushers you looked up to in your early days?

GA: Bergman Sam. He was an innovator. Back in the 50s he was trying new training methods. Back then a lot of mushers used whips. I would see him swatting at his dogs with a rolled up newspaper and asked him about it. He said, the sound bothers them and has the same effect as using the whip. He found out you don't have to beat on the dogs to get their attention. I was interested in him because he was trying to work with the dogs' minds.

I drove just about everyone's dogs up and down the Koyukuk river region. I've gotten a lot of good dogs that were very well trained. You



In George's house there are plenty of trophies, memorabilia, and pictures, but there is only one dog portrait on the wall: Lingo by 17 year-old

could take those dogs and go to any race in the country with them and they would do what you asked them to.

Bill Williams was another great dog trainer. You would get a dog from him and it was always trained perfectly, exactly the way I wanted it.

GS: When you would collect dogs from the Koyukuk river village mushers, did you have to pay for them? Were you leasing them for money?

GA: When I started, no, there was no money involved. But in later years, I had to pay \$500 before I could touch a dog. For instance in Fairbanks one time, I was short of dogs, and a guy had a kennel there and he said, "Go ahead and try any of them. If you put any in your truck, it's \$500, and if they get hurt, you take care of the veterinary bill." So I drove out of there with 5 dogs, one broke a toe shortly thereafter and I only used one in the race for 2 days. I ended up paying

over \$3,000 to use one dog for 2 days of ONAC. The Erharts in Tanana were some of my major dog suppliers for years. This is way back when the kids were small, old man Erhart was a great dog trainer. I never had one of his dogs go down on me and I used many of them. Every year for maybe 15 years I would rent some of his dogs. I would pick them up and pay for them. It was just business. This kind of thing doesn't happen as much today. For me it was all about how much I wanted to win. I had a sponsor that I had to produce for. The only way I was going to win and produce results for my sponsors was getting the best dogs.

GS: You were one of the first mushers to move the sport into more of a professional attitude, I mean by getting sponsors and media exposure and such—but it's not like you came out of Harvard Business School. Did you have any help or insight from anyone into how to approach sponsors and your public image?

GA: I would say the sponsors I had actually helped me. They were really great to work with. For instance J.C. Penney was one of my first sponsors. I got to know the head guy pretty well, and we would talk about how to present myself, and he gave me a lot of advice on that stuff. Some of it came to me naturally. I also knew how to be diplomatic when necessary and not to express my opinion! My very first sponsor was Weaver Brothers Trucking. They had a barge line and I worked for them in the summer as a licensed river pilot. The second time I went to the Rondy, they backed me up. Back then they didn't want much from me, other than just to be seen with me. Another example is Alaska International Air, it was owned by Neil Burke at the time, he was a very rich man. He just wanted to go out and party with me, that's it. That lasted for 2 years...

The George Atlla interview will be continued in the next issue of Mushing.

"The Making of a Champion: The Mindset of George Atlla" is a unique collaboration with Alaska's most accomplished sprint sled dog racer to create an information-rich web site that showcases his mindset and history. The target audience is the public and in particular, youth. Funded by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum, the educational website in development is at www.attlamakingofachampion.com. Free access to the finished web site is scheduled to start in February 2012.