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MUSHER

The Call of the White Wild

A film by Pierre de Parscau

SUMMARY

Musher \mə.ʃəʃ\

Driver of a snow sled pulled by a dog team. The origin of the word comes from the sled drivers who, to make their dogs go forward, said "march", which became "mush" in English

Somewhere in the Jura, an adventurer has built a family unlike any other. Sébastien dos Santos Borges is one of the most respected mushers in the world and has travelled the poles for twenty years, accompanied by his sled dogs. Dogs with singular stories, sometimes rescued from the SPA¹, and to whom Sébastien offers the opportunity to walk on the snow of their distant ancestors. Huskies, Alaskan Malamutes, Greenland Dogs: these top athletes have forged an unbreakable bond with their master.

More than 7,000km away from his mountains in the Jura, Sébastien embarks seventeen of his dogs for an extraordinary adventure, following in the footsteps of the adventurers of the Great North. For several months they will settle in the heart of Alaska, in North-West Canada. Training, care, meetings with local populations, these few months in the wild landscapes of Alaska will prepare Sébastien for the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, the most difficult sled dog race in the world. Only twenty mushers a year make it to the starting line, and more than half of them will never cross the finish line.

Facing local teams composed of more than five hundred dogs, Sébastien will have to start with inexperienced dogs, some of which are discovering the Great North for the first time. The goal: to travel alone a 1,700 km trail between Canada and Alaska. A major event for the local population and a journey that revives the one made by the pioneers of the Gold Rush at the end of the 19th century. Among them a man named Jack London whose books forged the Great North legend.

¹ In France and Québec, the *Société protectrice des animaux* (SPA) is one of the four types of animal shelters. The SPA is one of the most popular ones.

Without any help, Sébastien dos Santos and his dogs will have to face temperatures that can drop as low as -50°C , trace their route through snowy landscapes and work as one to hope to cross the finish line in the allotted time. Between snowstorms, steep mountains and polar lights, Sébastien's sled will dive into an unspoiled and grandiose nature.

But beyond the competition, this adventure will allow Sébastien to highlight his particular view on sledding and dogs. Alongside the populations of the Great North, he will discover a region threatened by the impacts of climate change and human development. A world still wild where the history of men and animals are intertwined. A heritage that the Iditarod Quest brings back to life each year for the rare mushers who dare to venture there.





DIRECTOR'S NOTE OF INTENT

I first found out about Sébastien dos Santos through the words of Virginie. His girlfriend had picked me up at the train station in Aix-les-Bains to drive me to his house. I was going to shoot his portrait as part of a report for Ushuaia TV and I only knew about him through what his web page said: too little. Forty-five minutes on the road with Virginie was to teach me much more. Along the way, she spoke of his love for his dogs, the first family with whom he had traveled the poles and left his mark on the ice, of his solitary but friendly character, of his self-sacrifice.

In fact, Sébastien was nothing like a bear when he opened the door of the wooden house he had built with his own hands. The interior was almost like an ethnographic museum, with a lot of Alaskan canoes, animal skins and trinkets. The house alone told the story of this extraordinary musher with the humility that, I found out in the course of this day, characterizes him. And then it was necessary to dive into the pack, camera in hand, to understand what this man had found in contact with the dogs. This whirlwind of joy, diverse characters and sensitivity, Sébastien had made it his daily life and shared it without restraint with his visitors. To see him leaning over his dogs was a lesson in kindness and gentleness. There are the veterans, the anchors and the youngsters who are only a few months old. And to each one Sébastien offers the same attention, he who has managed to find a place among his own pack.

Sébastien sat in front of my camera and talked about snow, cold, running in the night and makeshift camps. The camera was rolling, so was my imagination. I recognized in his stories accents of Jack London, memories of reading and this lexicon that made the Great North mythology. A return to childhood. We shared our stories, our respective adventures and Sébastien concluded the day by inviting me to accompany him to Alaska in a year from now. These few hours spent with him convinced me to say yes.

For a long time, I contemplated snowy landscapes through the windows of the Trans-Siberian Railway that I had taken on my way back from a long filming in the Pacific, which was

then dedicated to coral reefs. When I left the deep blue sea, I wanted to see this white wild that bites your skin and remains one of the last areas of the adventure. To follow Sébastien on his journey to Alaska is to immerse oneself with him and his dogs in this unique world, far from comfort and at the mercy of the elements. This film is an opportunity to extend this portrait shot in the Jura and to draw the picture of this region of the world, in the footsteps of the Gold Rush pioneers. A fragile myth that climate change is eroding today, and that may come to an end one day.

Sébastien is a competitor. But taking the start of the Iditarod, the most difficult race in the world, is not a first for him. After having braved this track and having lost a dog, the podium is not what pushes him to keep on coming back. This other thing is undoubtedly this unity with his team and the gift offered to these dogs, often from the SPA, to walk in these landscapes for which they are cut out. And then there is Virginie and Cassie, their little girl. This second family often divided between the desire to keep Sébastien for herself and the need to let him live his dream. A dilemma that seems to me to draw a powerful narrative arc.

I like the idea of the journey for what it is. This film is not about a sporting feat but about an immersion in the wilderness without any help. I'm not interested in Sébastien's position in the general ranking, nor is he, I think. I admire this man's penchant for sacrifice. The one of comfort, of a love life too classic. Faced with professional mushers running for money and glory, Sébastien has a vision of a free life. To leave with his dogs is for him to find himself.

Giving me a role in this adventure is a precious gift. Great scenery, deep characters, and unexpected adventures are not always enough to tell a good story. It often takes that extra bit of soul and passion. I hope that a little bit of Sébastien dos Santos's passion will permeate this film.

Pierre de Parscau



This man had saved his life, which was something; but, further, he was the ideal master. Other men saw to the welfare of their dogs from a sense of duty and business expediency; he saw to the welfare of his as if they were his own children, because he could not help it.

The Call of the Wild

Jack London



SÉBASTIEN DOS SANTOS BORGES



Born in Chartres, France, Sébastien became passionate about photography at a very early age and went on several expeditions, first to follow the itinerary of a drop of water in India through 4500km travelled by bicycle. He then explored for more than 20 years the coldness of the planet and notably accomplished the world tour by the polar circles.

In 1998, he adopted Kadluk, his first Siberian Husky. This meeting, by chance, allowed Sébastien to lead his expeditions in the Arctic Circle. From then on, he adopted a dozen Nordic dogs from the SPA and began his numerous journeys in the Great North. He also has some dogs from great bloodlines. It is this mixture which makes the strength of his team and which forms "*Le Traineau du Destin*"².

In 2016 he qualified for the Yukon Quest, the toughest mushers race in the world. He had to quit practically at the end of the race, due to the death of one of his dogs.

In 2017 he participated in the Copper Basin 300, a sled race of over 450km. The conditions were disastrous, it kept snowing and the track was covered with snow. as the race went on. 10 mushers out of 39 quit the race. Sébastien ended up at the 19th place and won the most important prize according to him, the VetCare prize. This prize rewards the musher for the quality of the care given to his dogs.

Sébastien would continue on February 4th with the Yukon Quest and hopes to cross the finish line with his dogs.

He now lives in the Ain with his partner Virginie and daughter Cassie.

² "*The Sled of Fate*"



IDITAROD TRAIL SLED DOG RACE

The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is an annual 1757 km sled dog race in Alaska, between Anchorage and Nome mainly through the taiga, also called boreal forest. It starts on the first Saturday of March and usually lasts between 8 and 15 days. Teams composed of a musher and a team of 12 to 14 sled dogs, of which at least six must be present until the finish line.

The race starts in Anchorage, Alaska, and ends in Nome. Twenty-one checkpoints separate the two cities.

To enter, participants must be over 18 years old and pay a \$4,000 entry fee (\$3,950 for previous race champions).

You must also have completed qualifying races: finishing the Iditarod or the Yukon Quest counts as a full qualification. The purpose of these qualifying races is to prove that the musher has the necessary training, physical and mental condition, and mushing and wilderness skills.

Mushers must bring food, camping equipment and dog care supplies, as well as an axe, a cold weather sleeping bag, a pair of snowshoes, their dogs' veterinary records, promotional materials, a stove and eight boots for each dog. The race rules pay particular attention to the dogs' care and well-being. At the beginning of the race, the musher must prove that all of their dogs are in good physical condition by means of a complete medical check-up.

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