

KICK SLED

" Speedy mileage on icy routes, handy carriage to run errands"

Kick sleds bring emotions and images alive. Kick sleds are valued as sports equipment, play equipment, and as moving aids of old people. A water sled transformed into a kick sled by the lengthening of its runners in the late 19th century. This kick-powered vehicle has a special place in the childhood memories of many Finns.

A kick sled has long runners and a seat for one passenger. It is pushed forward and used for outdoor sports and transportation. Water sleds are said to be the ancestors of kick sleds. Somebody came up with the idea to add a crossbar between the posts of the water sled for rigidity and to lengthen the runners backwards to make it possible to stand on them and to make it easier to kick speed. The kicking was made even more effective by wearing a special ice shoe on one foot. The shoe bit sharply to the ice and prevented slipping. (Enonkoski 1907; MV:K 16/615) Kick sleds were especially important in households that did not own a horse. This is why the kick sled has also been called "poor man's horse". In its early history, kick sled was regarded as a household's utility object, enabling faster travelling, and carrying of water, milk, firewood and even children. In Asikkala, people adopted kick sled vocabulary in their local speech with a completely new meaning: they used to say that somebody "was kicking a sled" when they meant the person was lying. (MV:K17/254)

First of all, kick sled was a means of transportation. It was used for getting to work, to school, to church, and for shopping. Traditionally, kick sleds were used for moving on ice, especially when it was thaw. When the temperature went below zero and there was snow, skis were used instead. Children were commonly not allowed to use kick sleds so that they wouldn't brake them or get hurt themselves. The sharp nose of the kick sled was dangerous if the sled fell over. Because steering of kick sleds was difficult children easily bumped into road banks or collided with trees. Despite the fragility of kick sleds children did use them for sliding. In Helsinki region, kick sleds were obtained as playing equipment for children in 1932 (MV:K 17/368). Children's kick sleds were smaller and lighter than those used by grown-ups.

Contemporary type of kick sleds were first used in middle and northern parts of Sweden in the late 19th century. How kick sleds found their way to the lives of the Finns? Kick sleds was brought Finland from Sweden in the late 19th century.

Pedlars from eastern Carelia and from Russia, travelling in Finland, soon noticed what an advantageous vehicle kick sled was in wintertime. They started to carry their merchandise with this new invention already in the 19th century. According to Ivar Wilskman, in the year of 1907 kick sled was a common means of transportation in Northern Finland, in Turku and along the coastline in general, but not yet in inland areas. It was first after World War I that kick sleds became popular in many parts of Finland. Postmen used to travel with kick sleds in the early 20th century in the archipelago areas but only when it was thaw. By frost even the postman rather used skis.

Kick Sled Parts

Kick Sled was made of six parts: poles, handle, crossbar, nose batten, runners, and the seat. Sometimes the upper parts of the poles and the handle were decoratively peeled.

Making of Kick Sleds

The first kick sleds were made of birchwood at home - for the bending of the wooden runners a press was used, the same tool as in making skis. Underneath the wooden runners the blacksmith hammered steel strips for better sliding and wear. These homemade sleds were often heavy and clumsy - even ugly.

Kick sleds with iron runners were later sold on markets and soon also in stores.

Kick Sled Types

Traditional Model

In the year of 1900, electrician Oskari Terhi from Salo made the first iron-runner kick sled that we know of. Iron-runner kick sleds gained popularity in different areas during the decades 1910-1930. Kick sleds used in the early 20th century were similar to the kick sleds of today, only sturdier and heavier. The poles were slightly inclined backwards to improve the steering properties and to give the foot and leg more room to swing in the front. The inclination improved the comfort of the person kicking and also the person sitting on the sled. When ploughing of roads improved and ice on the roads got harder it was possible to start to use sleds with thinner runners. This made the sleds lighter and further improved their steering properties.

Modern Model

The basic kick sled of today that we all are familiar with has basically maintained the same for the last century. Production methods have modernized and a few major factories in the Nordic countries mainly manufacture the kick sleds on sale. The kick sleds come in different sizes for users of different heights.

Kick Sled Manufacturing Today

In the 1960's, some 100 000 kick sleds were manufactured in Finland annually by five factories. Heavy car traffic, and sanding and salting of roads has worsened the opportunities to use kick sleds. The annual production of kick sleds has stabilized at the number of ca. 20.000 units. All of these are made by one company only, ESLA, the kick sled factory of E.S. Lahtinen in Koura. This company is the sole Finnish survivor in kick sled business. In Sweden and Norway, there still are other manufacturers.

Kick Sledding as Winter Sport

Women and Sports in the end of the 19th century

Kick sleds were regarded as competitive sports equipment in the late 19th century. However, from 1920's to 1990's kick sleds were primarily transportation means of women, children, old people, and people with walking disabilities. Women used to belong to skating, gymnastics, and biking clubs exactly for the reason that these hobbies were not included in competitive sports. In the 1880's women were allowed to participate in figure skating competitions, in which "the quality, beauty, and perfection of performance" were the qualities under review. Biking was a sport connected with tourism and it was promoted by bicycle merchants and the Finnish Tourist Association (Suomen Matkailijayhdistys), established in 1887. Gymnastics became the special sport for women because it did not aim at proofing who was the best, it was not a

competitive sport. Instead, strongly built women who made manual work were allowed to participate in skiing competitions, in the same rank with men. This happened, for example, in Tyrnävä in 1879. (118, Laine 1991, Suomi uskoi urheiluun).

"Oulun Potkuriklubi" The Kick Sled Club of Oulu and Competitive Kick Sledding

The first Finnish kick sledding club was called "Oulun Potkuriklubi" and it was established in March, 1890 (two years before the establishment of the first Finnish ski club, Helsingfors Skiklubi). Ms. Wera Hjelt was in key position in organizing "Potkuriklubi". She had been very active in the beginning of the 1880's to make the sport of kick sledding better known. No documents tell us if women participated in the first kick sledding competition organized by "Potkuriklubi" in 1892. In 1906, kick sledding was appreciated as one of the most important winter sports in Finland, together with skiing and skating. In 1901 and 1905, kick sledding was included in the competition programs of the major Nordic sports event, Nordiska Spelen, in Stockholm. The Swedish kick sleds of the late 19th century that were used in the competitions were very rigidly built, had iron-enforced runners and vertical poles. In 1985, after a many year beak, Finnish Championships in Kick Sledding were finally reorganized in Lentiira, Kuhmo.

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