

A Forgotten Hero - Man is a Dog's Best Friend

I love animals. When my teacher first asked me to think of a person who inspired me, my mind immediately was filled with a whole menagerie of animals that I have read about. Over Lockdown I spent a lot of time with my cats, they helped a lot with my stress and anxiety, they would sit next to me while I did my school work and I think that it really strengthened my bond between them. I am inspired by people who love and trust animals so much that they both achieve things that they could not do alone. I wanted to choose someone I could relate to but also inspire me and I couldn't find anyone better, or more inspiring to me, than Leonhard Seppala.

Who was Leonhard Seppala? Leonhard Seppala was a musher who lived in Alaska in the early 1900s. He loved dog sledding right from the beginning and won the All Alaska Sweepstakes two years in a row. However, he wasn't just a great musher. What made him special was that he cared for his dogs like no other. In his first race, he pushed his dogs too far and risked their lives. He was so ashamed of himself that he pulled out of the race immediately and let his dogs rest for the remainder of the year. These dogs wanted to work, so he worked with his dogs for 12 hours a day, even through the summer by using a cart with wheels that he invented. And they loved it! But there was one who loved it more. This was Togo.

So what about Togo? Leonhard's extraordinary love for dogs not only inspires me but it was also critical for him in finding the dog that saved so many lives and a lifelong friendship. Togo was born as the runt of his litter and had to be looked after by Seppala's wife. Seppala considered him a "Canine Delinquent", and initially Seppala tried to sell him...twice. However, Togo, not being fond of this idea, would constantly escape when Seppala was training the other dogs, no matter how hard Seppala tried. Seppala, seeing how strong this canine delinquent's drive was to be a part of the team, decided to give him a shot to pull with the other dogs. Togo quickly showed himself a natural born leader and quickly made his way up the ranks to become the lead dog. On Togo's first run he ran 120 kilometres without any training which no other dog has done. From then on, a special friendship formed between Seppala and Togo. Togo became Seppala's right hand man.

The inspiring bond of friendship between Seppala and Togo is best shown during the 1925 serum run. The small town of Nome, where Seppala lived, was suffering a diphtheria epidemic; the lives of thousands were at stake. Having recently gone through a pandemic I understand how powerless the people of Nome must have felt. Seppala responded to this by volunteering his team for a run of such length that many considered it impossible. The first diphtheria case in Nome was found on 24 December 1924 and quickly escalated into an epidemic. Unfortunately, the medicine they had to treat diphtheria was out of date. On 24 January, 1 month after the first case was diagnosed, the town's board of health held a meeting to discuss their plan of action; a dogsled relay to bring new medicine to the town. Shortly after the meeting, Seppala was notified and he started training his dogs for the run. On 29 January, Seppala set off on his journey with Togo in the lead.

Seppala's leg of the journey was the most dangerous part of the whole relay run and the riskiest part was crossing the ice-covered Norton Sound. Travelling over the Sound was crucial as it cut down time and distance. In the first 3 days he covered 275 kilometres. Unfortunately, the weather worsened so it was decided, unbeknown to Seppala, to add more teams to the run. Seppala crossed the Sound with ease and by a miracle ran into Henry Ivanoff, a late addition to the relay, who had the serum on him. On his return home, Seppala had to cross the Sound a second time. This time the team became stranded on a separated ice sheet close to the shore. Seppala quickly came up with a plan, putting his trust in Togo who he tossed 2 metres across the water to the other side. Togo tried to pull close the gap between the ice sheets but the line snapped. Togo, 'the once in a lifetime dog', grabbed the rope and wrapped it around his body and braced himself. With all his might and love for his master, he pulled the ice sheet closer so his team could jump to safety. After the impossible run, Seppala arrived at Golovin, 125 kilometres away from Nome, and handed over the serum to Gunnar Kaasen, who did the final part of the run and made it back to Nome on 25 February 1925.

It is only because I have seen the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns that I can imagine the relief people of Nome felt when the serum arrived against all the odds. During the pandemic, I often felt alone and anxious at having to trust other people to do the right thing. My pets provided me with companionship which helped me get through that time. For the people of Nome, they didn't know that their salvation was all due to such a friendship. Have you ever had a friend that you knew had your back regardless of what you did? The one friend that you could rely on unconditionally no matter how hard things got? Animals can be such a friend and the bond between Seppala and Togo is a perfect example of this. It was unique and special, like no

other. It was a friendship that allowed Seppala to put everyone's life – his own, Nome's residents, and the rest of the team into Togo's paws to get them out of numerous deadly situations. That critical moment on the Sound, Togo even knew to wrap the rope around his body, without any command from Seppala. It was a decision made by Togo simply to save his friend.

So, this is why I chose Seppala as the person who inspires me the most. What he achieved was amazing and Togo even more so. It upsets me that despite their achievements they didn't get recognition, like so many other human and animal duos, for many decades. In 2001 Togo finally got his own statue in Seward Park. In 2011, Time Magazine awarded Togo with the title of "Most Heroic Animal of All Time."

This is not only an essay about the person who inspired me, but is an essay that is directly inspired by him. And in doing so, I hope that the story of a man who chose a dog, and how together they saved thousands of lives, inspires you too - despite how difficult the last couple of years have been.

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