

Iditarod Dreams

In 2001 and 2002 I had the amazing opportunity to live one of my dreams and visit Alaska to experience the Iditarod Sled Race up close and personal. Since I began my career with dogs in 1992, I have always wanted to see the race first hand and decide for myself just how well the dogs were treated and see how the race itself operated. I had always wanted to meet some mushers and their dogs and see first hand what their lives and this race were all about.

Since my career at the time was veterinary nursing, arrangements were made for me to take some blood testing equipment up to the race to help the trail vets better monitor dogs at various checkpoints. It was an amazing opportunity and one that I took full advantage of. In 2001, I spent time helping read microchips on racing dogs at the ceremonial start in Anchorage and the official start in Wasilla. I went from there to McGrath which is one of the official checkpoints about 400 miles into the race. I set up "shop" for over a week and helped the trail vets with blood work and running chemistries on any of the dogs dropped from mushing teams prior to my checkpoint. The second year, I had the same opportunities, plus I went on to Unalakleet which is a checkpoint on the Bering Sea (frozen during the race) and about 800 miles into the race.

The experience was amazing as were the dogs, mushers and everyone involved with the race. The relationships the mushers have with their dogs are truly beautiful. Many people have the uneducated impression that the dogs are forced to run and that mushers treat them poorly throughout their careers as racing dogs. The EXACT opposite is true. These dogs are the mushers' families. They spend intense, long, lonely days with only the dogs in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness and often the dogs and the amazing relationships they have with them are the only thing that keeps them going. The mushers rely on the dogs and have great respect for the jobs they do. If your team of 16 dogs doesn't want to run, they simply won't.

The mushers spend a great deal of time being the "cheerleader" for the team, keeping the dogs enthusiasm levels up when the days are long or dark and cold. Just a quick tidbit though, the dogs prefer temperatures at zero or below to run. Temperatures too much above that and the dogs run the risk of overheating. So mushers do very well by their dogs and though they all have their "favorites", they have incredible bonds with each and every dog on their team as well as those in their kennels at home. At the starting line, I was impressed to see each musher go down their teams and give each of the 16 dogs a chin scratch or ear rub on their way to the sled and the start of their race!

Everyone involved with the race, from veterinarians and drop dog care teams to trail breakers and communication volunteers has a warm heart and a willingness to reach out and help, and at the root of that spirit of generosity are the dogs that run the race. There are approximately 1200 of them every year and they are the stars, the headliners if you will. Without them, the race simply could not exist. Everyone involved works hard to ensure their health and well being. From start to finish, Anchorage to Nome, it's all about the dogs. As well it should be!

For more information about the race, my experiences there, educational slide show programs about the race, or mushing in general, please feel free to email me at leslie@dogsthink.com and list "mushing" in the subject header. I'm a mushing addict and happy to talk about this amazing sport all day, most any day!

Best,
Leslie