



Beargrease rookie gets master's mentoring before Duluth debut

By: Andy Greder , Duluth News Tribune

A rookie musher from New Zealand wouldn't typically make the list of top mushers for the John Beargrease 150-mile mid-distance sled dog race. But if that unknown musher has been receiving guidance from Jamie Nelson — a four-time Beargrease marathon winner — fellow competitors will take notice.

So, take notice: Nelson protégé Curt Perano will make his Beargrease debut Sunday in the sprint from Duluth to Tofte.

Perano and his wife, Fleur, began dog sledding with a couple of Alaskan Malamutes in Christchurch, New Zealand, eight years ago, but Curt said they really knew nothing about the sport until December 2007, when they teamed up with Nelson at her home in Togo.

“For me and my wife, we couldn't have found a better opportunity than to learn from her,” Curt Perano said. “She is second to none.”

Nelson, who won Beargrease titles in 1988, 1995, 1997 and 1998, has a reputation as a dog sledding master, willing to share her knowledge with new racers.

Defending mid-distance champion Don Galloway of Markham, Minn., is another Nelson protégé. He learned the benefit of positive coaching of the dogs from Nelson during the mid-1990s.

“She is a wonderful person to work with and have as a mentor,” said Galloway, who has three consecutive top three finishes in the mid-distance. “Jamie has impacted and mentored a lot of dog teams and people's lives.”

With only a few four- to 12-mile races in New Zealand on his resume, Curt's first distance race, the White Oak Sled Dog Classic two weeks ago in Deer River,

went better than anticipated. With 10 Alaskan Huskies, he finished seventh out of 19 teams after covering 130 miles.

“That was more than I had done in any training event,” Curt said. “A lot of the dogs are young, and, with my experience, where I finished was a bonus.”

Nelson, who has raced in Alaska’s Iditarod and Yukon Quest, finished third in the White Oak and commended Curt’s race strategy.

“You couldn’t ask for a better way to interpret what I said, and he did it,” Nelson said.

The Peranos first met Nelson at her Mushing Boot Camp in Maine in October 2007. After forming a bond, Fleur asked Nelson if she knew of anyone who needed handlers. Nelson said she didn’t need to look any further and invited the Peranos, who were living in Atlanta, to move to her land about 35 miles north of Chisholm.

Nelson taught the Peranos how to manage, train and feed a kennel of dogs.

“She has been amazing,” said Fleur, who has done a lot of the training with the dogs while Curt is traveling for work as a media consultant. “She is a great teacher. A very knowledgeable teacher.”

Like most mushers, the dogs drew the Peranos into the sport.

“The dogs are the fascination,” Curt said. “If you were to tell me 10 years ago that I have 10 dogs, I would have laughed at you. Now, I’m probably going to get more. It’s amazing what they can do. It’s a privilege to work with them.”

Curt will come to the Ordean Middle School starting line with eight dogs, including lead dogs named Merlin, Winnie, Bolt and Sonic. About six of the dogs will have run with Curt at the White Oak race.

“It’s great to see the dogs come together,” said Fleur, who will run a team at next month’s Wolf Track Classic Sled Dog Race in Ely. “Especially training the leaders, that is the biggest joy.”

Nelson credits the Peranos’ understanding of dogs for having a competitive team so quickly.

“He has to be conscious of the dogs completely,” Nelson said. “We want to bring home happy dogs wagging their tails. I want to instill that in people I work with. If they learn how to do that, then they learn how to race.”