



THE SKINNY LEG SLED DOGS

A BIRTH DEFECT MEANT THAT SPENCER HAD TO LOOK FOR A DIFFERENT SPORT. HIS CHOICE HAS BEEN A HOWLING SUCCESS.

By Sarah Hanson

The sound of dogs yipping, howling, and barking fills the crisp air. Their harnesses tug back and forth as some dogs excitedly jump in place. People line the sides of the snow-covered trail, craning their necks to get a view of the mushers (dogsled drivers) and teams. The announcer on the sideline

yells out a name—"Spencer!"—as a 16-year-old boy in a giant parka steps onto his dog sled.

Finally, the timekeeper gives a countdown. Three, two, one . . . and then all barking and howling stops.

"The instant we take off, the dogs go dead silent," says Spencer. "All you hear is them breathing and their

paws hitting the snow. Everyone else fades away, and it's just this tunnel vision of focus."

Spencer is used to this kind of focus. He's been a musher (dogsled driver) for the past six years, and he knows that keeping focused and managing his adrenaline is essential, no matter how exhausted he feels.

Often, Spencer and his dogs will run 200-to-400-mile dogsled races that last three to four days. During those races, he and the dogs have to run day and night in freezing temperatures, stopping only three times to down some food and fit in two or three hours of sleep.

Spencer has had to stay awake for three days straight. He even got hypothermia once. So, if it's so difficult, why does he keep coming back to dogsledding again and again? Well, part of it is because of his skinny leg.

THE CALL OF THE WILD

For Spencer, dogsledding came about in an unexpected way. "I was born with a birth defect in my left leg that causes the veins in my leg to be atrophied, so not enough blood goes to that leg," he





Spencer (below) and his dad (above) race with their own team of dogs.

explains. “There’s not a lot of growth and muscle mass, so my left leg is shorter and skinnier than the right.”

Growing up, he could walk and run, but some things were still difficult for him. “I grew up in a family and community of athletes. My two older brothers, Chase and Brandon, are both big football players, which led me to want to pursue football too.”

However, after playing football for two years in elementary school, Spencer soon realized the other kids were just too fast and it was too difficult for him to keep up. “I was sad. I struggled because I felt like I couldn’t have something to work toward.”

Then one day as he was reading *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London, an idea popped into his mind—what about *dogsledding*? “I was fascinated

by the idea of dogsledding. I was with my mom after school one day when I piped up and said, ‘We should start dogsledding!’ My mom stopped dead in her tracks and retorted, ‘You’ve been talking to your dad!’ It turned out that my dad had been thinking about getting a dogsled team too! It was destiny.”

A WHOLE LOT OF WORK

Spencer’s family held a meeting and agreed that dogsledding would be the perfect sport for Spencer. He says, “I figured it would be good for me because it doesn’t involve a lot of leg strength and speed, but it does require endurance, both physically and mentally.”

Pulling everything together for a team took a lot of work, though.



“My dad and I researched the sport and talked to several mushers who helped us get started,” Spencer says. “We got our Alaskan Huskies a few at a time until we had enough for two teams—one for me and one for my dad.” They affectionately named their team of dogs the “Skinny Leg Sled Dogs,” after Spencer’s skinny leg.

Of course, the work didn’t stop there. Spencer and his family now take care of 51 dogs at their home in Montana, USA, not to mention their other pets (two falcons, two cats, and some canaries).

“We spend an hour each day feeding the dogs, giving them water, and scooping up poop,” Spencer says. “In

the winter, we make 70 pounds of meat stew each day to feed them enough calories. We also do our own veterinary work, like vaccines and stitches. We train them for two to

three hours every day during fall and winter. And during the winter weekends, we’ll run about 100 miles. Then, of course, all of that culminates in the races, which are a lot of work.”

Spencer isn't afraid of hard work. In addition to his training time, he spends an hour each day making sure his dogs are well fed and cared for.



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UNITED AS A FAMILY

Obviously, dogsledding is challenging and time-consuming. But Spencer says it has blessed his life in many ways, especially when it comes to his family. “Everything involved in dogsledding has taught me and my family to work hard. It has united us. It takes all of us to care for our dogs and run long races. My mom and my brothers are like my pit crew. They handle all the dogs during my races. And my dad and I work together to run it all.”



Spencer with his brothers, Brandon (middle) and Chase (right).

More than that, Spencer has realized why it is important for families to work hard. He says, “If you don’t put in the effort and nurture your relationships with your family members, you won’t be a real family—you’ll just passively be a family. You’ll miss out on the blessings of being a family.”

ENDURING SPIRITUALLY

Dogsledding also gives Spencer the motivation to move forward and achieve more. “I’ve learned to

push myself mentally and physically through bitter cold, darkness, fear, and sleep deprivation to achieve my goals. It’s given me the skills to stay alert and strong.”

Similarly, he thinks it’s important to learn how to endure spiritually in the gospel. “When the going gets tough, you’ve got to be tough. In dogsledding, you can’t stop trying or the dogs will stop trying, and then you won’t do as well. It’s the same in the gospel. To endure well, you must always

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Spencer also notes that progression and enduring well require effort. “You can’t just passively believe in the gospel. You have to work at it. All the best things in life come from work. To get a testimony, you have to show your dedication by doing things like praying and studying the scriptures. You have to show dedication in your calling and your family.” Though it may sound tiring, Spencer says, “Everything goes more smoothly with work.”

AN AMAZING WEAKNESS

In the end, Spencer keeps coming back to dogsledding because he’s being strengthened—physically, intellectually, and spiritually. “Dogsledding

is the coolest sport in the world. It has given me the motivation to achieve my goals. I have learned to push myself and be mentally engaged in what I do.”

And the remarkable thing is, Spencer is where he is today because of a supposed weakness. Who would have guessed a skinny leg would lead to training dogs and racing them hundreds of miles through the snow? “If it weren’t for my skinny leg, I wouldn’t be a musher. I think it was the Lord helping me turn my weakness into a strength [see Ether 12:27]. Not only has dogsledding made my body stronger, but because of my birth defect, I have developed a strong work ethic. The Lord has turned my weakness into something amazing.” **NE**

The author lives in Utah, USA.



FUN FACTS ABOUT SPENCER

- 1 He started dogsledding when he was 10 years old.
- 2 He was 12 years old when he did his first solo 100-mile race.
- 3 At 13, he won the junior division of Montana’s Race to the Sky 100-mile race, and he finished faster than any of the adults.
- 4 In 2017, he was the youngest musher ever to compete in the Race to the Sky 300-mile course.
- 5 Spencer has worked during the summer at Dairy Queen.
- 6 He has raced in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and Minnesota, USA.
- 7 During races, he sleeps on the dogsled in a sleeping bag.
- 8 His favorite scripture is Ether 12:27.
- 9 And his favorite animal? A dog, of course.

