

ANIMALS TO THE  
**RESCUE!**



# Balto

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# A Hero Is Born

NOME, ALASKA

EARLY 1920s

**B**alto twisted his neck to look at the strange leather straps on his belly. Another strap was fastened tightly across his chest. He chewed at it.

“Leave it!” Sled dog driver Leonhard



Seppala's voice commanded. Balto snapped to attention.

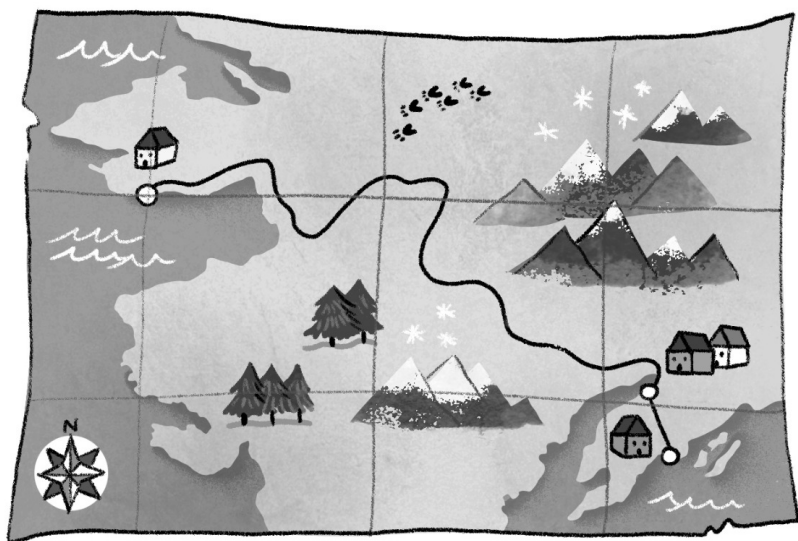
Balto was only a puppy, but today he was wearing a sled dog harness for the very first time. He was going to run with the team. Leonhard clipped Balto in beside an experienced female dog. She would show the puppy what to do.

Leonhard stepped onto the sled behind the team. "Hike!" he shouted. The team surged forward with Balto right beside them.

In the 1920s, sled dogs were the most important animals in Nome, Alaska—almost as important as the people. During the summer, Nome depended on ships coming in and out of the harbor with supplies. In the winter months, the harbors iced over and stopped ships from traveling so

far north. Planes had open cockpits and couldn't fly in snowstorms. The roads were buried in snow that was impossible for even teams of horses to travel on.

From fall to spring, the only way into Nome was over the Iditarod Trail. The trail stretched 938 miles from the port of Seward in the south, over mountains and through valleys, to Nome.



Without teams of sled dogs and their drivers, the town would be cut off from the rest of the world during the long winter months.

Balto was born to be a sled dog. He was a Siberian husky, one of the most common types of sled dog at that time. Malamutes were another popular sled dog breed. They were stronger than huskies, but slow. Malamutes would get into fights with other dogs, but huskies liked working in a group.

Huskies were smart.

They loved people.

And they loved to go.



Sled dog drivers made sure their teams were happy. An unhappy team could refuse to move—or even run away. And out on the trail, with the wind whistling over the ice, this could

mean disaster for the team and the driver.

Sled dog puppies like Balto might start their training when they were only six or eight weeks old. They would run



loose beside a grown-up sled dog team. The puppies would learn by watching how the adult dogs acted, and they would get used to running on snow, rocks, and ice. Some puppies would even try to wedge themselves into the team before they were put in a harness. When they were around nine months old, the pups would be strapped into the line for the first time.

To drive a sled dog team, the driver used only his or her voice. Balto

and other young sled dogs already knew basic dog commands, like “sit” and “stay.” During the training runs, Leonhard would teach them the commands for pulling a sled. “Hike” meant “go.” “Whoa” was “stop.” “Gee” meant “turn right,” and “haw” meant “turn left.”

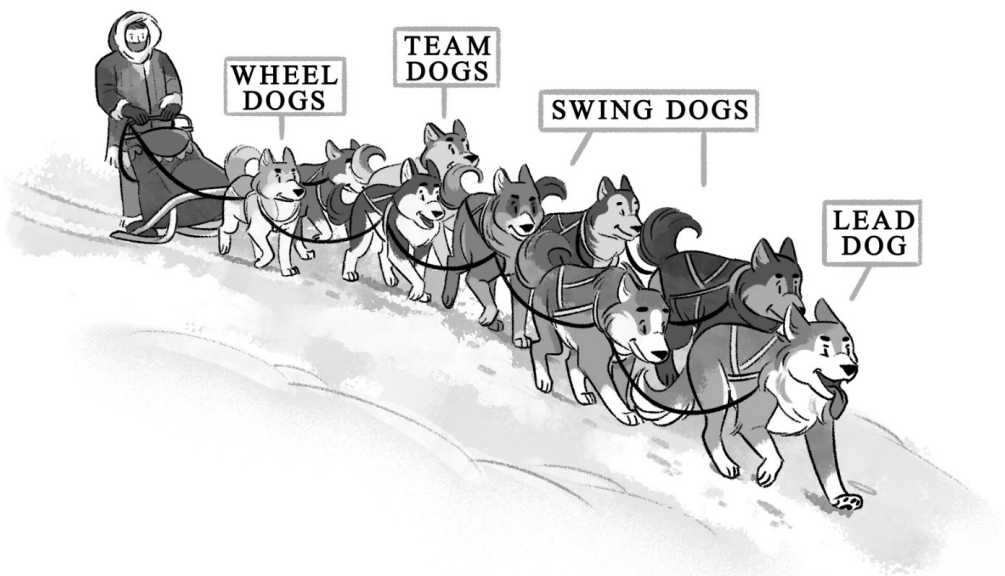
The young sled dogs also needed to find out where they fit on the team. Every dog had a job. Wheel dogs were harnessed closest to the sled. They pulled and steered, so they had to be strong and steady. Swing dogs and team dogs ran in front of the wheel dogs. They added extra power and speed.

The lead dogs ran at the front. A team might have one or two lead dogs. Lead dogs were natural pilots. They had to follow directions, but they also



had to think for themselves. If a driver gave a command that would put a team in danger, the lead dog needed to be confident enough to disobey.

Leonhard had many sled dogs. Some hauled sleds of supplies or other goods, but only the very best earned a place on Leonhard's racing team. This team included some of the smartest and fastest dogs in Nome—but it didn't



include Balto. Leonhard thought a good racing sled dog should be sleek and slender. Balto's body was boxy and his legs looked bowed.

So when Balto was about six months old, Leonhard sent him to work at the Hammon Consolidated Gold Fields Company. The mining company used Leonhard's well-trained dogs to pull freight sleds loaded with gold and other supplies. Balto was a strong, quiet, willing dog, but he wasn't a leader. No one thought he ever would be.

