

Dog Sled Racing begun in 1924 in McCall with Warren Brown



With 1924 barely in, Warren Brown, coming 12, had begun dog-racing. For some time he'd had a shepherd named Rex that he drove to school as soon as the snow came. Unharnessed, Rex would like outside to wait for noon dismissal. Or he trotted off and returned at noon and again after school to take Warren home.

Ted Geelan staged the first dog races on a course a mile long between Lardo and McCall. Warren won his first honors driving Rex over this course, finishing in four minutes. Only 15 seconds behind him came Bunny Hoff, aged five, described as "about the same size in all directions." Along the way Bunny fell off three times but his dog Tip always waited for him.

The next races required two dogs to a sled, but no boy owned more than one, so in each team one dog had a strange driver. Warren drove Rex with another dog, but time was not nearly as good, a fair indication that dog-boy relations matter.

The following year competition had sharpened and Warren had to be satisfied with third place.

By 1926 the races had spread to cover two days and the attracted considerable outside interest. Snow was four feet deep on the level this February but fans from Boise and southern Idaho did not let this discourage them. One train load of sports coming for the Winter festival had their liquor aboard, and somehow missed the whole train. Back when one fan came to the surface to say thoughtfully, "We must be just about getting into McCall."

For two months Warren had been taking his dogs out on the frozen lake every night after school. He worked them until they had all the edge he knew how to put on. He thought he had a chance to win this year, but on the first day of the races, a professional dogteam man, Smokey Gaston, showed up. In the first lap Gaston took the lead and held it with seeming ease into the third. At that point Warren's hard work began to show. His dogs surged ahead to win by a margin so narrow- 10 seconds- that the judges at first gave Gaston the victory. On a recount they changed their decision. Eighth-grader Brown had done 10 miles in 48.20.

This gave Warren the Ted Geelan cup and first prize of \$300. And it was announced that if his mother and his first teacher, Clarence Oylear, would relent about his missing school, he would go to Ashton, in southeastern Idaho, for the much publicized races to be staged there 12 days later.

Except for William Deinhard, one of Carl Brown's good friends, 13 year old Warren went alone by train with his dogs to the town at the foot of the Tetons, six hundred miles from home. Officially Deinhard was representing the McCall Chamber of Commerce, but he was always close at hand if the boy should need help or counsel.

Warren's team consisted of dogs of several colors and breeds, from the blooded pincer police to the plain mongrel. His lead was a 90-pound half Airedale, half red Irish setter named Tuck, a wonderfully keen dog who responded instantly to signals and never fought the other dogs. So willing were all of them that Warren had to keep the sled tied to something while he put on their harness. And once ready, he had only to call "All right, Tuck," and they were off. He used no whip, only his voice. Carl had provided his sled with one special feature, runners of bandsaw strips. These took a fine polish and resisted scratches from dirt and gravel.

The 22nd of February opened in Ashton in spring-like warmth. On the main street 16 dog sled teams lined up to start two minutes apart on the 15-mile course. The sidelines were crowded with 10,000 spectators, described by one newspaper as including "eastern bankers rubbing shoulders with lumberjacks from the Payette."

The sun came out, shone fitfully, retired. Clouds turned the sky gray. Before the first team has half way along, a blizzard struck. Snow drove into the faces of the spectators, but they stayed- it was too exciting.

The race took two hours, and in that time 10 dogsled records were made and broken. Warren Brown was not to make the best time- best was for Howard Salley, a veteran musher driving Labrador retrievers. Warren's nondescript dogs that he had trained himself came in 7 minutes and 42 seconds behind Salley.

But it was the 95-pound, freckle-faced Warren at the finish, against a backdrop of excited faces and snow flecked fur collars, that the newspaper pictures played up.

"..... Leading one dog and guiding the sleigh with the other hand. Several yards for the finish line the dog he was leading started as though to break through the crowd. This caused, the lad to let loose the sleigh handle. Old Tuck, the leader, turned as if to inquire. Brown yelled at him, "Get on there Tuck! I can handle this dog!" Old Tuck straightened in the harness and led the team across the line while the boy raced across with the unhitched dog."

Pictures and stories appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, the Chicago Sunday Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the National Dog Journal, the American Boy, and others.

Warren and his dogs and Bill Deinhard set out for home. At Nampa when they left the train, a hundred people, including old friends of his parents, were there to congratulate him. Women insisted on kissing him-"I had to take it," he told his mother later. By the time he reached home letters and wires were pouring in. From former employees of Carl's, from the bankers, from families that had moved away.

Sometimes several members of the household wrote in the same letter. Ex-governor D. W. Moore, who had witnessed the race, sent word that it was the best in Ashton history.

To anybody in McCall, second place for Warren in such an unequal match was the same as a victory. Ida had sent him a wire of congratulations and had met him at Nampa. Carl paid cheerfully for the meat and milk the dogs consumed, and for harness and express, but he was probably too rigid with pride to say much when the boy came home.

Warren seemed unaffected by attention. How he felt about contending against experienced dogsled men and coming out with credit had to be surmised. The one bit of show-off he allowed himself was to slip under his father's plate at breakfast the morning after his return the sum of \$750. After all, his father had put out cash for a number of things. Of course Carl made him keep the money, and so frugal and hard-working did he continue that by the time he was ready for college he had saved enough to keep him there two years.

What Aunt Harland thought of Warren's feat was no secret- she told all who would listen. Besides she had a sort of stake herself in the race. She had regularly baked the dogs' training "bread" a mixture of horsemeat, vegetables and cracked corn. Warren had taken to Ashton a 2 ½ foot stack of this bread baked in slabs as big as the oven would admit.

The following year Warren went again to Ashton, but now professional competition had become so harsh that the best he could make was fourth place. First went to a former Alaskan government musher with a team of Irish setters.

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