

*Knight and Clyde race to American Championship in 2014 in Fairbanks Alaska. Photo by Casey Thompson*



# Rebecca Knight, Dog Musher Extraordinaire

ARTICLE BRIDGET GREY | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED

This fall, Missouri Heights residents glimpsed a strange – and possibly worrisome – sight: a black hound with a flapping tongue streaking by, towing a woman on a bicycle. This wasn't just a bike-mounted dog walk getting out of hand. The woman's hands weren't even *on* the leash! That spunky dog was actually *tethered* to the bike.

The dog was Pippa and the bicyclist was Rebecca Knight. They were training for a November bikejoring competition, the International Federation of Sleddog Sports (IFSS) Dryland World Championships in Bristol, Canada, near Quebec. Knight and her dog Clyde brought home a bronze medal from that event.

Knight, who moved to Basalt in June, is an accomplished sled dog musher and a championship skijor racer. She has crossed Alaska by dog team on the famed Iditarod trail. She and her husband spent nine months as caretakers for a 50-mile-off-the-road remote lodge in the Alaskan wilderness. A team of 10 Alaskan huskies kept them company there all winter and allowed Rebecca to explore the area by dog power.

Dog sledding first fascinated her in high school after watching a documentary about Susan Butcher, a four-time winner of the Iditarod. In 1996, Knight traced Butcher's tracks by taking her own team of eight Alaskan huskies along the 1,000-mile trail, making a 24-day winter camping trip out of it.

A volunteer for the committee that is working with the Snowmass-based Krabloonik dog sledding business, Knight notes, "These dogs, Alaskan huskies, have very strong hearts. They are a very resilient breed of canine that is genetically gifted to do what they do. They are built for distance travel in the far north. They can attain a super athlete level during the racing season. People sometimes think that dog mushing is bad for these dogs. I try to explain to them that these dogs *love* to run and pull!"

After Knight retired from running distance sled dogs, she discovered skijoring, a sport that has long been popular in Scandinavia. Canadians and Alaskans picked it up in the 1980s, and it soon spread to other snowy states. The sport requires only minimal equipment: Nordic ski gear, a skijoring belt attached to an 11-foot towline, a dog harness and the right dog.

Knight says that sled dogs are primarily and have historically been Alaskan huskies. These dogs are not an American Kennel Club-recognized breed, but a mix that has been developed over the past century by mixing Siberians,

Malamutes and other working breeds like pointers and greyhounds.

Many competitive skijorers use German Shorthaired Pointers and pointer mixes with bloodlines from Scandinavia.

Knight's first skijoring dog was Gypsy, half Alaskan husky and half German short hair. Gypsy had been running for a musher in a six-dog sprint sled team. Because she had been squabbling with a female litter mate, she needed a new home, and Rebecca provided one. Gypsy loved skiing with Knight.

Clyde, Knight's next dog, was a pointer-husky mix. "Those two together were unstoppable," Knight enthuses. "They won just about every race in Alaska during the 2009/10 season and qualified for the IFSS winter world championship in Norway."

Currently, Knight's "Team Spunky Hounds" includes four dogs: Clyde; Ronin, a husky who is the team's mascot; and Kate and Pippa, two Pointer sisters from Norway. Knight says she named them after Kate Middleton and her sister Pippa because they were born a month after Kate married Prince William.

Since moving here to be closer to family, Knight, her husband, and their pack have been happily settling in. Knight learned that Aspen is a "very dog friendly town" after taking her Alaskan-born husky Ronin to lunch at the Little Nell where the Alaskan-born pooch "unsurprisingly ordered a salmon, rice and scrambled egg dish off the doggie menu."

Knight has begun racing with the Rocky Mountain Sled dog club. She has found ways to compensate for the Roaring Fork Valley's famed banana-belt-of-the-Rockies temperatures while training. "It mostly means training very early in the morning," she says. "Anything much more than 40 degrees can be too warm for the dogs. When we race in Fairbanks, the temperatures can plummet to around 30 below at night and can range from zero to 20 below for our races. The dogs wear lightweight but warm racing jackets and have no problem with the cold. For the skijorer, it's more of a challenge to keep extremities warm when racing up north."

Why does she brave all that cold and snow? "It's really the relationship with dogs and working as a team that's rewarding," she says. "It's the trust that you build that allows you to work as a team. It just makes me very contented to see my dogs happily doing what they are born and bred to do."



Rebecca Knight and Clyde at the IFSS 2013 Winter World Championships North Pole, Alaska. Photo by Tibby Kull



Knight with some of her distance sled dogs in Alaska, circa 1998



Heading towards the finish of the three day Limited North American Championship Fairbanks 2015. Photo by Casey Thompson