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Red Dog

The Sled Dog

Words Natalie Langmann Photos Shaun Hughes





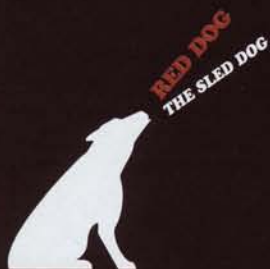
Red Dog stood up on all fours, arched his back, and shook off the winter morning breeze. There was a different smell in the air; something new was blowing into Clearwater, B.C. Red Dog could not put his fine senses on what was making his nose twitch.

Then again, how could a dog foresee a group of international snowboarders about to drive into his town and change up his way of mountain life?

Shaun Hughes has been shooting photos for the past couple of years and this season he wanted to do something completely different, yet totally Canadian. His whole scope on this road trip was to strengthen the Westbeach International team and to do so he was about to take them to a back-country cabin for four days. Shaun's idea was to shoot the riders snowboarding, snowmobiling, snow skating, and for a whole different angle, dog sledding. It had been difficult to find a dog sled company that would work with snowboarders, until Shaun came across one out of Clearwater, B.C. He had spoke with Steve and Tannis Mullen, the owners and operators of Alaskan Husky Adventures, and they seemed keen to experience something totally different from their usual tours. Just to make sure, Shaun forewarned them that they would be spending the next couple of days with a group that would "probably" like to drink a lot. Tannis Mullen shrugged that off to say that the guys would have a hard time keeping up with her. So the operators seemed pretty cool, but what would it be like grouping together two Europeans and two French Canadians?

THE CAST

Enter Danny Wheeler, Gabe Authier, Jamie Baker and Marc Andre Tarte. Meeting up outside Westbeach's Vancouver HQ, introductions were made and acquaintances were reacquainted with the crew being split into separate trucks for the drive north. After losing Marc Andre shortly after leaving town it was ironic that, a few hours later, Jamie and Marc were the only two that took the correct turn off onto the highway. Shaun, followed by Gabe and Danny, "enjoyed" the long tour of Cache Creek back around to Clearwater. The experience would have been a lot worse if within this time they had not found a restaurant selling Poutine. When Gabe, Danny, and Shaun arrived in Clearwater hours later than anticipated, they expected to see Marc Andre and Jamie at the bar drinking, but of course they were nowhere in sight. Those two had driven straight through town and had headed out into the wilderness, only to have to back track hours later. After a full day of driving the group passed out, wondering what the next few days would be like together. When silence fell their minds turned to dreams of Husky dogs gone wild.



You might think that these dogs were giving Danny Wheeler props for his style, but the fact is that they were probably just thinking about food, peeing on things, and sniffing other dogs' arses.

This had been a busy winter for Red Dog and the rest of the sled dog gang. They had been out running trails and tours with different people from all different walks of life. Red Dog was a proud member of an elite dog sled team, named the Alaskan Husky Adventures. Back in Red Dog's fine glory he had raced the world famous Iditarod. He remembered racing as if it were yesterday. There were many days and nights of blazing through hours of dark and hunger bitten blizzards. The wind would be gnawing into his paws; his legs would be pounding through snow banks, wind drifts, and frozen rivers. He had pulled his pack through desolate terrain, charged up gnarly side hills to cross over jagged mountains and unknown plateaus. Red Dog's swift intelligence had made him the lead dog of the pack. He was born to be a leader, since his ancestry traced back to the early days of Nome, Alaska. Red Dog had heard about the arrival of a different breed of sledder; he wasn't sure if he was going to like what he was about to endure. He decided to lay low in the back of the truck as it made its way up to the snowline of Raft Mountain.



Steve Mullen opened up each dog kennel on the truck and started to rig up the dogs. Red Dog was frantic. The future of sports was glaring him in the face. There were five big beasts in front of him, with steam blazing out their side vents and growling at the dogs with throttles full of hysteria. These monsters of blackness were blasting out seven hundred cc's of energy that mocked the dogs; as if to say they could be louder, they could climb higher, and at greater speeds. To make Red Dog and the gang a little more fearful, they seemed to have minds of their own. Behind the five machines were five snowboarders. To Red Dog the boys looked strange with long skinny boards attached to their backs. With all his might Red Dog tried to pull ahead, but Steve had dug the team's snow hook deep into the trail. The teams would not move until Steve and Tannis pulled the plug.

Just to make things a bit stranger for the dogs, there was one snowboarder that had more adrenalin than they had ever seen. Marc Andre Tarte was bouncing from one sled to another, then one truck to another, flipping and spinning and burning more energy than ought to have been humanly possible. Red Dog turned his head and barked to the pack to watch out for the laughing guy with the mullet. Prince, a little white husky from the "rock star" litter, knew what to do. He lifted his leg and peed down the side of Marc Andre's snowboard pants. The dogs howled out in laughter and with that Marc Andre and this dog's friendship were cemented for life. "All Right!" Steve called out to let the dogs know to start up. With that, the three sled teams and the group of snowboarders started up the trail and headed into the mountains.

There was a foot of fresh that morning, so the day was spent burning around on snowmobiles, scoping out this newly found zone. The dogs spent their day near the cabin, while the boys searched for the right areas to build kickers. Having scoped the area the boys headed back to the cabin. Steve and Tannis had loaded up the dog sleds with enough food to feed these boys for weeks. This was what they needed because after a full day of playing they were starving! After a great feed of organic veggies and salmon, the boys were about to hit the sack. The one thing stopping them was the howling of the dogs - Red Dog making the most noise of all. Bedtime did not come fast for these boys, as they still had to feed thirty-three hounds. Marc Andre was the first to run to the door, he had a special bond with these canines. Gabe Authier grew up on a horse farm, so this was nothing new to him, but for Danny and Jamie this was something they had never experienced in their lives.

BOOTERS

The next morning the boys rose early with plans of building two kickers, hitting them, and dog sledding. After the sun shone through, Gabe, Danny and Marc hit the higher jump. Gabe was the first to go, and busted a huge backside 180 over the jump. As soon as he hit the ground, cement caught him. The snow had got cold over night and had warmed up with the morning sun. With a hefty concussion, the only thing Gabe could figure out was that his girlfriend was back home in Whistler. But where in the world was he?! Danny and Marc spun a couple of Cab 540's and 720's off the jump, since it was too perfect to give up. The ground would not let go though, so with Gabe's concussion and thereafter Danny's hurt elbow, the boys had to let it go. When the cards aren't playing your way, do what these boys did... pack up and burn back to the cabin to take the dogs out for a long run!

While Steve, Tannis, and Tim rigged the dogs up, the boys stood back. The dogs were excited. They had seen the boys ripping down the mountains on their snowboards, and now they wanted their time to run through the snow. Tree runs in Canada are epic: firs grow in abundance, and days can be spent blasting through tight trees on snowboards, but on a dog sled?



Marc Andre Tarte only span off this kicker to shake the dog piss off his leg.





Gabe Authier, shortly before temporarily ruining his short term memory with a particularly nasty slam.

Red Dog had his eyes on Danny Wheeler. He had noticed Danny's free but strong snowboard style, and wanted to teach him a lesson. Red Dog wanted to prove that being on his dog team wouldn't come easy for someone who made snowboarding look effortless. He knew the exact corner where he would hit the trail so tight that the sled basket would cartwheel over and send Danny flying.

So Danny was sitting in his sled, filming, and enjoying the nice cruise. The next thing he knew his jacket was being ripped apart, his arm got wrapped around a tree, and his camera was buried deep into the snow. Red Dog triumphantly pulled the team through the smallest corner. It took all of Tim's might to get the team to stop. "What in the world?" thought Danny; he could not understand why he was sent out here to film with such uncivilized beasts. Danny turned his back, marched up to the cabin and spent the rest of the day happily designing graphics for his pro model. What Danny did not know was that Red Dog had sensed Danny's fear and had used that to ignite the fire under his seat.

Over the next few days the boys were busy filming and shooting photos around the backside Raft. They tandemed the single-track daily, but this was new for the dogs. It took the expert skill of Steve, Tannis, and Tim to get them around to the other side. When the dogs raced into the new area, they were blown away with what they saw. Jamie, Gabe, and Danny dropped some cliffs while Gabe and Marc Andre got towed up to the cabin by snowmobile to jib the wall ride. After getting some "good old-fashioned" snowboarding in the boys wanted to hit the lower jump they had spent the previous days building. The lower was a jump to quarter pipe that somehow now turned into a huge rock. The frustration of building two jumps to uncovering rocks and cemented landing was enough to drive some snowboarders mad. Fortunately the dog sledding was something that the boys knew no matter how bad the conditions ever got the dogs would be there to fire up and get the sled going.

CROWN ROYAL

After days with only each other's company, there was one night where three of the dirty and unshaven boys decided to break the "no going back down the valley" rule. They had drunk all the wine, and needed to get some alcohol. The only way back to civilization was to snowmobile down to the parking lot, get in Gabe's truck and drive to the liquor store. Gabe was the first to instigate the late night excursion, as snowmobiling at night is an amazing experience. Danny and Jamie were fairly new to sledding and to say they had mastered it would be a lie, but when the options were sledding off in the dark to get Crown Royal beer or going to bed, it's obvious what the boys chose.

A few hours later, Gabe came back to the cabin laughing his head off. He must have seen some different styles of sledding that night! Jamie, on the other hand, was prouder than ever to come back sporting his brand new Corona Hockey Jersey. He truly felt the Canadian pride, since "all Canadians grow up playing hockey, right?" He had also learnt on this trip that there wasn't one drink better than good old Crown Royal, and with help from the bottle he stayed up the whole night, reflecting on the past few days. They had stomped cliffs, sunk deep into fresh powder lines, busted a few sleds off jumps, and dialed the ability to drive a dog team. But it wasn't until the last day that the boys got to see what a man and his dog sledding team can really do.

Red Dog was proud of the fact that he had scared Danny. Fear was something Red Dog did not like and fear was what drove Red Dog. He had proved to the boys that it was not easy driving a sled team. He had seen the boys manoeuvre their snowmobiles around with their body weight, jump from side to side. He had also observed the use of their bodies to steer their snowboards down the hill. The theory behind driving his team is similar, except it was counter steering that these boys needed to learn. Pulling away from a curb, instead of leaning into one, is the technique needed.





Surrounded by hungry dogs, the only thing that the canine-phobic Mr. Wheeler could think of was to balance on this roof till they went away.



Dog wasn't finished showing the boys what he could achieve. He barked forth to Steve, hoping that Steve would understand what it was he was saying.

The bond between man and dog is strong, and Steve understood Red Dog. He looked over at the boys and he too wanted to show them what these dogs could achieve. Steve was not thinking about snowboarding, as he had been looking up the slope instead of down. He could not climb any of the lines the boys had made and he wanted to take his dog team up the front face, above the cabin. With five jaws hanging open, Steve took hold of the gang line and drove his dogs up high into the mountains. Half way up, the dogs wanted to turn. The force of gravity was strongly pushing their bodies back down the fall line. Steve charged his dogs to direct Red Dog straight back up the hill again. The dogs knew that if Steve had the strength to push them upward and onward, they would keep charging full speed ahead.

At that moment in time, all sports became as one. With snowboards on their backs, the boys tandemed the sleds up the hill. They dropped each other off, to do snowboard runs and to race against the dogs, and the trip ended with dog sledding snowboard style as the boys jibbed the whole way down.

After spending an insane four days in the backcountry, Jamie and Danny decided the only thing to do was to take a limousine up to Whistler, for the Ski and Snowboard Festival. Danny was happy to be back in civilization, showered, and back on the phone to his girl. Jamie, on the other hand, took the saying "hair of the dog" a little too seriously with his passion for Crown Royal, and managed to find himself kicked out of most bars in Whistler. Gabe placed fifth in the Ripzone Superpipe Invitational. The big rain cloud that hovered over the West Coast started moving away, and Gabe went back to filming with The Gathering. As for that Marc Andre, he spun himself into first place at this year's Ripzone Invitational Big Air. Yep, the last time anybody saw that boy he was hanging upside down from a tree in the Whistler Village Square. Somebody thought he was trying to say something about Vodka and Red Bull. We all know he was talking about Red Dog, though.

TO BOOK AN ALASKAN HUSKY ADVENTURE

CHECK OUT STEVE AND TANNIS' WEB SITE:
WWW.DOGSLEDDINGADVENTURES.COM
 CHECK OUT MORE RIDER INFO AND THE WESTBEACH CLOTHING LINE:
WWW.WESTBEACH.COM

MAUN HUGHES STILL RESIDES IN WHISTLER. WHEN HE'S NOT OUT SHOOTING PHOTOS, HE'S TRYING TO TEACH HUDSON TO SNOWMOBILE. ALL NAMES IN THIS STORY REMAIN TRUE, EXCEPT FOR RED DOG, WHICH HAS BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT HIS IDENTITY.

