



WINDOWS TO THE LAND

By Judy Ferguson

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George Attla, the Huslia Hustler

In 1958 when the two sprint dogsled championships, the Fur Rondy World Championship Sled Dog Race in Anchorage and the Open North American Championship in Fairbanks, were at their height, when thousands of fans used to throng the streets, an unknown Athabaskan with a fused leg, George Attla of Huslia came to town.

Located within the Koyukuk National Wildlife Refuge on the Koyukuk River, Huslia is about 170 river miles northwest of Galena and 290 air miles west of Fairbanks. Traditionally, the Koyukon Athabascans lived between the south fork of the Koyukuk and Kateel rivers. They had seasonal camps, following wild game and in summer fishing for salmon.

Cutoff Trading Post (also called Old Town) was established in the 1920s, four miles overland or sixteen river miles from modern Huslia. In 1949, the community moved to today's Huslia due to recurrent flooding and marshy ground.

During the 1970s, when we were raising our family on a remote homestead, George Attla dominated the sprint sled dog racing circuit. Once when we came to town, our children saw a movie of someone who lived like they did, George Attla's movie Spirit of the Wind.

Thirty-six years later when I was selling at the Tanana Valley Fair, I met Kathy Turco, a fellow vendor in the craft tent. She was selling her exquisite sound and film documentation of Alaska's animals, Spirit of the Arctic. She explained that George Attla had consulted with her on her film, and she promised to introduce me to him when he returned. After we met, I asked George if he might consider interviewing.

Six months later, during the GCI Open North American Sled Dog Championship in Fairbanks, we met. I followed George down Second Avenue, crowded with both urban Natives and those in town for the race. Hands reached out: "Hi, George," "Hey," patting his arm, clapping his back. He answered some but kept his course straight for his destination. I felt privileged, walking behind in his shadow.

The story of George Attla from 1958 to 2011 is the evolution of competitive sprint dog mushing, birthed out of village Native life.

In March 2011, we went into McCafferty's A Coffee House on Cushman Street where George began to share his story.

Back in those days, the world was a very big place. There was no village of Huslia/Ts'aateyhdenaade kk'onh Denh. Everyone lived in camps, following the game.

My father, George Attla Sr., was born in 1900 near Hughes on the Koyukuk River, a supply point for the Indian River gold fields. When he was only twelve, he developed a trapline from Hughes to what became Huslia. He evolved into the most successful trapper on the river and possibly in the state. He trapped marten, beaver, otter, lynx, mink, and fox. He traded mostly at Dominick Venetti's store in Koyukuk, John Summers' in Nulato, or at the trader's in Ruby.

After he and my mother Eliza married, he began fishing on the Yukon River. I was born in Koyukuk, August 8, 1933, the middle of eight children.

We lived four miles overland from today's Huslia at Cutoff. As the chief, my dad was

keenly aware of the need for schooling. He sent most of his own children to the mission school at Holy Cross. It was a long way away but he felt that there was no other choice.

During the 1930s, we did not feel the Depression. My mother both soured and canned wild vegetation. We put up anything that was edible. The only other vegetables and fruit in the Bush came in a can. To have a balanced diet, an Indian ate the whole moose: guts, cartilage, stomach fat, everything. In old times, some of the miners at Hughes starved to death because they didn't eat the whole moose.

When I was a kid, it was a different world. There was no welfare. We were responsible for the whole village and shared everything.

There were a lot of fox in those days and they brought five hundred dollars a pelt. As a trapper, my dad had two dog teams, using eight at a time. Every summer at our cabin, we caught a tremendous amount of fish. Dad cooked them mixed with store-bought cornmeal and tallow for the dogs. We didn't want for anything, but of course, we didn't know anything else either. We had three trap cabins as well as our summer cabin.

In our remote area, there was very little missionary activity. The mining at Wiseman was a long way north of us. Back then it was a big country.

Cutoff was built on the floodplain, so the territory wouldn't staff a school there. To have a school, everyone moved four miles downstream to a higher bank where they built today's Huslia. The territory had no funds to build the school, so the village did. Senator John Sackett's father owned the store.

Since the smallpox epidemic of 1835–1840, immigrants to Alaska have brought disease to a people who had no immunity. Whole families died off. I had an uncle who lived through that time. He was so busy burying people.

During the early 1900s, tuberculosis was everywhere. We lived in a very small trapping cabin. I don't know why we didn't get sick. Somehow my mother knew to keep everything clean. When we had company, she was always careful. Afterward, she boiled our dishes and clothes. Neither of my parents had any training in germs. When I was young I never heard of a steam bath until I started working on the steamboats. It was an Eskimo custom; so far as I knew, we didn't have it in the Interior. It was not a horrible thing for the white man to bring disease. It was too big a country for a man to leave if he got sick. Epidemics were an inevitable part of progress. It was bad times.

For me, there was nothing before the tuberculosis. When I was eight years old, we didn't speak anything but Indian, no English at all. One season when we were at one of our trapping cabins, I started having a problem with my leg. I didn't know that it was serious. We started playing to see who could run the farthest from the cabin, wearing no shoes and carrying a ball. I didn't know that I already had TB in my knee. When I woke up the next morning, my leg was drawn up like a bird's under my armpit; it was locked tight. No way could I walk. None of the family had ever seen anything like that and we had no crutch. My dad hooked up eight of his dogs and took me to the hospital in Tanana. (In those days, the trails were so well used that they were like a highway.)

All they spoke at the hospital was English and all I spoke was Indian. When my dad left me there, it was a disaster. I couldn't take it. Until then, I had not known I could get sick. For a month, I couldn't communicate with anyone; I cried the whole time. They gave me a crutch but I wouldn't let them do anything with me. Finally, they sent me back home. But my dad said, "We have to do something with your leg," and he sent me right back.

Over the next two years, they straightened my leg. I learned English on the fly from

my friends and from the nurses. I had a lot of white mamas. At that time, World War II was going on but as a kid, I didn't know it. However, we did eat horsemeat because there were shortages of everything. Due to the war, there was a push to develop medicines. There was no schooling for the kids because the staff had their hands full. But I remember how happy the nurses were when the war was over.

When I was ten, I returned home for about ten months, but my leg started crooking up again so I had to go back. This time, the doctor could not get any movement out of my knee at all. Every day, it kept bending farther up. My dad wasn't a man to say, "Well, that's the way you're going to be all the rest of your life." No, if there was a way to fix it, he was going to find it.

When I was fourteen, he took me to St. Joseph's Hospital in Fairbanks. They arranged for me to go to Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital in Sitka. They'd never dealt there with TB of the knee. I was given large doses of streptomycin. At that time, medicine wasn't advanced. They did a lot of experimenting with Native people, but they were trying to save my life. Finally, they fused my knee. I stayed there for two and half years, until I was seventeen.

When I first arrived at Edgecumbe, I was harassed because of my poor English. I learned to read and write there and got what little education I have.

By the time I returned home, I could speak English okay but I could not do anything like the other guys my age could. They were all good trappers, and they could get around the country really good. As a kid, I'd missed running and playing and now, as a youngster, I couldn't be master of my own land. I was pretty bitter, with a chip on my shoulder. Since I was eight, I had not fit into any place; it was a pretty confusing way to start life.

During my second or third stay in the Tanana hospital, we used to fight a lot. I could beat anyone there. I was pretty tough. However, to straighten my leg out periodically, I'd have to lie in bed for a month while I was in traction. When I was helpless, the kids would pester me a lot and I couldn't get back at them. I'd vow when I was free, I'd settle the score with those guys. As soon as I could, I picked a fight with one of them that I'd laid out before--but darned if he didn't whip my butt. As young as I was, I realized then that I had to stay in shape. I could not lie in bed, get up, and whip anyone. It was one of the most valuable lessons of my life.

The second time I was in Edgecumbe, while confined to my bed, I started exercising my arms. There was no excuse that I couldn't exercise my upper body.

Before I got sick, my dad had a birch sledge hammer; every morning, even at eight years old, I would go out and swing that heavy hammer. For me, fitness has always been critical, like religion is to some others.

When I returned home in 1950, my dad, knowing that I loved to hunt, told me to go moose hunting that fall. I took my thirty-thirty and went out, but he didn't tell me when to stop. By the time he did, I had six moose. We lived about fifteen miles from Huslia. And man, I had meat hanging all over the place. I was wondering what he was going to do with all that meat. After freezeup, he told me to haul it down to the village, adding, "They need it down there."

My people have been trapping for hundreds of years, farming the land. Fish and Game began telling my dad that his trap had to be twenty-five feet away from a beaver house. I couldn't believe it. Always calm and peaceable, he began experimenting with setting underwater snares. He perfected it, and then set one underwater near the submerged house. His trap on land was twenty-five feet away from the beaver's house while his underwater

snare was definitely out of sight. He said that human beings were no different from any other animal he trapped; he had to learn how they operated and how to outsmart them.

When I was young, after I couldn't get around on my leg, my dad told me to go break in two dogs of his litter of six. I did. He kept four black ones but he actually gave me the other two, brown dogs. But by the time I returned from Edgumbe, the dogs were already old. I told my dad that I was going to hook up my dogs and go to town, but I admitted that I did not know the way from the camp to the village. (There are some huge lakes in that country. Crossing a treeless, frozen lake, blown over with snow, is a good way to get lost.) But my father said, "Just put your dog, Buster, in the lead. He'll get you there," and that's what happened. I learned then that once you take a dog over the trail, he never forgets it.

At Edgumbe I used to work in the nurses' quarters as a janitor for seventy-five cents an hour; that was a lot of money then. So I knew about working for wages. At home, I couldn't earn a living like my peers. After a year at home, I went to Fairbanks where I washed dishes in restaurants. But I could only live like that so long, and I returned home.

Back in 1939 in Cutoff, Jimmy Huntington, the original "Huslia Hustler," had placed fourth in a tough, eighty-mile sled dog race in Fairbanks.

After I'd been home a while in the 1950s, I saw guys going to dogsled races in Fairbanks and Anchorage. Back then, before snowmachines, people were close to their dogs; they knew them. So when a person like me had trouble with his dogs, there was always someone in the village who knew what to do. I had teachers all over.

After trying a few races as a junior musher, I won a race in Huslia. I wanted to race in Anchorage or Fairbanks but there was no way to get the financing. Even if there had been money available, I had no credit. I was still just a kid.

We had good dogs in Huslia, probably the best in the state, but we didn't know it. In 1954, Raymond Paul from Galena won both the Fur Rondy World Championship Sled Dog Race and the Open North American, but when he raced at our spring carnival in Hughes, he came in fourth! A light turned on in our heads about the real quality of our dogs; wow! (It was like as if now Egil Ellis came up to Hughes and lost against us.) We didn't know! So ten of our mushers started competing. Jimmy Huntington was the first. He made a clean sweep of the Fur Rondy World Championship Sled Dog Race and the North American. The next year, Bergman Sam came in and he won the North American.

My team belonged to the village but Cue Bifelt had the majority of the dogs, four of them. The rest were my brother's, Steven Attla, and my brother in law's, Georgie Frank, as well as my dad's; they were the best of the best. Before I ever won, my dogs had already been trained and were winners. When I began, the only dog I owned was my leader, Tennessee.

The elders I learned from were Bobby Vint, Edwin Simon, Sammy Sam, and Sidney Huntington but probably my best teacher was my dad. However, like most kids, I thought my dad didn't know anything. I had a lot of teachers; I could go in anyone's house and they could tell me how to straighten out a dog problem.

In 1958, I decided to try the Fur Rondy World Championship Sled Dog Race in Anchorage with the same winning team that Bergman Sam had used, the village dogs. I entered as an unknown. The first day, I came in first. However, the next morning, I woke up with not only my leg stiff, but I was stiff all over. I had pushed myself hard to come in second; I was too young to know how to pace myself. The second day, I took it much easier, coming in second. But the last day, as a rookie, I crossed the finish line first and won the Fur

Rondy World Championship.

In my world, winning the Rondy was quite an accomplishment and that was the first race I had ever won. With the prize money of \$2,500, I felt pretty goldarned rich. I bought a whole bunch of ice cream and a case of whiskey. (Yesterday at the North American, I had a guy tell me, "I remember when you won your first race and boy, when you got home, we ate a lot of ice cream!") So when I got back home, we celebrated by having that party at my house. The old, great racer Bobby Vint was sitting across from me at the party. He said, "Kid, you didn't prove anything to me. Those dogs you had were already trained and they had been driven by somebody else."

What he said stuck in my mind and it made me hungry. Every winter after that, I trained dogs--but every year, I knew they weren't yet good enough. The great thing was that I kept saying to myself that I could do it again.

I watched and I admired Bergman Sam's training. In those days, people relied on fear to make a dog run, but not Bergman. He tried new approaches, like using crinkling paper for a goad. I realized then that there must be other ways than inciting fear, a better way to train dogs. He got my mind going, searching for creative training methods.

In 1962, when I was training a new batch of dogs, I realized, "Holy Cow, these dogs are champions, my very own dogs!" It had taken me four years but I had done it.

I returned to the Fur Rondy World Championship Sled Dog Race and this time, I won with my own team. Afterward I did the same thing: I brought ice cream and booze home to celebrate. During the party, Bobby Vint reached over and he shook my hand. He congratulated me: "By God, you are a dog man!"

Man, for four years, I'd worked to hear that! Eventually I had gotten back at him. But I began to wonder how many times I could do it again. Once you win, you know how to do it and you know what it takes. I figured then that I could do it again. Like today, Egil Ellis made it look easy to win the North American because he knows what he is doing. He was also competing with people who have the best dog education in the world.

Back in the 1950s, Huslia had developed dogs both with good looks and with speed. As I crossed my team with Gareth Wright's Aurora Huskies, my team developed. From that breeding, I got my first really super team in 1972. When I was almost forty I went Outside for the first time. That first winter on the road, I went to every race. I was guaranteed five hundred dollars just to have my name in the race, and they were doubly glad that I was Athabaskan. The problem was that I also had to consistently produce.

Horace "Holy" Smoke of Stevens Village, who won the North American during 1951 to 1953, was tremendously supportive of me. Horace was quite a character. I don't think he ever knew a down day; he was always smiling.

During the 1970s, I was on the road all winter, pretty much dominating the sport. Every winter for ten years, I mushed all the way from Alaska across Canada to New York and down into the Midwest. Syracuse, New York, had a big dog race. The sport was also popular in the Midwest. You could go to a twenty-thousand dollar race every weekend. In the late 1970s, Tesoro became my sponsor and I had to earn that sponsorship. By then, things were beginning to change.

When I started out, there was no such thing as racing sled dogs, breeding, and sales. I started all that. When I got really good in the 1970s, I started promoting myself because I had to have a steady income. Every weekend, it was like gambling with my dogs but I was proven to have the best breed around. In 1977, Carl Huntington won his second Rondy with

my brother Alfred's dog, Trot. That's all it took. I bought the dog for \$2,500 and she became a key leader in my team for years.

About that time, people like Harvey Drake, Charlie Champaine, and Harris Dunlap, the non-Natives, began getting into the circuit.

In my day, my biggest competitor was a quiet, very humble man— a great racer— Doc [Roland] Lombard. Back then the purse was developed. Selling myself, becoming a great sports figure, like a Mohammed Ali, I had to keep beating my competitors every year. I must've done a good job. Even today at the Fur Rendezvous, they pay me to come down to promote the sport. Somebody had to do it.

Every year, it wasn't a problem to earn a quarter of a million dollars, which was even more back then. I loved competition so much that I'd sell my best dog breed. I had no problem telling someone how to beat me. I loved the competition. It made it fun. If you beat me, I'd try to figure out how to beat you, to get you back. I liked being on the edge. The sport helped me focus the anger of my youth into a constructive, winning way of life. It was exciting to challenge myself all the time. I was a public figure promoting an emerging sport in Alaska. Sports writers referred to my famous "Attla kick," my energetic, fused leg. It was such a great time; people came in from the villages, promoted by one person's winning. And of course, dogsled racing was also very popular in the states.

In 1979, I caught up with Doc Lombard and I took my eighth world championship title. By 1981, I was pushing to get my tenth, to surpass Lombard and become the greatest dog musher of all time.

I was also looking at all the young mushers like Roxy Wright-Champaine, Gareth Wright's daughter, as well as Lester Erhart's sons, Chuck and Curtis, and I began to feel old. I told Lester, "All these years, you told me you were my friend, but now, you send out your sons to whip my butt."

In 1982, when I was nearly fifty, I won my tenth world championship. By 1984 with Lombard out of the picture, some said I was king.

In sprint racing today, we don't have a figure who is turning on the public enough to compete with the popularity of the long-distance races. The Quest and the Iditarod have overtaken the stardom of sprint racing, which is now a second-class sport. Long-distance racing was born from sprint racing. In 1973, although I was one of the first entrants in the Iditarod and placed fourth in the race, I had no idea the 1,100-mile Iditarod would some day overshadow the Open North American.

In 1970, *Reader's Digest* did a story on me. As a result, a movie, *Spirit of the Wind*, was made and released in 1979. It is still shown sometimes at the Rondy and at the Open North American.

In 1972, I wrote my first book with Bella Levorsen: *George Attla, Everything I Know About Training and Racing Sled Dogs*. In 1993, Lewis Freedman wrote, *George Attla: The Legend of the Sled Dog Trail*, republished in 2001 as *Spirit of the Wind*.

In the 1970s and 1980s, we took in my brother's and sister's kids. At one time, I had twelve boys at North Pole but I never had any problem with any of them. This went on for years. I couldn't take all those boys with me on the road so I left my oldest son, sixteen-year-old Gary, in charge. I left them a truck and a Greer tank with five hundred gallons of gas and grocery money. When I came back, they still had some gas and money left. They never got into any trouble. They were taking care of my hundred-dog kennel, particularly the young pups. That couldn't be done with youngsters today.

One of the boys who grew up with my children was Marvin Kokrines of Tanana. His father, Henry and I were close friends but he died about 1972. I became a surrogate father to his kids, including musher Marvin Kokrines. After he was grown, Marvin taught me one of my most valuable lessons. One year when he and I were competing, I thought I could relax, not push myself quite so hard. I was having a good time. When I race, I always listen to my radio to know who's where. When it was too late, holy smokes, I realized Marvin was only two positions behind me and I still had four miles to go. I tried pushing my dogs but it was too late then. I learned never to underestimate anyone. Big mistake.

The oldest of my eight children, Gary, is in his fifties today. In 1981 while I was sprint racing, he ran the Iditarod and he was named Rookie of the Year. One of my other sons, George III, and I both competed in the Fort St. John race; I won and he came in second.

However, in 1984 when I was fifty-one, I was running out of gas. I ran my worst race that year; my hunger was gone and my drive was flat. But when a young musher, Eddy Streeper, had just won the world championship, he added insult to injury by saying, "George Atla is washed up and he should retire." I got my edge back. He was disrespectful and I had to prove him wrong. When I got back in the game, Charlie Champaine said, "George had to do it for himself; he loves it."

Although I was determined to keep going, by the mid 1990s, I told my sponsor I had had enough. I didn't want to do it anymore. I retired with ten world championships, eight North American titles, and nine International Sled Dog Association Unlimited Class medals. For three decades, I'd placed in front of the pack. However it was such a relief to retire. For thirty-one years I'd had to think of my public image and be on the cutting edge. Thirty-one years of that life had required a lot of sacrifice from my family. But until I was almost sixty, I was in pretty good shape.

Today, it bothers me that in twenty years, a life-long Alaskan hasn't won the sprint races. Even though he lives in Willow today, Egil Ellis is from Sweden. Canadians and Europeans have taken over sprint racing. Someone needs to change that.

When I was growing up, my dad used huge, heavy dogs for freighting, not for speed. We didn't have good gear either. They used to pile all us kids in a fourteen-foot sled to go to the village for Christmas. I used to watch Blackie, our wheel dog, move. There was such a huge load in the basket. Blackie would pull so hard. You could feel it.

The world today is completely foreign to me. It isn't the village days when we lived with our dogs. Not that many people today are gifted with communicating with their dogs. Education and the fast way of life get in the way. In early human history, I think people could communicate with the animals without speaking, just with their body language. I can tell you what my dogs are thinking and they know how I am feeling. I am that close with my animals. The more education we get, the more we're losing touch with reality. Where's the human race going?

Years ago, I tried to help one of today's competitors understand his dogs. I spent a month with him but I couldn't get my message across to him. I said, "You're too well educated. You don't understand me so how are you going to understand your dogs?"

In the early days of competitive mushing, a lot of Natives used to race. If you look at the record, there were ten different winners in a period of ten years. After a man won, everyone wanted to be seen with the champion. They'd take the winner to the bar and ply him with drinks. They didn't realize that they were destroying him. When I saw that, it wasn't

going to happen to me.

Every time I won an award, I thanked my family. They protected me both privately and publicly. They took care of me.

Every spring at the Koyukuk River Championship Dog Race, the villages of Hughes, Huslia, and Allakaket/Alatna host the festivities. April third through sixth, 2008, my family and friends honored me with the fifty-year anniversary, celebrating when I won the 1958 Fur Rendezvous World Championship. Of course without Huslia's support, none of that in 1958 would have happened.

In 2010, I started racing dogs again. Every now and then, I get the will to run a race. In April, I won the 2011 Koyukuk River Championship spring carnival race, dedicated to my mentor, the late Bergman Sam. But I didn't have a big problem winning and I wondered, "Hey, what's wrong with you guys?"

The only way for me to understand the dog of today is to train seriously, so I got back into it on a huge level. Today, there's all this modern equipment: global positioning systems, *gol dang!* After a run, I come home and print all this stuff up from my GPS about what kind of a run I had! It reminds me that in my dad's day, he would said, "Never believe what you hear and only half of what you see." I can look at my dogs and feel that they are running really well. But if I print out the results, they aren't really running that well. The guys on top of the race circuit are the ones using this equipment. But those who don't and have been trying to win for years, they fail because they won't use these machines. They can teach a person a lot. It's not what you see but what your equipment is telling you that matters.

Theoretically, I am training my twenty-five-year-old granddaughter, Georgia Attla, but I think she is really training me. We just got new dogs. She's a worker, which for today's kids is kind of unusual. She just moved to Huslia a month ago because she wants to know what Grampa's been doing all his life. When I give her a job, she does it and then she's looking for another.

I'm a cancer survivor. In 2008, I had open-heart surgery. Since my right knee has never worked, throughout my life that hip took all the wear. So in 2009, I had to have hip replacement. Now I'm back in shape and at seventy-eight, I am running fifteen dogs again.

I believe in the benefit sports gives to youth, channeling their energy and aggression into a winning lifestyle. Harlow Robinson, a runner, and Chris Myers of Anchorage wanted their children involved in sports. They also noticed that there was no Sports Hall of Fame in Alaska. For years, they talked about it and tried to raise funds. To celebrate Alaska sportsmen in the new millennium, they gathered articles published throughout the twentieth century and put them online in 2000. Finally in 2007, they were able, beginning with me, to start inducting athletes, healthy heroes. The first class of those athletes represented those who, throughout all of the state's history, were Alaska's best in sports and included Susan Butcher, Reggie Joule, Tommy Moe, Scott Gomez, and Kristen Thorsness. On September 25, 2008, I cut the ribbon on the new Alaska Sports Hall of Fame inductee exhibit at the Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport. I stressed the importance of the Hall to Alaska youth, especially rural Alaskans. Today the display is at the new Anchorage Museum.

I wrote the foreword for the new book, *Alaska Sports Hall of Fame*. With my anger, had it not been for dog racing, I might have wound up in a very different place. But I focused on a winner's mindset, I controlled my emotions, and I stayed in top shape with an absolute commitment to give my best. A contender must aim for the top but also be able to

take a beating. Opposition can teach a person a lot.

In 2007, the seventy-six-year-old Fur Rondy World Championship Sled Dog Race was on the verge of phasing out. When I went to Anchorage that year to be inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame, *Anchorage Daily News* columnist Beth Bragg wrote, “He owns the Rondy, but don’t ask him for one more.” She continued, “the man who ruled sprint mushing back when sprint racing ruled Alaska...Attla is the most accomplished musher in Alaska history...At seventy-four, he doesn’t look like a champion athlete anymore but then, the rail-thin musher never did. Attla says he’s too old to spend three straight days driving a powerful team of huskies along city streets at speeds approaching twenty-five miles per hour where it’s not unusual to see sleds tip on sharp corners...Attla said, “There’s a limit to what you can do...I’ve got a lot of aches and pains where I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t done it all.” She continued, “Cry us a river. Aches and pains didn’t keep Attla from competing in a two-day New Year’s race in Huslia, where he drove a dozen dogs twelve and half miles each day. He finished in about forty-one minutes each day— fast enough to win the race, set a speed record for the trail, and beat both his son and his grandson. There’s still some hustle in the Huslia Hustler.”

Indeed, forty-eight-year-old John Baker of Kotzebue, the 2011 Iditarod winner, said of Attla, “It was incredible for him to stay on top of his game for so long. We still use his great line of dogs today.” Fifty-year-old, Dr. Arleigh Reynolds of Salcha, 2011 Winner of the Yukon River Ruby Marine Open Championship Race, said, “Attla is a FIERCE competitor. When he was almost unbeatable, there were all-time top mushers, probably never again to be repeated.” Thirty-one-year-old Thomas Moore of Tanana, remembered, “In 1999 when I raced the Rondy, three days of the fastest 25 miles your dogs can do, George told me, “Don’t pressure the dogs, just let them run.” Fifty-six-year-old Marvin Kokrines of Tanana and North Pole, said, “Other mushers complain about a lot. Although George may be blind in one eye and lame in one leg, he doesn’t cry about it. *That* inspires me.”

What began with Jimmy Huntington in 1939 and now with John Baker, bringing village mushers back into the headlines, Attla summed up, “At almost eighty, I look back on four decades of carrying the torch. To youth like my granddaughter, Georgia Attla, and those inspired by the Alaska Sports Hall of Fame, I pass the torch to discipline your mind and your body, to give your best. If I can do it, so can you.”