



## THE DIFFERENCE IS VERSATILITY

Show winner - check. Back packer - check. Sled dog - check. Weight puller - check. Did you know only three dogs have been awarded the AMCA's prestigious Versatile Alaskan Malamute title? Breeder Charlene LaBelle tells us about her journey with her beloved Buddy - aka Belle's Cool Holiday Special - the very first VAM recipient.

### Alphabet Soup?

Please don't ask me to list all 43 of the "sets of letters" we collected to surround Buddy's name. But Buddy and I did have a lot of fun collecting letters. Buddy was my first AKC champion. He was also my first male and the first champion where I was the breeder. AKC Ch, CKC Ch, FCI Ch, Int'l Ch, Mex Ch, World Ch Belle's Cool Holiday Special, ATT, MTT, CGC, WWPD, WPD, WTD, WLD. And a bunch of Bests-In-Show - All-Breed, Bred-by, Veteran, Brace, Stud Dog (All-Breed) - and a whole lot more.



### My Backpacking Buddy

*If I could keep the pack on him for the first half-mile, we'd have a great hike!*

I would have loved to go for an All Around Alaskan Malamute (AAAM) title - one step above the VAM title. But Buddy was not one to let "momma" just walk away. He failed Canine Good Citizen test after test. Until I had the bright idea to hand him to someone and ask them to watch my dog while I went into the restroom. Not a peep out of him. Darn dog was too smart for his own good. Every other time, he simply pitched a fit. So the idea of a Companion Dog obedience title, which we needed for the AAAM, was not something I felt we could ever earn. Besides, we were having way too much fun doing everything else!



### About the Author

*Charlene LaBelle has been owned by malamutes since 1976, when her first rescue mal adopted her. Her Belle Kennels has produced several generations of champions, as well as several celebrity dogs who have starred in national TV commercials, print ads, promotional items and even a fashion show with the San Francisco 49er football team!*

*An accomplished author, Charlene wrote MUSH! A Beginners Manual To Sled Dog Training 4th edition, and A Guide To Backpacking With Your Dog. Charlene has also written for or been featured in Dog Fancy, Better Homes and Gardens, and many other publications, as well as on TV, radio and webcasts.*

*A member of the AMCA Board of Directors, Charlene also belongs to the Alaskan Malamute Assistance League, Dog Writers Association of America, International Sled Dog Racing Association, Northern California Alaskan Malamute Association, and Sierra Nevada Dog Drivers.*

# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

## Workin' for a Livin'

Buddy completed his first AMCA working title in 1995, for Working Weight Pull Dog. Buddy earned his four qualifying scores for the basic weight pull title at his first four weight pulls. His fourth pull was one I will always remember because his last completed pull was literally a couple pounds shy of the weight he needed for an Excellent leg. The next weight was a lot more than he needed for an X-leg. The track was getting quite rutted, so I had the cart moved. His turn came, he buckled down and pulled to less than a foot from the completion line. It took him less than 15 seconds to get to that point. With all the dogs digging in to get traction, a small rock surfaced, and I spent the next 45+ seconds trying to coax him to pull those last few inches. He could not move the load, and we had to go back to the previous completed pull. I made a handler error.

Our next weight pull was one embarrassing pull. We were at the AMCA National in Utah. They needed a few more of the big guys in the over 100# class, so I grabbed Buddy and asked him to pull. Here was a dog that had completed pulls of over a half ton

and would not even TRY to pull the empty cart. I rolled on the ground, I ran away, I coaxed, I pleaded. The more people laughed, the more fun he was having being a clown! He did not get on the cart or pee in the chute, so I guess I should have been happy.

We did enter quite a few more weight pulls after that. He always behaved and pulled. But I never again just grabbed him and expected him to pull. I chalked the Utah behavior up to yet another handler error.

I started out in the AMCA's working program with backpacking, but the Working Pack Dog title was Buddy's second AMCA title, not his first. He earned his WPD in 1996.

Buddy liked to play games. He loved backpacking but seemed to feel it was his duty to try to dump his pack within a half-mile from the trail head. If we made it past that magical point, he was a saint. He knew that, when the backpacks came out, we were going HIKING!!!! On overnight trips, we would settle the dogs into camp. They would promptly fall asleep. This was the time to do anything we needed to with their packs. Because if you were still messing with their packs when they woke up from

their afternoon nap, they were READY TO GO...NOW!

Buddy, also known as the Bud-man, was quite a social butterfly. He loved people. He loved being in public. We started going to sled dog races so the general public could pet and take photos with the dogs. I could not just sit there and ended up helping. Helping with teams turned into helping put on internationally sanctioned sprint races - for over 20 years!

In the mid-1990s ski-joring was starting to get popular in the USA. I think it was 1995/1996 when my local Race Giving Organization (RGO) added ski-jor to their classes. After a few years of negotiating with other RGOs, ski-jor could qualify for International Medal status. My youngest brother Rick ran Buddy and Corky (Intl Ch Belle's Show Stopper, WTD) or Buddy and Nessa (Intl Ch Belle's Toy Bear at Alyeska, WTD) in the 1997/1998 season. Team Buddy, Corky/Nessa & Rick Meyner finished in the Top 10 Internationally! We were the only Malamute team that ran. We used our ski-jor racing for the qualifications for Buddy's Working Team Dog title in 1998. We had a lot more miles in training than we ever had in racing, but it was fun to have the "trucks" out there ("trucks"

*Two malamutes have earned the VAM award since Buddy did on November 7, 1998.*

*Top: "Monty" A/C CH, U-CDX, Malhaven's Many Vistas, A/C CDX, Sts/ASCA CD, AMCA: WWPDX, WPD, IWPA WWP, CGC, ATT*



*Bottom: "Jacob" BIS BISS A/C CH Wind's Fury Jacob Trailblazer, ROM, TDI, CGC, WWP, WWPDX, WPD*



## VA-VA-VAM!

### How does a dog become a VERSATILE ALASKAN MALAMUTE?

**Conformation:** Championship title (AKC, CKC, FCI, etc.)

**Obedience:** Companion Dog title (equivalent or better, Agility, Rally)

**Sledding:** a team dog or lead dog at any level (ex: WTD or WLD)

**Weight pull:** a weight pull at any level (ex: WWP)

**Backpacking:** a packing at any level (ex: WPD)

For the VAM title, any one of the above five categories may be traded for advanced work in TWO of the others...

OR...Progress can be shown in one category (ie, a majority of legs in obedience or working, or points in conformation) but not completion, and added to advanced work in another area. And do not forget:

**Temperament:** This is a BIGGIE!! Written verification by a neutral party of what the dog has done in public contact. This is a MUST have.

For the complete rules, visit <http://www.alaskanmalamute.org>

# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

meaning Alaskan malamutes). And were they a big hit with the crowds!

In the 2001/2002 season, I thought it would be fun to put a Working Lead Dog title on Buddy. So on what would have been race training weekends, we took a three-dog team out for a fun run. After a nice picnic five miles out, we would head back to the dog-truck. For these trips, the distance was ten miles; but when racing, our heat was three or four miles each day. I sorta made a goof....yup, yet another handler error.

One weekend, we took the three-dog team out like usual. And the next weekend we had a race. This is where I "goofed." The race had a loop trail instead of the usual out and back. In other words, the course was one-way - the dogs did not return on the trail they went out on. I was waiting patiently for our team to cross the finish line. When the dogs crossed the finish line, they did not stop! This was not our first mutiny - and it was not our last!

Another mutiny that comes to mind happened early in a season. I ran the snowmobile down the trail and put a "lollipop" turn-around in for my husband Steve and the team. I came back and told him where the turn-around would be and sat waiting for him, camera at the ready, so I could take a few photos. I waited.. and waited... and waited. No husband and no dogs. So I started my snow-machine and headed back out the trail. I was sure I would meet them head-on. Nope. I kept going...and going...and there they were. Still headed OUT, long past the turn-around I had put in for them. Steve could NOT get them to turn around. So I turned them around, jumped on my sled and zipped down the trail back towards the dog-truck. I still wanted to take a few pictures. I stopped and turned around. Steve should have been facing me, but I was looking at his back! The dogs had made a nice neat U-turn and were headed back OUT the trail. I went out to turn them around again...and they did the same thing. The third time I stayed behind them until I was sure the dogs were heading back to the trail head.

## When You Say Buddy....You've Said It All

Our activities were not just working. We went to a lot of dog shows. We visited a lot of schools. At the time I was working for a company that really promoted volunteerism. I literally visited a school a week, several months out of the year, for quite a few years. Each year it was made known that Buddy and I were available to do a presentation on "Alaska, the Iditarod, sled dog sports and responsible dog ownership." The child's parent would accompany us to the school. Each presentation ended with the children being able to pet Buddy three times as they filed out the door. The largest group we spoke to was 300, normally it was 50 to 75 (plus parents and teachers). Buddy LOVED the attention. We figured as a conservative number, Buddy was petted by a minimum of 10,000 people! Between school visits, pet fairs and benched shows, a lot of people petted Buddy. (We still have a school we visit annually. After Buddy died, one of my "girls" went with me, then Buddy's son. Now I take three dogs: Buddy's granddaughter, a grandson, and his great-granddaughter.)



Photos from top left: Strong finish at a skijoring race at Foresthill; Buddy's first two AKC points; Looking good at the Canadian 2000 Top 25; Chilling out in the RV on our way home from Mexico.



## The Genuine Article

*Titles are not just a brag, not just a stepping stone to a higher title, not just an adjunct to competitive scores. A title is a tribute to the dog that bears it, a way to honor the dog, an ultimate memorial. It will remain, in the record and in the memory, for about as long as anything in this world can remain. Few humans will do as well or better in that regard.*

*And though the dog himself doesn't know or care that his achievements have been noted, a title says many things in the world of humans, where to many, such things count. A title says your dog was intelligent, and adaptable, and good-natured. It says that your dog loved you enough to do the things that please you, however crazy they may have sometimes seemed.*

*A title says that you loved your dog, that you loved to spend time with him because he was a special dog, and that you believed in him enough to give him yet another chance when he failed, and that in the end your faith was justified.*

*A title proves that your dog inspired you to that special relationship enjoyed by so few; that in a world of disposable creatures, this dog with a title was greatly loved, and loved greatly in return.*

*And when that dear short life is over, the title remains as a memorial of the finest kind, the best you can give to a deserving friend, volumes of praise in one small set of initials to be added before or after his name. And years later, those few letters may remind you of the special time spent together.*

*~ Author Anonymous, edited by Charlene LaBelle*



# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

These varied activities - showing, racing, and public appearances - tended to overlap, which created some interesting challenges. For example, when we were racing, we praised the dogs for clean passes. But in the show ring we did not want the dogs to pass. At races the dogs were marked to signify the class they were running. Not a big deal until the time we had a show the day after a race weekend. That weekend the class was marked with green on their face. Buddy's green mark would not come off for the show! We had to explain the green mark was left over from the previous weekend's sled dog race. We never had that problem again; as part of the RGO, at races I looked at the classes with show dogs and made sure they were not marked on their faces. We were fortunate that his harness never did much damage to his coat.

I remember Buddy's 40th "title". It was a dog show title earned in Southern California. As we went into the ring, a large group of people showed up ring side. Buddy won breed, completing his title to a lot of clapping. The judge asked what that was all about. I explained that this completed his 40th "title". The judge had us take an extra lap, with Buddy on the OUTSIDE so that his fans could watch him strut his stuff.

Sadly, I lost Buddy at a very young age. We had no warning; he had cancer and he died in surgery. A part of my heart broke the night I lost him. The very next day I got on a plane and went to the National. I still have the cards people sent and the hundreds of emails. Buddy was my heart dog, and ten years later, it is still very difficult.

But together we had a LOT of FUN. I have so many special memories. The Canadian National and The Canadian Top 25, the trails (snow and sand and dirt and rock). The trip to Mexico (with three group placements in four shows!). The Cow Palace benched show. Just cuddling in bed was special with the Bud-man. He would stretch full length between my husband and me.

Buddy was an ambassador for our breed, and I still miss the big guy. Buddy may not have cared what each title was, but he sure had fun collecting them with me.

You do not need to be a title collector to earn a VAM - but you do need a dog that enjoys people.



## For All You Do.....This Buddy's for You!

*Above: Buddy excelled in the show ring, winning many Bests-In-Show.*

*Below left: Husband and wife teams: Charlene and Buddy with her husband Steve and Buddy's "wife" Toto - Ch SnoKing Totally Tempting. Check out Charlene's shirt!*

*Right: On the cover of MUSH!, Buddy is pictured leading the team.*

