



The Excitement of the Iditarod

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Jeff King, four-time winner of the Iditarod Race, stood right in front of me signing an autograph for an awe-struck teenage boy. In the next street over Lance Mackey, soon-to-be winner of the 2009 race, was talking to an animated reporter of a local news channel as fans and volunteers clamored around him for a picture. In the early hours of the morning, Anchorage was waking up and preparing for the Ceremonial Race Start activities before the mushers hit the Iditarod trail to work their way to the finish in Nome.

Commemorating a challenging history in wild Alaska, the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race has become a highly competitive sport. What began in 1973 as a project to celebrate Alaska's Centennial Year now draws mushers from all over the world. Prior to the 1920s dog teams were used to cover rough terrain that was highly impassible for everything except dog sleds. The Iditarod Trail was a heavily traveled route used to carry mail, transport supplies to small isolated communities, and take gold out. In 1925, dog sleds carried medication to combat a diphtheria epidemic in Nome. With no other way to reach the residents, the mushers and their dogs saved many lives.

I learned the history of the Iditarod Race and why it is important to Alaska's identity from locals, volunteers, and others in my tour group. During this time of year, the Iditarod is the only thing people talk about and they were delighted to share their knowledge with me, a first-timer to Alaska and the Iditarod. The Race attracts mushers, volunteers, and thousands of visitors from all over the world coming together and creating an international community to witness "The Last Great Race on Earth."

More than 2,500 volunteers work along the Iditarod Trail, from before the race begins to after the teams cross the finish line. Their duties include trail breaking (maintaining a clear Iditarod route), sewing protective booties for the dogs before the race begins, handling dogs during the Race starts, providing services as a veterinarian, and working at checkpoints along the route. As a volunteer dog handler, I had amazing access to the mushers and their dogs as they lined up along the snowy streets. The atmosphere was filled with excited energy among the dog teams, and I witnessed the extreme dedication of the mushers as they cared for their dogs. Each dog was given personal attention, and once they were harnessed and had their booties on, they could barely contain their excitement. Some teams were jumping up and down and playing while others were quietly sitting but I could see the anticipation in their bodies as all the dogs knew they would soon be running over 1,100 miles of Alaskan countryside.

With 67 teams this year and a maximum of 16 dogs per team, the mushers relied on their staff and volunteers to keep the dogs in order after they were attached to the sled. Once assigned to a musher, I ran with the team from their pre-race position to the starting line. Every two minutes a musher crossed the starting line to loud cheers and flashing cameras. When it was our turn, we ran to the start, let our hold on the dogs go, and watched the dog team run down 4th Avenue in Anchorage.

After experiencing two days of Iditarod Race starts (the Ceremonial start in Anchorage and the Official start in Willow), I wanted to follow the teams as they made their way to Nome. But Washington, DC was calling my name, so unfortunately I couldn't stay to see the winner cross the finish line some 10-17 days later. I did, however, follow the progress of the dog teams each day through various blogs and websites, and was able to better understand and appreciate how Lance Mackey won the Iditarod for the third consecutive year!