

Lance Mackey Interview

The following telephone interview took place between Sue Hamilton at her home in Harwinton, Connecticut and Lance Mackey at the home of Jim and Betty Lalla in Nashua, New Hampshire on September 30, 2007 the evening of the close of the 12th annual Northern New England Sled Dog Trade Fair & Seminar (Lance Mackey, Keynote Speaker).

1. S.H.: This past weekend was just incredible to watch just how busy and sought after you were with the crowds of people at the Northern New England Sled Dog Trade Fair & Seminar. Did you ever imagine that you'd be in such demand for personal appearances and by the media?

L.M.: Oh, absolutely not! I never dreamed about that ever, never once thought about it. As a little kid, I dreamed about winning the Iditarod one day, but I never put that along with all this attention. Quite honestly, I'm not opposed to it. I'm actually having fun with it. I'm still just not used to it. It's just a totally different experience for me, so I am a little uncomfortable with it. For example, this weekend there was a huge crowd on Saturday and standing in front of those people trying to talk without getting choked up, well I've never been good at that. But it is getting easier and I'm enjoying *every* bit of it! It's been a blast.

2. S.H.: We've been going to the Trade Fair for about ten years and this year was the biggest crowd ever!

L.M.: You're kidding me! Wow. That's great to hear. And I'm glad people are taking an interest. It means there are a lot more people following our sport. I consider

myself just a normal person with a normal life who is blessed having a job he loves to do.

I worked at many other jobs part time because I never found anything I was too interested in. But I was always interested in my dogs. They were just the one thing that I could relate to, that I got satisfaction out of. And it wasn't because they were paying dividends; it was just the feelings the dogs gave me.

3. S.H.: How have you been doing juggling the demands on your time, your celebrity status with being a husband, father, a kennel owner and a long distance musher?

L.M.: I've been blessed to have an organized wife! I am a little disorganized. Well, in fact I am *unorganized* and I'll admit it. Tonya's basically my guide. She tells me where to go and what time to be there and on what date.

I owe it to the people who support me and who follow our sport to oblige them by coming out and talking about it. It should be almost a requirement for somebody like me that has become successful because I think our sport needs good publicity. And I'm doing my best to promote myself not for the personal recognition but for the love of mushing.

4. S.H.: Has all of this attention or will all of this attention change you in any way?

L.M.: Well, I hope in the financial department it will! But as far as the way I am and who I am, *absolutely not!* I've said it many times, "What you see is what you get." I'm not ever going to be the guy whose head swells up, tells you to go away and can't

talk to you. I will take the time to sign and autograph stuff. I'll talk to you as much as possible. Like I said, I am me and I will always be me. I'm just a normal person loving what I do.

5. S.H.: If you hadn't had cancer do you think you'd be the same person or a different person?

L.M.: I am a little different in the sense that I know tomorrow's not a given. Now I'm kind of in a hurry to make sure I get some things accomplished. Before I wasn't quite so "pushed". More than before, I find that I am pushing myself harder than ever, driven to do many things.

6. S.H. What do you say to folks that want to get into the sport and into distance racing in particular? Do you warn them, encourage them?

L.M.: Both. I think you need to take your time to make that decision and be one hundred percent on it. And make sure your spouse or partner is with you one hundred percent. Many a family has broke up over a dog team because it's a demanding sport and requires a lot of time and even more money! Not necessarily to just run dogs, but to get into long distance racing you have to set a goal, have a plan and it's got to be a realistic one. It's going to take four or five years probably to achieve those goals and be successful as far as being a competitive musher.

7. S.H.: Part of your success are the dogs. What do you see when you evaluate a dog's potential that other mushers might not see? You obviously have an eye for dogs.

L.M.: Well, again that goes back to being raised around them. I grew up knowing what a good dog was supposed to look like, act like and perform like. And when I

wasn't racing dogs I was on the sidelines looking at the dogs that were acting like, eating like and running like champions. So, yes, I feel I have an eye for what it takes. But I think a lot of people - and this is just my opinion - a *lot* of people don't take the time to find the full potential in a dog's capabilities. Some dogs are slow maturing, some are slow to figure out how to run. That's part of training. And I think that it's unfortunate that there are a lot of kennels that go through a lot of dogs because they don't have the patience or the time. So they do the numbers thing. Instead, I work with a younger dog and look for his full potential first before I decide he doesn't make the cut.

8. S.H. How long does that take or does it vary from dog to dog?

L.M.: Oh it absolutely varies from dog to dog. But generally by a year old you should have an idea. For example, if he pays attention better than its partner going down the trail, if he's more into his eating program, if he's having good runs consistently instead of periodically. These things are obvious, but then you have to look at the history of the bloodline and understand that some dogs of a particular bloodline might not mature until they're two-years-old before they figure out what they're supposed to be doing. So you have to be patient. But there are always some dogs that stand out right away and a lot of times those are the ones that end up on my main team.

9. S.H.: What do you think about on those long stretches between checkpoints?

L.M.: That's about all you have to do out there is think. You don't have any control of your thoughts. And you think of just about everything - from birth to present day,

and about the future - like what am I going to do to better my existence? If I do well in this race, when I get home how am I going to benefit my family? What are the things that might become? What might I be able to afford? Who do I have to pay off? All the normal things obviously, but there's a lot of daydreaming as well. The dreams of winning the Iditarod. You know, I did that all the time and now here I am and it's reality.

10. S.H.: Did you get to keep your lucky thirteen bib?

L.M.: Oh absolutely! It's a priceless piece of memorabilia. For years that number was lucky in our family and for years I always dreamed of having number thirteen when I won the Iditarod. ...You know, maybe for a certain price I would probably sell half that bib, one side or the other.

11. S.H.: If someone were to say, "Oh, Lance Mackey. He's the one who won the Iditarod," is that how you want people to know you? How would you like to be remembered?

L.M.: When I'm gone I would like to be remembered as the guy who loved his dogs. And that I wasn't in it to be a celebrity, for the money, the sponsors or the fancy trucks and all that stuff. I love what I'm doing. I don't like brag about my accomplishments. I think I've earned them. I've *not* been given special favors to get where I am today. I work my tail off and definitely people know me for that. And I eat a lot. People know me and they know I eat a lot!

I just want people to remember me as the guy who loved his dogs.

12. S.H.: And when your dogs hear the name “Lance Mackey”, how would you like your dogs to define you?

L.M.: As part of the team. I am on their equal. I am a dog, so to speak. I’m the hardest working dog on my team. And I think my dogs would remember me like that, not the lazy guy on the back.

13. S.H.: What has been the most positive aspect of your record breaking accomplishment and all the attention that has come of it?

L.M.: The ability to bring, in a positive way, our sport to the public’s attention. There are a lot of people who know about the Iditarod but don’t even know what the Yukon Quest is. But we have over a million visitors every year to our museum in the Fairbanks area and because my trophies are on display there, people are finding out what the Yukon Quest is. And that’s one small reward as a result of all the attention I am getting. I have been lucky to have this great opportunity to promote my sport. I think it’s a great sport and I would like to see it continue way beyond my time and my kids’ time and their kids time. But really it has nothing to do with me because I consider myself just a normal person that most people can relate to. I just want to take these opportunities to promote the love of the animals no matter if you are skijoring, or dryland racing or whatever. You don’t have to be a professional musher. I am just promoting the love of my dogs and the bond between humans and their dogs. You know, there are a lot of people out there who think that even just owning dogs, let alone racing them, is inhumane. I’m just trying to support the kind of

lifestyle you can lead while sharing your life with dogs. If even one person has benefited from my story then I've been successful.

14. S.H.: If you hadn't gotten into dogs, if dogs didn't become a part of your life, what do you think you would have ended up doing?

L.M.: Oh, there's no doubt in my mind I would be a king crab fishing captain. No doubt in my mind. It was my first career and second passion.

But, you know, I was eight-years-old when my dad won the Iditarod I was there to see it. And I remember quite well that it was something very exciting to me at the time and it embedded in my head. And then to watch my brother become successful in doing this. I am glad my dad was a dog musher and loved dogs because I'm not the kind of person who would enjoy being in a building stuck behind a desk. I belong in this sport!

15. S.H.: What do you do in your leisure time when you're not driving yourself?

L.M.: Well, lately I haven't had a whole lot of time to myself. But I would love to enjoy more time with my family. Just kick back and relax. Unfortunately I made a big move across the state from the Kenai area up to Fairbanks and I'm in the process of basically a twenty-year project that needs to get done, like, last June! So I've been extremely busy building a house, building a dog lot, dog boxes, basically everything you do that it takes to start over. So there is no leisure time and on top of that I've been flying all over the country talking to different people; and again I love it and I'm having a great time doing it.

16. S.H.: If you could travel anywhere in the world, go anywhere for any reason, where would it be?

L.M.: Right now, tonight, I want to travel back home! Other than this, if I could go any one place in the world, I'd like to check out Jamaica. I'd like to go there and see their dog team run. I think that would be great.

17. S.H.: So, what do you want to be when you grow up?

L.M.: I don't know. I tell my wife all the time it's inevitable I have to grow old, but why do I have to grow up? To be quite honest I'd rather be a little adolescent and never grow up and continue doing what I'm doing because I'm perfectly content with my lifestyle right now.

18. S.H.: Well, we'll just rename you Peter Pan!

L.M.: Ha! Well, I've been called worse so that'll do just fine.

19. S.H.: When's the movie coming out?

L.M.: There's not a specific date but it is in the making. In the next couple of years for sure. I don't know how long it takes to make a movie but they are in the process.

20. S.H.: Is there anything else you'd like the folks reading this interview to know about you?

L.M.: Absolutely. The one thing that comes to mind immediately is that a poor boy does have a chance in the real world. Don't ever give up on your dreams because dreams can come true! If you put your heart and soul into something, then you can do anything in the world that you want to do. People have said this time and time again and I think this is a perfect example.

Sue Hamilton has been a recreational musher for over 30 years, first with Alaskan Malamutes and then, beginning in 1996, exclusively with Inuit Sled Dogs. She is the co-founder and U.S. coordinator of the Inuit Sled Dog International (ISDI) and editor of the ISDI's award-winning quarterly journal, *The Fan Hitch*. Sue and her husband live in Connecticut.