

DOG MUSER, BASEBALL COACH, TEACHER:

**ARLEIGH JORGENSON '68 HAS SPENT A LIFETIME
INSPIRING THOSE HE ENCOUNTERS WITH A
PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO HIS LIFE'S PURSUITS.**

LEAD DOG

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHRIS WELSCH





"The dogs take us out of our world and into theirs. It can be a life-changing experience," says Arleigh Jorgenson '68, here with Vega, one of his lead dogs.

IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT his twin passions — dog sledding and baseball — Arleigh Jorgenson is likely to cite Kierkegaard and Kant. But he is just as likely to mention the lessons learned from a stubborn husky named Mohawk.

"I first learned from some old-school mushers: They *drove* their dogs," he said, leaning forward in a wooden chair in the kitchen of his home in the hills north of Grand Marais, Minnesota. "They used all kinds of negative reinforcement. I knew instinctively that was wrong, but it took me a while to find my own way."

The turning point came with his training of a promising lead dog named Mohawk. Jorgenson was determined not to repeat mistakes he'd made before. Instead of forcing his will on the dog, he wanted the dog to discover for himself that he was the leader of the team. "I changed my whole philosophy."

Jorgenson took Mohawk and a sled dog team on a training run in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. On a trackless expanse of Caribou Lake, Jorgenson simply said, "Let's go." He didn't tell Mohawk where. "He took off across the lake and then headed to shore. He drove the sled into deep snow under a big old cedar branch, and we got stuck, and I just let us be stuck."

Jorgenson crouched in the snow to give Mohawk "a little lecture: 'You didn't listen when I said gee [right] or haw [left], and neither one of us wants to be stuck in the snow under a cedar tree.'" Then Jorgenson pulled the sled back onto the lake. "When I said 'gee' he took an immediate right. And when I said 'haw' he went left. He ran down the lake like an 'A' student. He finally understood what I was trying to do and that it was cool to be part of it. Leaders like to be 'A' students."

While Jorgenson's life has taken many unexpected turns, his stories almost always return to the theme of cultivating excellence in others — whether those others are dogs, people learning to run dogs, baseball players, or students. He is not comfortable, however, when the focus is turned on him.

"I realize that I am Norwegian, and this self-deprecation is something we do to excess sometimes," he says. "Being a St. Olaf alum, I would love to be one who has lived, and is living, an inspiring life."

It's been an interesting one, and even Jorgenson will admit that.

AN EXAMINED LIFE

ON HIS TWENTY-FIVE-ACRE PROPERTY in Minnesota's Sawtooth Mountains, 1,000 feet above Lake Superior, November is the time for Jorgenson to repair harness and sleds, prepare his twenty-five dogs for winter, and study the craft of coaching. His kitchen table was stacked with titles such as *The Left-Handed Pickoff — A Guide to the Ultimate Move* and *Hitting for Excellence*. At age sixty-three, Jorgenson has a full head of sandy brown hair and retains the rangy build of an athlete. Wearing a green fleece pullover, jeans, and black Mizuno baseball shoes, he sat on a sturdy wooden chair by his woodstove. Rain tapped on the roof as he recalled the tangents of his life.

Jorgenson was born in the southwest Wisconsin farm town of Darlington. The first of three kids, he helped his dad run the family dairy farm from an early age. He and his father shared a love of baseball, and they listened to radio broadcasts of Milwaukee Braves games while working with the cows. When he wasn't working or going to school, he was playing baseball.

"I always had a ball, a glove, and a bat with me — always," Jorgenson said. "I was always Hank Aaron or Eddie Matthews. I always intend to write Aaron a letter to thank him for that. ... He had a bunch of white kids in farm country who learned instinctively that racism was wrong, because we imagined ourselves to be him."

At St. Olaf, Jorgenson ran track and majored in philosophy; he wanted to become a minister and felt he needed to investigate the existence of God. "I asked a few of my favorite professors, 'Do you believe in God? Why?' ... I learned that no philosopher could come up with absolute, *a priori* proof of God's existence." He concluded that living was something you have to do without all the answers, but left St. Olaf knowing that he wanted an examined life. "One thing I got consistently from St. Olaf was the message that we are all blessed to be here and that we'd better take that good fortune out into the world for the benefit of others."

His next step was a divinity degree at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. During his years at the seminary, Jorgenson took up dog sledding at the invitation of a friend named Mabel Hill who raised Siberian Huskies and had more than 100 of them. During winter mornings, he took Hill's dogs on sled runs, and in the afternoons he attended classes.

He found himself connecting with something larger than himself when he worked with the dogs, pulled by their power across snowy trails and into the woods. After Jorgenson graduated, Hill died of cancer, and Jorgenson inherited thirteen of her huskies. This gift coincided with his doubts about becoming a minister. He put the idea aside.

Jorgenson's first job came in Grand Marais. Through a federal program, he worked as a counselor for at-risk kids. In winter, he ran his dogs, finding inspiration in their unre-

lenting drive to pull. He was among the first participants in the John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon along Minnesota's North Shore (he finished fourth in the first two races). He also raced in Montana, northern Manitoba, and other Canadian provinces.

In the intervening years, Jorgenson started a family and had two children — son Odin and daughter Anna — and he accumulated more dogs. He needed to find a way to help support his family and his teams. He turned to tourism in the early 1980s. He ran daytrips for visitors to Lutsen Mountains, a ski resort on Minnesota's North Shore, and then started organizing winter camping trips into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, just a few miles north of his home.

Jorgenson found a great satisfaction in sharing his love of sled dogs and the wilderness with people who often had little experience of either. In an unconventional way, he'd found his ministry. "Something happens to people when they make a connection with these working animals who have been bred for this purpose," he said. "The dogs take us out of our world and into theirs. It can be a life-changing experience."

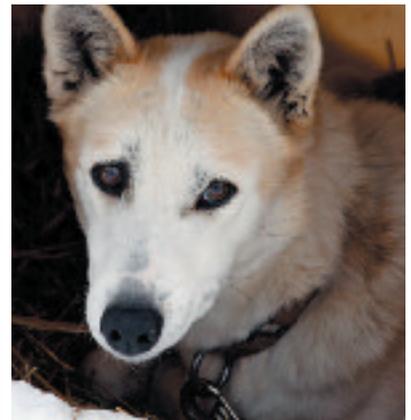
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CALL OF THE WILD

ON JORGENSON'S SLED DOG TRIPS, his clients learn to harness a team, how to drive a sled, and how to camp in the winter in northern Minnesota, where overnight lows at 30 degrees below zero aren't uncommon.

Mushing dogs is actually a physical pursuit; the driver stands on runners at the back of the sled, shifting weight on turns, running up hills to help the dogs bear the load, and braking on the downhills to keep the sled from overrunning the dogs. When it's time to set up camp, the hard work begins. Jorgenson cuts a hole in the ice of a lake to get water for the dogs and builds a fire to make a warm dog-food stew for the animals who have worked so hard all day. Jorgenson and his clients pry the dogs out of their harnesses and stake them out on a long chain for the night. An insulated tent must be put up, a fire built, and dinner cooked.

The rewards are sometimes painted in the sky in the form of Northern Lights or heard in a nighttime opera of





wolves and sled dogs matching howls. Jorgenson encourages his clients to wander away from camp to be by themselves in the wilderness where, he says, “If you’re quiet, you will hear the wilderness talking.”

When Minnesota’s winters begin to fade in late March, Jorgenson loads a truck with several teams and heads to Canada’s Northwest Territories, where he guides trips on the tundra near Great Slave Lake.

“One of my ultimate experiences running sled dogs came on one of those trips, in May, and we were thirty miles north of the tree line. We heard wolves howling and our dogs answering back, and at one point I got out of my tent and here came a pack of eight wolves, coming in upwind and fast, fanning out in front of our camp. The leader was pure black and the other seven pure white. He stared at me proudly and confidently, and it seemed like five minutes passed, though it was probably just thirty seconds.

“It would be intrusive to look into another human’s eyes that intensely,” he said, still moved by the connection to a wild soul.

HERE AND NOW

ENCOUNTERS LIKE THAT IN THE FAR NORTH fostered in Jorgenson a sense of living fully in the present. That led him to a brief tangent on the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, which segued into discussion of another discipline that brings its participants into the moment: Baseball.

“Baseball is perfect for putting you into these situations over and over,” he said. “When you’re up to bat, when you’re waiting to catch a fly ball, you’re all alone, and failure is part of the game. It teaches humility and also the chance to excel, again and again.”

Jorgenson’s career as a baseball coach was as unexpected as his life as a dog musher. When his son Odin, now thirty-one, started playing Little League, Jorgenson volunteered. His daughter Anna also played. What started as a hobby turned into a passion. After his children left home, Jorgenson coached teams in the American Legion and other summer leagues and then, ten years ago, became the coach of the inaugural team at Cook County High School in Grand Marais.

He donated many hours of his time to build a regulation baseball diamond in Grand Marais, while at the same time rallying others to help the cause.

“You have to understand, there aren’t many flat places in Cook County,” said Chuck Futterer, former superintendent of the county’s schools. “I can still see Arleigh out there, moving rocks and dirt around by himself to get that field into playable shape. On top of that, our nearest games are more than fifty miles away [in Silver Bay]. This was not an easy task.”

At about the same time, Jorgenson realized that he

needed to consider his future retirement as a musher; camping in the winter wilderness with dozens of dogs is hard work. More importantly, in the event that he was incapacitated, he didn’t want to leave dozens of dogs to someone else to care for, or worse, have to consider putting them down. He said that he applied Kant’s categorical imperative to the question. (Philosophy refresher: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”) Jorgenson determined that he had to stop breeding his sled dogs so that they could all live full lives and die naturally. As he moved toward retirement from dog sledding, so would they.

From a peak of about 160 dogs, he’s down to twenty-five. Jorgenson says this winter will be his last one running trips in Minnesota’s north woods.

At the same time, last year he led the Cook County Vikings to their best season and to the sectional final, which they lost to Iron Range powerhouse Chisholm.

“It was really painful, for all of us,” Jorgenson said. “But I told my players that I was extremely proud of them, and that they should be proud too. We were a good team, and we were in that game. And ultimately, knowing that is the most important thing.”

At the urging of dozens of his former players and other fans in Grand Marais last year, the town’s baseball diamond was renamed Arleigh Jorgenson Field, a tribute that he’s not entirely comfortable with, but has accepted. In a letter to the naming committee, former player Noah Waterhouse wrote, “Arleigh doesn’t just pass on the game of baseball to his players, he passes on the way the game should be played. Honorably, respectfully, and passionately. He is coaching young boys to become men and shaping their lives in ways most people can’t even see.”

Now Jorgenson is set for his next challenge. Last fall, he started substitute teaching in the Cook County Public Schools and plans on getting his teaching certificate in the upcoming year.

“The thing I love about teaching is that it demands that you be an even better student,” he said. “I’ve taught everything from high school English to an elementary music class.”

One of Jorgenson’s favorite philosophical maxims is Plato’s “The greatest wisdom is to know that you know not.” For him, it’s an endorsement of the idea of living with uncertainty while always striving for answers.

“That is the beginning of learning and the joy of learning and what I want to impart to my students,” he said. “For me it’s a huge reward to be able to take away the angst of not knowing. You get some kids who are running away because not knowing is painful. If you can take away that pain, the transformation is unbelievable.” 🐾

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