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The Last Great Race



Written by Ned Jensen

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A musher and sled-dog team in the wilderness

Introduction

It is hard to imagine anyone wanting to travel almost 2,000 kilometers (1,242 mi) across the Alaskan wilderness in the dead of winter. It is even harder to imagine someone doing it behind a sled pulled by a team of dogs. Yet every year since 1973, dozens of men and women have participated in what is known as “The Last Great Race on Earth.” The race, better known as the Iditarod, starts in Anchorage, Alaska, on the first Saturday in March. It is without a doubt one of the most **grueling** sporting events ever held.

The Inspiration

In the winter of 1925, a terrible disease called **diphtheria** struck the town of Nome on the central coast of Alaska. Diphtheria, which usually attacks children, is caused by bacteria that infect the lungs, suffocating the victim. It can be treated with an injection of **serum**. But during the harsh winter, Nome was running out of serum. Doctors in Nome sent an urgent plea to the city of Anchorage, asking for more. Someone suggested they send the serum by plane, but flying was dangerous in 1925. The planes of that time could not cope with the fierce storm that was raging. Instead, the serum was loaded on a train and sent northward to Nome. Unfortunately, the train tracks ended about 1,100 kilometers (683 mi) short of the town.



A dog team in Nome

The only way to cover the remaining distance was by dogsled. A **musher**, or sled driver, loaded the serum from the train and traveled to a village or house, where he passed it to another musher. The next musher passed the serum to another musher at a second village or house, and so on all the way to Nome. Thanks to the brave mushers, Nome's children were saved.

Do You Know?

The lead dog of the sled-dog team that arrived with the serum in Nome in 1925 became famous. His name was Balto, and he was the subject of many news reports. Balto even went on tour throughout the United States and Canada with other dogs from his team. He eventually retired to the Cleveland, Ohio, zoo and died in 1933. Today, schoolchildren have begun a campaign to return Balto's preserved body to Alaska.



History

The 1925 journey demonstrated how important dogsledding had once been for the people of Alaska. But by 1967, dogs were being replaced by snowmobiles, cars, and trucks. Two Alaskans, Dorothy Page and Joe Redington Sr., wanted to do something that would help save this 6,000-year-old tradition.

Dorothy, an Alaska history buff, and Joe, a dog breeder and musher, decided to hold a sled-dog race along the Iditarod trail, a route created during the Alaskan gold rush. The trail got its name from Alaskan Native Americans, who called the surrounding hunting area *Haiditarod*, or “The Distant Place.” The route of the first race was about 90 kilometers (56 mi) and took only two days to complete.



Dorothy Page



Joe Redington Sr.

In order to attract mushers, Joe and Dorothy raised \$25,000 in prize money. This was enough money to get 58 mushers to enter. But the next year, the race was canceled because the mild winter led to a lack of snow and a lack of interest.

Another race was held in 1969, but organizers could only raise enough money for a \$1,000 prize, and only 12 mushers entered.

But the lack of interest did not discourage Joe Redington Sr. He was determined to make the race longer and more challenging. In 1973, he extended the route to around 1,800 kilometers (1,100 mi). It now stretched from Anchorage to Nome and was the longest sled-dog race in the world. Joe managed to increase the prize money to about \$50,000. In 1973, 35 mushers entered the first official Iditarod. It took the winner 20 days to complete the race, and the last-place finisher reached Nome 12 days later.

The Route

The trail taken by the mushers carrying serum in 1925 only covers about half of today's northern Iditarod race trail. The current trail uses two routes, the northern and the southern, which split off for about 500 kilometers (300 mi) in the middle of the race. On even-numbered years, mushers take the northern route, and on odd-numbered years, they take the southern route.

The official opening of the race is a bustling ceremony in Anchorage. The dogs make a **ceremonial** run from Anchorage to Eagle River. Then the dogs are trucked to the official start in Wasilla. This way, the dogs are not competing on the dangerous city streets of Anchorage, and they do not have to cross the treacherous Cook Inlet.



The busy start in Anchorage





Jeff King, Iditarod champion in 1993, 1996, 1998, and 2006

Not every team starts at the same time. Instead, teams take off at two-minute intervals to prevent teams from running into each other. The differences in time are erased at the required 24-hour stop, where officials hold the teams back for a few extra minutes.

Since the race takes over a week to complete, there are 26 checkpoints along the route where mushers and dogs can rest. Before the race begins, mushers send dog food and other supplies to the checkpoints so they will not have to carry them on the trail. The average distance between checkpoints is 74 kilometers (46 mi)—longer than the entire 1967 race—and the greatest distance between checkpoints is 150 kilometers (93 mi).



Off they go!

The dogs can keep a steady speed of about 19 kilometers per hour (12 mph) for about 4 to 6 hours before they get tired. This is usually long enough to get from one checkpoint to the next. But the dogs also rest on the trail, so the mushers don't always stop at every checkpoint.

In order to keep the teams on course through the trackless wilderness, the trail is marked with orange stakes and reflective tape. Additional markers are set up in the mountains and along the coast. Each year, volunteers set out about 12,000 stakes. Getting lost could cost a musher his or her life, so it is important that the trail be well marked.

The Iditarod trail is filled with some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. It crosses the Alaska Mountain Range at a gap known as Rainy Pass, though during the Iditarod, it is more likely to be a snowy pass. The trail also follows the Yukon River Valley and travels along the coast of the Bering Sea before reaching Nome. Along the way, it passes through thick forests and over frozen **tundra**. The teams must cross frozen streams and rivers, which can be deadly if the ice is too thin. Wild animals such as moose have been known to attack and kill dogs. And racers can encounter fierce storms with arctic winds and driving snow.

Rainy Pass, the highest elevation on the race trail



The trail ends in the small city of Nome. During the winter, the sun rises for only a few hours a day, and the race is a welcome celebration for the residents. Citizens of Nome line the streets to watch the finishers come in. While 55 to 75 mushers usually start, every year several drop out because of sickness, injury, or simple exhaustion. Today, winners of the Iditarod usually complete the race in 10 to 12 days. The record time of 8 days, 18 hours, and 46 minutes was set in 2011 by John Baker. There can be a full week between the times when the first and last mushers cross the finish line.

Do You Know?

During the early days of dogsledding, a red lantern was hung outside a checkpoint to help the musher find shelter. The lantern remained lit until the musher arrived. Today, a red lantern is hung over the finish line of the Iditarod. The lantern is lit at the start of the race, and the last musher to cross the line puts it out.



The Musers

Musers come from all walks of life. They include professional athletes, tradespeople, authors, doctors, teachers, and lawyers. Since 1974, both men and women have competed in the Iditarod. Two women have won the race. One of them, Susan Butcher, has won four times.

IDITAROD WINNERS SINCE 1973

Year	Musher	Days	Hrs	Min	Year	Musher	Days	Hrs	Min
1973	Dick Wilmarth	20	00	49	1993	Jeff King	10	15	38
1974	Carl Huntington	20	15	02	1994	Martin Buser	10	13	05
1975	Emmitt Peters	14	14	43	1995	Doug Swingley	10	13	02
1976	Gerald Riley	18	22	58	1996	Jeff King	09	05	43
1977	Rick Swenson	16	16	27	1997	Martin Buser	09	08	30
1978	Dick Mackey	14	18	52	1998	Jeff King	09	05	52
1979	Rick Swenson	15	10	37	1999	Doug Swingley	09	14	31
1980	Joe May	14	07	11	2000	Doug Swingley	09	00	58
1981	Rick Swenson	12	08	45	2001	Doug Swingley	09	19	55
1982	Rick Swenson	16	04	40	2002	Martin Buser	08	22	46
1983	Rick Mackey	12	14	10	2003	Robert Sorlie	09	15	47
1984	Dean Osmar	12	15	07	2004	Mitch Seavey	09	12	20
1985	Libby Riddles	18	00	20	2005	Robert Sorlie	09	18	39
1986	Susan Butcher	11	15	06	2006	Jeff King	09	11	11
1987	Susan Butcher	11	02	05	2007	Lance Mackey	09	05	08
1988	Susan Butcher	11	11	41	2008	Lance Mackey	09	11	46
1989	Joe Runyan	11	05	24	2009	Lance Mackey	09	21	38
1990	Susan Butcher	11	01	53	2010	Lance Mackey	08	23	59
1991	Rick Swenson	12	16	34	2011	John Baker	08	18	46
1992	Martin Buser	10	19	17	2012	Dallas Seavey	09	04	29

Do You Know?

Since 1986, the Iditabike Race has been held alongside the Iditarod trail. In this 322-kilometer (200-mi) race, a hearty group of mountain bikers rides over the snow and ice, braving sub-zero temperatures and strong winds.

While many are Alaskans, mushers come from all around the world. They come from many of the 50

states and from Canada, Russia, Norway, Japan, New Zealand, Great Britain, and Italy. To enter the Iditarod, a musher must be at least 18 years old. He or she must have competed in a previous Iditarod or two qualifying races of at least 805 kilometers (500 mi) in the previous two years.

Sled-dog racing is a solo sport, and all mushers compete in the Iditarod alone. They have no crews waiting at the checkpoints to help them feed and care for their dogs. Most mushers will feed their dogs and make straw beds for them even before they feed themselves.

So what would cause someone to brave temperatures as low as -51° Celsius (-60° F), strong winds, blowing snow, wild animals, and treacherous ice, all on very little sleep? The winner's prize of \$50,000 or more may be an **incentive**, but most do it for the challenge, for the love of the sport, and the love of their dogs. Most participants are thrilled simply to finish the race.

The Dogs

The Iditarod is really about the dogs. The dogs who run the race, called huskies, have been specially bred to pull sleds the way collies have been bred to herd sheep. The sturdy, tough huskies can pull a sled carrying supplies and the musher, a total weight of 136 to 182 kilograms (300–400 lbs). This may seem like a lot, but huskies love to pull.

Huskies have also been bred to withstand extreme cold. They have two layers of fur. The outer layer, made of thick hairs, protects the dog from wind and water. The inner layer is a lot like a sheep's wool. It serves to **insulate** the body from cold temperatures and keep body heat from escaping. Some people even use husky hair to make warm hats and gloves.



Huskies can't hide their enthusiasm.

The dogs do not lose heat by sweating through their skin as humans do. Instead, they pant, and they sweat through their feet. These adaptations allow huskies to run comfortably at temperatures below -51° Celsius (-60° F).



Do You Know?

Often, sled dogs on the Iditarod wear "booties" on their feet. The booties keep the dogs' paws dry and prevent cuts from the sharp ice and rocks on the trail. A dog team can go through as many as 1,000 booties during an Iditarod. This can get pretty expensive, since the booties cost about fifty cents each.

Huskies have also been bred to work as a team. This is important, since the whole team must work together to pull the sled. An Iditarod team can have as many as 16 dogs. Usually, an experienced lead dog runs at the front of the team and helps set the pace. Huskies are extremely friendly dogs, and, like most dogs, they love to please their owners.



Lead dogs are tough, enthusiastic, and experienced.



A vet checks a resting husky.

Care of the huskies before, during, and after the race is of utmost importance to the mushers and to the officials who run the Iditarod. Veterinarians wait at each checkpoint to examine the dogs as they come in. Dogs suffering from frostbite, exhaustion, or injury are pulled from the race. In fact, most mushers drop off one or more dogs that become tired or don't want to run anymore. There are three **mandatory** stops during the race to let the dogs rest. The first one, taken at the musher's choice of checkpoint, is 24 hours long. The other two are 8 hours long and are made at specific checkpoints. Mushers who mistreat their dogs are disqualified.

The dogs eat a lot during the race to keep their energy high. One dog can consume up to 10,000 calories per day. The dogs' diets are rich in fat and protein from meat, pure fat, and dry dog food. They also need a lot of water, which the mushers warm up so that the dogs will not lose heat. The dogs typically eat three meals a day during rests, and they also get lots of snacks on the trail.

Food Consumed per Meal	
Food Type	Quantity
Dry dog food	.4 kilograms (12 oz)
Meat	.5 kilograms (1 lb)
Fat	.25 kilograms (8 oz)
Water	1 liter (1 qt)

Like any athletic team, the dogs go through rigid training before the race. Sled dogs are trained to pull from the time they are puppies. Between September and February before the Iditarod, teams make practice runs of up to 2,253 kilometers (1,400 mi). They also compete in smaller races of 322 kilometers (200 mi) or more. In the end, the best-trained team is usually the winner.



The Iditarod is, above all, solitary.

Conclusion

The Iditarod, also known as the “Last Great Race,” is a grueling competition between sled-dog teams. They race across the Alaskan wilderness for 10 to 12 days for a more than \$50,000 prize. Musers come from around the world to compete. Journalists, TV networks, and newspaper reporters from across the globe come to cover the race. But it is not the money or the fame that attracts the mushers.

The mushers do not really race their teams against one another; they race against the hardships of the wilderness and against themselves. Any musher will tell you that the true heroes of the Iditarod are the huskies who run almost 2,000 kilometers (1,243 mi) over some of the harshest, most beautiful land on Earth.

Explore More

On the Internet

- A. In the address window, type *www.google.com*.
- B. Type *Iditarod* into the search window and click on “Google Search.”
- C. Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting.
- D. When you want to explore more links, click on the back arrow at the top left.
- E. You can also look up other Iditarod-related subjects, such as *Susan Butcher, huskies, or dog training*.

At the Library

Ask your librarian to help you find books on the Iditarod. You can also look up books on dogsledding, huskies, and life in Alaska. Many adventure stories and other fiction books have been written about this rugged state. And some of the most amazing adventures are true.

Glossary

ceremonial	done only for show; not official (p. 9)
diphtheria	a disease of the respiratory system, caused by bacteria, that strikes children in particular (p. 5)
grueling	extremely difficult (p. 4)
incentive	something that causes a person to take action; motivation (p. 16)
insulate	prevent loss of heat (p. 17)
mandatory	required; something a person has to do (p. 20)
musher	person who drives a sled-dog team (p. 6)
serum	special medicine given in a shot (p. 5)
tundra	huge, flat arctic plains where it is too cold for trees to grow (p. 13)

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Front cover: A team shoots through Rainy Pass.

Back cover: A husky takes a well-deserved warm nap.

Title page: At -30°F (-34°C), racer Steve Carrick's breath freezes on every surface.

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