

A Sled With A Soul

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Like a master violin creator who walks in the woods looking for the most suitable tree for his new masterpiece, one which will create dreamy, soothing tones in the great concert halls, such is the way my friend Frantisek Chlan looks for suitable timber for his next masterpiece. Instead of a manmade concert hall, Frantisek creates his work to be performed in the greatest concert hall, the outdoors. A timeless aria composed of huskies panting along to the tune of his sled gliding gracefully through the snow. It is with great precision that his sled is made, and you can rest assured, as with the violin maker, that you will not be disappointed in the craftsmanship or quality of his fine instruments. It is with love and pride that he works his craft.



Look to the encyclopedia and it tells us that a sled or sleigh is a vehicle, which slides across the snow. It consists of two runners and a body between them. In areas with deep snow cover in the past, it was virtually the only means for transportation. A sled moves through the snow better than a vehicle with wheels. It displaces less snow, and generates less friction, thus needing less force to be powered across the surface. It can be powered by human, gravitational force, horses, dogs or reindeer. Alas, so much for definitions.

Sleds designed for use in conjunction with dogs need to be flexible, resistant to shock, and be able to maintain a straight track. All connections with these creations must be moveable to slide and help when rounding turns. The individual layers of wood are bent and then glued to each other to hold the desired shape and guarantee flexibility. In the Czech Republic, all mushers know these sleds as "chlanovky", but where do these sleds come from? The answer, Frantisek Chlan!

If we talk about F.C. (born 1947), we are also talking about the history of mushing in the country. F.C. is a living legend in Czech mushing. He was instrumental in ushering in the sport to the Czech Republic during the 80's and in helping mushing become developed and organized.

Author Libuse Pecena in her book, talks about how each person must find

a breed that grabs their heart. Some people while looking for a breed, find a life, and for some that becomes clear almost immediately. For F.C., what captured his heart was the Alaskan Malamute. From the very beginning of his mushing career, he was a malamute man to his core.

In 1981, F.C. became the owner of his first Alaskan Malamute puppy, Abipon Del Monte, from breeder Hana Petrusova. It was from the first litter of Malamutes born inside the former Czechoslovakia. He became the first musher, and the first Malamute expert among us. As tends to happen, after his first time mushing, he quickly fell under the spell that grips so deeply, and began to devote all of his spare time to the sport. He was 34 years old.

In 1985 the first dog races were organized in the former Czechoslovakia. At the time it was common for most enthusiasts to only have one or two dogs. The owners would gather together as friends, combining their dogs to create teams, and take turns mushing. In subsequent years this began to change, as F.C. led the way by developing his own kennel called 5th mile. He based his kennel and bloodlines on a dog named Blix of Steep Hill, purchased from a German musher named Horst Toeffels from Hohenstadt. Considering the economy at the time, and the exchange rate from German Marks to Czech Crowns, it was quite an investment. Only recently did F.C. admit that it was almost 3 months salary!





The predominant sled at the time was called a "jeklovky" (jäckel made). It was a sled that had the frame consisting of hollowed out iron, that was bent and shaped to form a less than desirable, bulky and awkward sled. As a trained engineer, F.C. began to investigate different techniques for improving the usability of these sleds. At that time the internet was not available and little foreign literature. The only resources available were Jack London novels filled with romantic, yet fragmentary technical information gleaned from reading between the lines. It quickly became apparent to him that the runners must be made of wood. F.C. had for years had a passion for restoring antique cars. He had developed various techniques for bending wood and layering, as these classic cars had mostly wooden interiors. It was a technique that involved great patience, but during the socialist time, nobody was in a hurry.

He converted his garage in his family home near the town of Ceske Budejovice in Hrdejovice, into a workshop. Soon began to emerge the first prototypes of his wooden sleds, which have progressed through trial and error. The process was such that after the first trial run on the sled, when faults were found, they were noted and the sled was burned, along with the others in production with the same defects. F.C. states that "It was impossible to ride them at all, they were hard to ride, and kept jumping, and it was difficult to keep them on a straight track. At the time I didn't know that the runners needed to be a certain length in ratio to the overall size of the sled, and angled slightly to create a wedge shape, and that the attachments binding the sled together should not be fixed firmly and glued,

but on the contrary, needed to be flexible by design to create a smoother driving function, so to speak," as he recalled the beginning of his production. Other runners were being developed simultaneously that proved much more successful and didn't end up as firewood.

In 1986, F.C. and four of his sled dogs attended the first race in Nove Mesto in Moravia. People there noticed his sled and its construction, and from this point his production of sleds became a decent job. In 1989, he raced abroad in the Austrian Alps. As further evidence of the quality of his sleds, he quickly began receiving requests from abroad. With this increasing foreign demand, he began professional production in 1993, yet still looking to improve as always.

This leads us to today, where he currently offers 6 models of sleds, from the light-weight sprint sled weighing approximately 8.5 kg to his expedition sled (toboggan) weighing in at 35 kg, and an overall length of 2.4 to 3.4 meters with a support plate below the sledbag. "Expedition sleds are 64cm wide and 95 to 105 cm high. It is possible to load them up to 150 kg and to harness 8 or more dogs at one time," states F.C.

Currently F.C. produces on average 40 sleds per year, with about 80% of his work being shipped abroad. His products are designed for both recreational and racing purposes. In the past, he mainly had requests from those who saw his products at sled dog races. He participated in more than one hundred, and boasts many successes at home and abroad, most importantly a few 3rd and 4th places in the championships with 4 and 6 malemutes.



Interested in information?

Customers can generally find F.C. home alone working in his workshop making repairs to sleds that need new runners. Detailed information about his offers can be found at www.sled.cz which is conveniently able to be viewed in Czech, English, German and French.

The site features the full range of his products including both sleds and dry-land carts for use in fall training and racing. As F.C. says, the cart production is not like working with wood. He prefers making sleds, but people still want the carts so what is he supposed to do?

Both the sleds and carts are developed based on the experiences and needs of the athletes. As the seasons change, so does the work, turning from carpenter into welder and metalsmith, and back again.

If you know F.C., then you are well aware of the quality of his work and that everything is finely crafted of the best materials and with the utmost care.

Time flies and the year is now 2011, and oh how quickly 30 years have passed. More than quarter century. Shelves in the living room are now full of trophies, cups and medals, surrounded by plants and collecting dust.

The dogs are now older, and the breeding program has come to an end. Both musher and sled dogs are retired. In this time two sons have become men and are now fathers themselves.

The garden villa is now filled with 3 twelve year old malamutes lazing their days away, content to eat and sleep in the shade. This job, making sleds and carts is now a hobby much like his gardening and mushroom collecting. A project that brings satisfaction, keeps alive cherished memories, and keeps friendships long ago forged in the time of youth, stronger than ever.



The production process for the wooden sled:

The basic material for the construction of the sled is ash wood. The design consists of between 4 and 8 individual layers of wood – slats- with a thickness of approximately 4-5mm glued together with a water resistant adhesive. The slats come pre-manufactured and dried to 8-10% moisture. For the production of the handlebars, the wood is dried close to 20% moisture allowing increased flexibility in the production process. Slats must be sticking up in the same order as they were cut, making sure that the pieces are bent upon removal from the mold, so they will hold the desired shape. These main pieces of the sled are fixed by a pin, and lashed together with durable rope. The resulting joints and pin fixtures are then filled with silicone to prevent moisture from penetrating the wood. The finished wooden product is then covered in a clear coat varnish. The actual runners themselves, as well as the front crash bar of the sled are made of polyurethane, and can withstand temperatures up to -56°C . The sleds come equipped with two brakes, the first is a metal folding two positional brake, and the second is the drag brake fixed between the runners. The price range for these sleds, depending on the type, size, and complexity of the design is between 500-1300 euros.

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Ten years ago my personal journey with F.C. began when I arrived in Hrdejovice for my first new sled. I remember the excitement and passion of my life from this event.

I have used these sleds since my first day and I continue to use them for training, tours, and racing. I think these sleds are amazing and I am committed to them. I used this type of sled during the Norwegian Finnmarkslopet, a distance of 1000km. I had 14 dogs harnessed and pulling the sled during this race.

Frantisek made sure my sled was fully equipped, including a comfortable seat so I could rest here and there and even possibly take a nap!

Wooden sleds have proven durable for all types of terrains. From sliding side to side over a frozen lake, up and down steep vertical terrain, across mountains and through the deepest of snow.

Once you have one in hand, and step upon the runners, and begin the timeless tune of wilderness travels to the sound of your own heartbeat, and that of your huskies, then you will realize what a great service F.C. has provided, and what a lasting legacy he has given to mushers and their future.

He is a composer in the most literal sense, and his masterpieces touch the hearts of all who hear the symphony of the wild aboard one of his creations.

Františku, Thank you!!!

Jana Henychová

www.sled.cz

