



The Last Great Race on Earth

You can't compare it to any other competitive event in the world! A race over 1150 miles of the roughest, most beautiful terrain Mother Nature has to offer. She throws jagged mountain ranges, frozen river, dense forest, desolate tundra and miles of windswept coast at the mushers and their dog teams. Add that temperatures are far below zero, winds that can cause a complete loss of visibility, the hazards of overflow, long hours of darkness and treacherous climbs and side hills, and you have the Iditarod. A race extraordinaire, a race only possible in Alaska.

From Anchorage, in south central Alaska, to Nome on the western Bering Sea coast, each team of 12 to 16 dogs and their musher cover over 1150 miles in 10 to 17 days.

It has been called the "Last Great Race on Earth" and it has won worldwide acclaim and interest. German, Spanish, British, Japanese and American film crews have covered the event. Journalists from outdoor magazines, adventure magazines, newspapers and wire services flock to Anchorage and Nome to record the excitement. It's not just a dog sled race, it's a race in which unique men and women compete. Mushers enter from all walks of life. Fishermen, lawyers, doctors, miners, artists, natives, Canadians, Swiss, French and others; men and women each with their own story, each with their own reasons for going the distance. It's a race organized and run primarily by volunteers, thousands of volunteers, men and women, students and village residents. They man headquarters at Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Nome and Wasilla. They fly volunteers, veterinarians, dog food and supplies. They act as checkers, coordinators, and family supporters of each musher.

The Spirit of Alaska! More Than a Race... a Commemoration

The race pits man and animal against nature, against wild Alaska at her best and as each mile is covered, a tribute to Alaska's past is issued. The Iditarod is a tie to a commemoration of that colorful past.

The Iditarod Trail, now a National Historic Trail, had its beginnings as a mail and supply route from the coastal towns of Seward and Knik to the interior mining camps at Flat, Ophir, Ruby and beyond to the west coast communities of Unalakleet, Elim, Golovin, White Mountain and Nome. Mail and supplies went in. Gold came out. All via dog sled. Heroes were made, legends were born.

In 1925, part of the Iditarod Trail became a life saving highway for epidemic-stricken Nome. Diphtheria threatened and serum had to be brought in; again by intrepid dog mushers and their faithful hard-driving dogs.

The Iditarod is a commemoration of those yesterdays, a not-so-distant past that Alaskans honor and are proud of.

An Event for All Alaska

Anchorage is the starting line for the Iditarod race. A modern city of over 250,000 people, street lights, freeways and traffic. From there the field of dog teams which grow in number each year, runs to Eagle River, Checkpoint # 1. After a restart in the Matanuska Valley at Wasilla, the mushers leave the land of highways and bustling activity and head out to the Yentna Station Roadhouse and Skwentna and then up! Through Finger Lake, Rainy Pass, over the Alaska Range and down the other side to the Kuskokwim River, Rohn Roadhouse, Nikolai, McGrath, Ophir, Cripple, Iditarod and on to the mighty Yukon, a river highway that takes the teams west through the arctic tundra.

The race route is alternated every other year, one year going north through Cripple, Ruby and Galena, the next year south through Iditarod, Shageluk, Anvik.

Finally, they're on the coast. Unalakleet, Shaktoolik, Koyuk, Elim, Golovin, White Mountain and into Nome where a hero's welcome is the custom for musher number 1 or 81!

The route encompasses large metropolitan areas and small native villages. It causes a yearly spurt of activity, increased airplane traffic and excitement to areas otherwise quiet and dormant during the long Alaskan winter. Everyone gets involved, from very young school children to the old timers who relive the colorful Alaskan past they've known as they watch each musher and his team. The race is an educational opportunity and an economic stimulus to these small Alaskan outposts.

The "I" logo, a trademark of the Iditarod Trail Committee, Inc. and the Iditarod Race, was designed by Alaskan artist Bill DeVine in the early years of the race. The design is done on a white background with blue thread for the dog and inner outline. The Outer outline is done in red. The design is used on a shield in some instances and that variation was used on wooden trail markers in the earlier races.

On the Trail

Every musher has a different tactic. Each one has a special menu for feeding and snacking the dogs. Each one has a different strategy. Some run in the daylight, some run at night. Each one has a different training schedule and his own ideas on dog care, dog stamina and his own personal ability.

The rules of the race lay out certain regulations which each musher must abide by. There are certain pieces of equipment each team must have such as an arctic parka, a heavy sleeping bag, an ax, snowshoes, musher food, dog food and boots for each dog's feet to protect against cutting ice and hard packed snow injuries.

Some mushers spend an entire year getting ready and raising the money needed to get to Nome. Some prepare around a full-time job. In addition to planning the equipment and feeding needs for up to three weeks on the trail, hundreds of hours and hundreds of miles of training have to be put on each team.

There are names which are automatically associated with the race. Joe Redington, Sr., the co-founder of the classic and affectionately known as "Father of the Iditarod." Rick Swenson from Two River, Alaska, is the only five time winner and the only musher to have entered 20 Iditarod races and never finished out of the top ten. Dick Mackey from Nenana who beat Swenson by one second in 1978 to achieve the impossible photo finish after two weeks on the trail. The late Norman Vaughan who at the age of 88 has finished the race four times and led an expedition to Antarctica in the winter of 93–94. Four time winner, Susan Butcher, was the first woman to ever place in the top 10. And of course, Libby Riddles, the first woman to win the Iditarod in 1985.

There are others mushers such as Herbie Nayokpuk, Shishmaref; Emmitt Peters, Ruby, whose record set in 1975 was not broken until 1980, when Joe May, Trapper Creek, knocked seven hours off the record. The flying Anderson's, Babe and Eep, from McGrath, Rick Mackey, who wearing his father Dick's winning #13, crossed the finish line first in 1983, making them the only father and son to have both won an Iditarod, Joe Runyan, 1989 champion and the only musher to have won the Alpirod (European long distance race), the Yukon Quest, (long distance race between Fairbanks and Whitehorse, YT) and the Iditarod, Terry Adkins, retired from the United States Air Force, the only veterinarian on the first Iditarod and one of the two mushers to have completed 20 out of 23 Iditarods. (The other is Rick Swenson.) The list goes on, each name bringing with it a tale of adventure, a feeling of accomplishment, a touch of hero. Each musher, whether in the top ten, or winner of the Red Lantern (last place) has accomplished a feat few dare to attempt. Each has gone the distance and established a place for their team in the annals of Iditarod lore.