

SPECIAL PROFILE

Driven by pure passion

GARY ROLFE IS 38 and one of the few men in history to consistently and successfully make solo expeditions, with Huskies, to some of the world's most isolated wilderness locations.

In May 2002 he successfully completed his third consecutive Arctic Ocean expedition then in February he completed another successful solo journey over the frozen Mackenzie River. Temperatures fell to a debilitating -51°C.

Gary is driven by his pure passion for working sled dogs and here he gives us an insight into his life and how it all started.

London's E17 doesn't see many Polar Bears but that's where I was born, in Walthamstow, before spending my school years in Cornwall.

My mother is Romany, my great-grandfather's bare fist-fighting career left him with damaged, later amputated fingers on both hands and my father's uncle Jack was, at 18, the youngest sergeant major in the First World War. So it's fair to say that there's some family history for tenacity.

I was an adventurous kid. At an age when most were out coping with teenage angst I was happy enough learning from gamekeepers and poachers. A respectful understanding of nature developed, as did my love of working dogs. From my late teens onwards I was rarely without one for company. Lucy, a Jack Russell, was the first dog that triggered a rapport. We met when as a kid I took her from a farmer who was threatening to shoot her. From then on there was an invisible thread between us and we went everywhere together. I'd climb trees with her inside an old canvas shoulder bag and we held our breath, not moving a twig to watch fawns, fox and badger cubs.

Getting started

I learnt how to take care of the little cuts and scrapes we always seemed to end up with and how to deal with her first litter of puppies. For 16 years she was my best friend and I loved her. She made me laugh and when she died, she made me cry. Lucy taught me many things and my own care and attention towards her started to develop into the beginnings of more. In the following years I had many adventures throughout the world but they always had to involve working dogs.

I started with nothing but a plan. I was determined to learn how to handle dog teams and myself in brutal cold. It took me 18 months to track down and contact the world's best polar travellers. It felt desperately unattainable for a while but I stuck with it. By day I ran ten miles to work as a farm labourer and by night ran back to eat leftovers from plates I washed-up in hotel kitchens to save money. I clocked up over 56 hours overtime a week. Then I was on my way learning in the farthest reaches of the world from men and women Yukon fur trappers, field biologists, Polar Bear hunters and Inuit elders who first heard about the Second World War a year after it had ended.

"Eskimo"

To befriend them hasn't been easy thanks to the white men or 'Kabloona' before me. For over a century southerners have been telling the gentle nomadic Inuit how to run their lives. I saw it at Crufts this year. Inuit sled dogs are not Eskimo sled dogs. The word 'Eskimo' means 'eater of raw meat'. The term is considered a rude slur since they've voiced a wish to be called Inuit, a word that simply means 'the people'.

I'm not interested in racing dogs. Countless generations of southern dogs bred into civilisation lack attributes that only northern dogs have. They may be quicker, but wiry thin-coated southern dogs have been accredited bad press through an inability to survive the cold throughout races like the Iditarod.

For 3,000 years Arctic breeds have devel-



Gary and the dogs share the Arctic Ocean with 15,000 Polar Bears in temperatures cold enough to turn spit into ice cubes

oped their own selection process. The worst cases of inbreeding brought inherited deficiencies but also created individuals with superb athletic traits. It's these that have survived. Where mercy didn't exist puppies pulled or died. Life was no easier for their masters. To survive the cold and the Polar Bears meant eat or be eaten.

Northern sled dogs like the cold and remain fantastic company. Combined with courage, gorgeous thick coats, deep chests, strong powerful legs, feet and toes they're purveyors of excellent efficiency. These are their tools of the trade and extreme cold is where they best ply it. They're the Panzer tanks of the dog world and never give in. They won't thank you for building kennels for them. They'd sooner urinate on them and sleep on top.

They are pack animals with a need for authority. I recognise where they're best suited within a team. Puppies develop into



This February on the frozen Mackenzie River at -51°C Gary threw boiling water skyward. It instantly froze as snow and ice



Pingo and his henchman brother Hansel.

real characters. Some are boisterous, some are shy and some are naughty. They have traits some people lack but wish they had. There is that unrelenting drive, with the will to keep going, despite seemingly overwhelming odds. Together with their immense physical qualities they have a gentle, lovable and sincere side – qualities we like to recognise in our loved ones, our friends and in ourselves.

Journeys

Journey days are difficult at the best of times. I'm usually poleaxed with mental and physical fatigue after a day's travel. Snow on sea ice becomes packed concrete, solid from thousands of hours of relentless winter and spring winds. This tempered snow becomes a valuable insulator and building material for the dog's protection at night.

I dig down sometimes two metres to secure the stakeout chain with a climber's ice screw at either end. Like Polar Bears, the dogs protect critical space around themselves. There's constant one-upmanship going on. If left to their own devices, violent fighters will battle to the death. A bloodbath in extreme cold leads to serious implications and I avoid the scenario at all costs.

At night the stakeout chain is low and tight, giving no slack to waiver allowing dogs to bunch. With my shovel, I chip dog pits a metre deep. I'm careful not to expose ice. This has no insulating properties. I shape easy-to-handle compressed snow, brick-like, to fabricate a low igloo wall on the windward side of each nest. This serves as an individual windbreak for each dog. Paired off nearest the sled, wheel dogs come off first. I toss each one ice-cube lumps of fat and chicken until I feed and hydrate later in the evening. I utter a gently spoken word. Enough just to say what I mean, 'I'll never let you down you know that don't you? Never.'

Timber, though tough, is shy and can be trusted to be left loose. The main thing is he nestles close to warn me of wildlife. Untrained dogs can aggravate rather than defuse a situation. Inexperienced, excited and loose they can lead Polar Bears or potentially rabid wolves back to camp.

Daily, inside my tent, I melt 90 litres of snow then boil 12 litres of water to hydrate the dogs. At 40 below zero this takes me four hours. Ready to feed, I down the tent zip and swallow. Storms often have me on my hands and knees clutching a lonely feed bowl and feed box.

All dogs can produce their own vitamin C. A diet of 50 per cent fat provides vast energy. This they metabolise and mobilise fast. It's no good me looking at a dog thinking it looks in good shape. Even through three lay-



Weighing in at half a ton with paws larger than a man's chest polar bears are formidable.

ered mittens I run my hand down a dog's back and legs to feel if body mass is being maintained without undue soreness.

Always quick to feed, the dogs slather with bubbly tongues then dribble. Stalactites form chandelier chins like bizarre, extended icicle fangs.

Nourished, the whole team's job now is to rest and conserve energy. I couldn't stand the feeling that any dog thinks I'm letting them down. Once asked, "Do you eat your dogs?" It was with complete inward disgust that I replied, "No I don't. Do you eat your children?"

Training

Each dog fills a critical role within the team and thrives under different situations.

Training highlights progress and suitability of a dog's potential. Some learn faster than others, especially leaders. Though not physically the strongest, mental strength they have in abundance. Any leading animal needs courage with conviction and I want them to prove it with their mental capacity to take pressure from the front, learn fast and respond to my commands. I favour the tandem hitch and harness in pairs to a single trace with the mainline back to the sled. Potential leaders I pair with an experienced leader. They develop intuition and become favourites with very strong bonds.

Behind the leaders come bright and good-natured potential leaders called point dogs. The bulk of dogs in between I call team dogs. They're spirited and forever eager to please. Early indication of stronger pullers I put in the wheel position, nearest the sled and payload. It's not rocket science. I listen, watch, ask myself questions and solve the problems in such a way that the dogs are able to efficiently carry out the job. I train consistently and no longer than is necessary to make progress, exposing dogs to everything they could encounter on a journey.

By the end of their first season puppies will experience bears, wolf packs, moose and thundering ice with an abundance of love and attention.

Summer

I favour spring litters. Whelps ran with me alongside the Mackenzie River. They tumble and splash through the water, socialising with all they discover. In lakes I encourage them to swim while I paddle a canoe. They love this exercise.

On land individual puppies hitched up to little logs instinctively pull them around. The summers may be short but they're equally intense.

An Arctic July sees temperatures hover around 30°C. For 56 days, the sun remains in the sky for 24 hours, seemingly stuck but creating the land of the midnight sun, and mosquito formations attack like Spitfires.

My grandfather died of asthma and as a five-year-old kid I was diagnosed as asthmatic too. Close proximity to the dogs shedding summer coats gets me sneezing so I try to do what I can to raise awareness for Asthma UK who are increasing awareness of asthma.



Gary at 40 degrees below zero.

ma and the needs of the people whose lives are affected by it.

Winter

It can snow in any month of the year in the Arctic but generally the first snow comes by September. At freeze-up I introduce year-old puppies to the sled harnesses, living on a stakeout chain and run and rest routines. In the early part of the season, new ice can sometimes be disconcerting for them, bashing and booming, seemingly chasing as it cracks and shudders. Paired up with an older dog keeps them moving without fuss. If the puppy makes a big deal of the situation the older dog will growl and nip, telling them to grow up.

What's next?

I'm heading back to the Arctic this summer. My training is ongoing and includes running 100 miles a week. Some days travelling on the Arctic Ocean means a 12-hour slog over ice taller than a double-decker bus just to gain 400 metres. In the Canadian Arctic I share the sea with 15,000 Polar Bears in temperatures cold enough to turn spit into ice cubes so the training gives me that disciplined edge to give the dogs all the care and attention imaginable. □

For more visit:
www.garyrolfe.com
Asthma UK:
www.asthma.org.uk



This picture of Gary's ancestors is proof positive of where his wanderlust and love of dogs originates.



Over near-perfect conditions Gary and his team move almost effortlessly over sea ice.