The Jr. Iditarod

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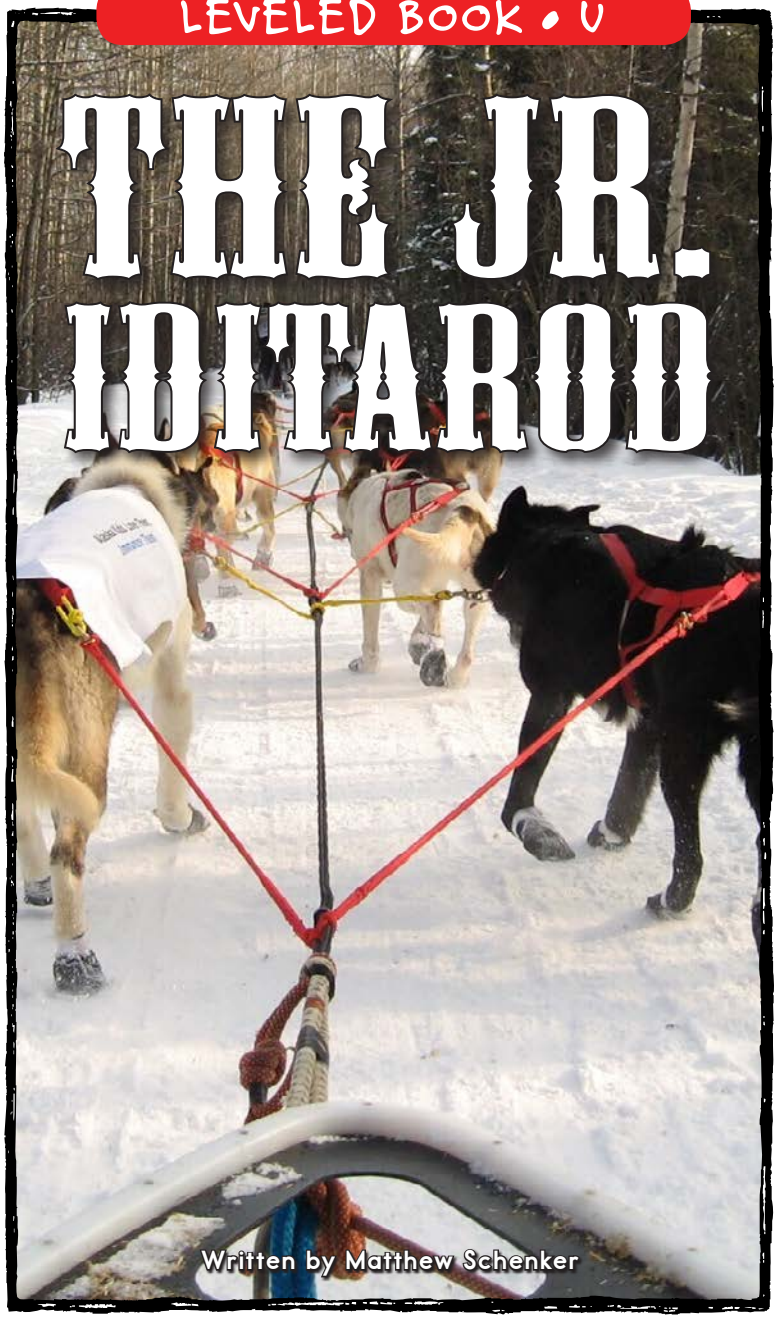
THE JR. IDITAROD



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What Is the Jr. Iditarod?

It is late February. Young people ages fourteen through seventeen gather in Alaska with their dogs for a special race. The participants in the race, called *mushers*, stand on the back end of sleds pulled through snow and ice by a team of dogs. The mushers and their dogs will race across roughly 150 miles (241 km) of challenging **terrain**, braving blizzards, severe winds, and sub-zero temperatures as they aim for the finish line. This is the Jr. Iditarod, a demanding race that began in 1978 and has taken place every year since then.

Do You Know?

The Jr. Iditarod is modeled after the Iditarod, a sled-dog race that covers over 1,000 miles (about 1,600 km) and may last up to 15 days. Part of the Iditarod route was used in 1925 by mushers and their dogs to deliver life-saving medicine to children in the Alaskan city of Nome. The Iditarod, which began in 1973 to commemorate that event, is a highly competitive race and a popular sporting event in Alaska. The Jr. Iditarod helps to prepare young mushers to participate in the Iditarod.

Preparing to Race

Training Together

Mushers begin working toward their goal long before they are old enough to participate in the Jr. Iditarod. Some mushers start training for the Jr. Iditarod at just five years old, packing up supplies and warm clothing, and heading out with their parents onto snowy trails with a team of dogs.

One of the first things young mushers must learn is how to stay safe in the cold. They wear special clothing to keep their hands and faces protected from dangerous winds and below-freezing temperatures.

Proper equipment is essential for mushers.

Another important part of training is mastering a series of commands that mushers teach their dogs. Mushers practice the commands every day with their dogs until the dogs understand and obey each command.

Mushers know from a very young age that they must eat healthy food to be successful at dog-sledding—driving a team of dogs that pull a sled. Mushers must be strong to last the full distance of the race. Proper nutrition helps build their muscles and keeps them at their peak performance level.

Dogsledding Commands

gee	turn right
haw	turn left
come gee	turn left 180°
come haw	turn right 180°
whoa	stop
easy	slow down
mush	let's go!
line out	command telling the lead dog to line up the team in a straight line

Mushers bring careful attention to the daily ritual of feeding the dogs.

Caring for the Dogs

Most sled dogs are Alaskan huskies, known for their speed, strength, and **stamina**. In addition to these qualities, mushers want dogs that are friendly and have a positive attitude. Because these are not average dogs, they cannot just eat everyday dog food. Sled dogs require proper nutrition, just as mushers do, to have enough energy for the Jr. Iditarod.

The mushers rise early in the morning to feed their dogs. Mushers prepare special dog food, cooking big pots of rice, to which they add fish and a variety of vitamins. Every morning, beginning when the dogs are puppies, mushers follow this strict routine in preparing food for their sled-dog team.

Each dog has a unique personality.

Choosing a Leader

During the training leading up to the big race, the mushers have to make an important decision about their dog team. They must determine which dog will be the leader—the dog that shows all the other dogs which way to go. Every member of the dog team is a little different. Just like humans, each one has its own **unique** personality. Some dogs are full of energy, while other dogs are quieter. Some dogs get along better with each other, while others are less **cooperative**.

At each practice session, the musher puts different dogs out in front in the lead position and then watches carefully to see how well the team runs. The next day, the musher moves the dogs around and tries something different. After a while, the musher finds the perfect arrangement that allows the dogs to work together smoothly and run as fast as possible. The lead dog goes in front, and the other dogs line up behind in double-file. The team practices this same arrangement daily, right up to the day of the Jr. Iditarod.

Lining up the dogs

Ready, Set, Go!

The Check-In

The big day of the Jr. Iditarod finally arrives. The mushers arrive in the Wasilla area, north of Anchorage, which is the starting point of the race. They begin to prepare for the race. They put on warm clothing to protect their bodies from frostbite, a condition where skin gets so cold that it actually freezes. After they dress themselves properly, the mushers get the dogs ready to race. They place special booties on the dogs' feet as protection against the ice and the extremely cold temperatures. Each musher hooks up leads to the front of the sled—long ropes made of strong material that can **withstand** high tension as the dogs pull the sled. Each dog wears a harness, which wraps around the dog's chest. The mushers carefully hook the leads to each dog's harness until all the dogs are connected together as a team.

These dogs are ready to race in their harnesses and booties.

Checking supplies on a musher's sled

Adults at the race have a checklist of necessary supplies, called the *payload*, that each musher must carry. These adults make sure the mushers have everything on the checklist packed away neatly and securely inside the sleds. Because the race is so challenging, it is crucial that nothing falls out or gets wet during the race. After the check-in is complete, each musher puts on a jersey with his or her official race number.

The Race Begins!

One by one the dogsled teams come to the starting line, with spectators lining the racecourse to watch and cheer. As the mushers **anticipate** the **grueling** race, they are gripped with excitement, and their hearts are pounding as they wait their turn to leave at the two-minute intervals. The event they've been preparing for so **diligently** for years is finally here. The dogs, also excited, eagerly try to pull the sleds forward—they're all ready to race!

snow hook

As they wait for the start signal, each musher stands on the brake, a pedal that works like the brakes on a car. For more holding power, the musher also sets a *snow hook*, which is like an emergency brake. Both dig into the snow so the sled doesn't move. When the mushers hear the start signal, they release the brake and pull the snow hook. The dogs yelp and bark as they strain to pull the sled forward. Spectators cheer as the mushers and the dogs take off down the trail. It only takes a minute before each musher and dog team is out of sight.

A team takes off!

2006 Jr. Iditarod Trail

Essential Equipment

- Cold-weather sleeping bag
- Hand axe that is at least 22″ long
- Snowshoes that are 28″ long and 9″ wide
- Eight booties per dog
- Head lamp
- Alternate light
- Restraint to hold dog(s) in sled
- Two pounds of dog food per dog
- One day of food for the musher and emergency rations of 3,000 calories
- Five stake-out cables with snaps
- Reflective tape material
- Matches or lighter
- Dog food cooker
- Three pairs of socks
- Rain gear
- Three pairs of gloves

Out on the Trail

Staying on the Trail

Even though the dogs have been training for years, the race is very challenging. It is the mushers' responsibility to make sure the dogs stay on the trail. Mushers watch for markers in the ground every few yards, which help them see the trail. The markers—wooden sticks with bright orange tips—are placed along the entire route of the race. The sleds have headlamps, which light up the trail and help the mushers see the markers during snowstorms and at night.

Markers help mushers stay on the trail.

Long stretches of the racecourse are straight and flat, but then a sharp turn or a very steep hill will suddenly appear in front of the team. Mushers have to drive their sleds through soft and hard snow, over frozen rivers and rocky ground, and through forests. All the while, they're shouting commands to the dog team while trying to see what lies up ahead and staying alert enough to be able to respond quickly.

The dogs don't do all the work. On flat ground, the mushers kick with their feet to help push the sled forward. Going up a hill, the mushers get off the sled and help by pushing the sled. If the mushers don't stay focused on the trail, they are in danger of sliding off the trail and losing valuable time.

The weather can be **brutal**—temperatures can drop to –50 degrees Fahrenheit (–46°C), and the wind can be so cold that it stings a musher's face. Mushers and dogs are able to **endure** all these challenges and conditions because they have had years of exercise, good nutrition, and special training.

One team is about to overtake another.

Supporting Each Other

Each musher pushes his or her team to go as fast as it can and to win the race, but there is more to the Jr. Iditarod than just winning. If a musher is racing along, another musher may come up behind and yell *trail!* That means the musher in front has to move over and let the other musher pass. This is called *giving trail*, and mushers must obey the rule. Any musher who doesn't move over is automatically disqualified from the race.

Mushers are always concerned about each other's safety and well-being. If a musher is in danger in any way, other mushers will stop to help—even if it means losing the race. The code of **ethics** among fellow mushers places a higher **priority** on helping each other than on winning.

Checkpoints

Every so often, mushers stop at *checkpoints*, or stations along the trail where adults, called *checkers*, make sure the mushers are healthy and have enough supplies. Veterinarians at the checkpoints make sure the dogs are in good health. Mushers also have their own *checkpoint routine* to follow. They inspect the dogs' booties and walk around the sleds to make sure all the leads and harnesses are in proper condition. They also check their jackets, gloves, and hats, replacing them if wet or torn. Mushers and dogs only spend as much time as needed at checkpoints, eagerly returning to the trail to continue the race.

A musher goes through a checkpoint.

Mushers share friendship bonds during layovers.

The Layover

When the mushers reach Yentna Station, the halfway point of the race, every musher must stop. They are required to take a ten-hour break, called a *layover*. The mushers rest, eat good meals, and take care of their dogs. The first-place musher arrives at Yentna Station and starts a bonfire. It is a tradition that as the other mushers come in to Yentna Station, they sit together around the bonfire. They all share food with each other, and even more, they share stories. Each musher has an opportunity to describe something that happened out on the trail or tell a funny story about his or her dog.

Heading Back

After ten hours, the first-place musher gets back on the sled and races away from Yentna Station. The other mushers follow in the order in which they arrived. After leaving Yentna Station, the mushers race back to the starting point of the race over the same trail they followed to get there. They go through each of the same checkpoints they stopped at on the way to Yentna Station.

Mushers and their dogs are often the only life along the trail.

Success!

After the mushers pass the last checkpoint of the race, they are in the home stretch—the last and most exciting part of the race. As they near the end of the race, they can see the sign bearing the word "Finish." This is the moment they have been training for, and they use all the energy they can **muster** in a mad dash to the finish.

The first musher to cross the finish line wins the race. Spectators who have gathered to watch the end of the race cheer as each team appears.

2003 winner Ellie Claus nears the finish line.

Ellie Claus and her dogs pose for a photograph.

After the last team crosses the finish line, all the mushers get together to receive their awards for completing the race. The mushers congratulate each other, no matter how they finish, because they recognize how challenging the Jr. Iditarod is for every participant. They have every reason to be proud of themselves and their dogs after all the long hours of training and hard work. They know that each musher's team worked together to complete this incredible race and that they all worked alongside each other as well. Each musher feels proud that a challenge was laid down and met. In this way, every participant in the Jr. Iditarod is a winner.

Year	Musher
1978	Joe Good, Division I; Mike Newman, Division II
1979	Clint Mayeur
1980	Gary Baumgartner
1981	Christine Delia
1982	Tim Osmar
1983	Tim Osmar
1984	Tim Osmar
1985	Lance Barve
1986	Lance Barve
1987	Dustin VanMeter
1988	Dan Flodin
1989	Jarad Jones
1990	Jarad Jones
1991	Brian Hanson
1992	Ramey Smyth
1993	Ramey Smyth
1994	Cim Smyth
1995	Dusty Whittemore
1996	Dusty Whittemore
1997	Tony Willis
1998	Charlie Jordan
1999	Ryan Redington
2000	Ryan Redington
2001	Tyrell Seavey
2002	Cali King
2003	Ellie Claus
2004	Nicole Osmar
2005	Melissa Owens
2006	Micah T. Degerlund
2007	Rohn Buser
2008	Jessica Klejka
2009	Cain Carter
2010	Merissa Osmar
2011	Jeremiah Klejka
2012	Dallas Seavey
2013	Noah Pereira
2014	Conway Seavey

Which musher has won the most times?

Glossary

anticipate *(v.)* to think about in advance (p. 12)

brutal *(adj.)* extremely difficult to cope with (p. 15)

cooperative *(adj.)* willing to work together (p. 8)

diligently *(adv.)* working hard and doing a thorough job (p. 12)

endure *(v.)* to live through something challenging (p. 15)

ethics *(n.)* moral principles that guide a person's behavior (p. 16)

grueling *(adj.)* very difficult; exhausting (p. 12)

muster *(v.)* to summon; to bring forth (p. 20)

priority *(n.)* importance (p. 16)

stamina *(n.)* having energy for a long time (p. 7)

terrain *(n.)* land; ground (p. 4)

unique *(adj.)* one of a kind; unlike others (p. 8)

withstand *(v.)* to not be damaged or affected by something (p. 10)

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