

# A happy slide as dogs retrace the serum run

## POSTCARD

By Marilyn Beaverstock

From the time I heard about the Alaskan Iditarod Dog Sled Race, I was determined to go. This year was the 38th running. The race recalls a serum run in 1925. Nome had an outbreak of diphtheria and the only way to get the serum there was by dog sled.

I flew to Anchorage and became a volunteer for the race. A charity start is held in the streets of Anchorage. People bid thousands of dollars to ride with their favourite musher. The following day is the restart in Willow. 72 mushers with 1152 very noisy dogs ready. It was there that I helped a musher from Scotland take his dogs to the start line. It was all I could do to hang on.

The next day I flew to McGrath, (population 421) 527km from Anchorage. Many of the mushers take their mandatory 24-hour stop in the town. Watching them come in while I huddled around a fire to keep warm, was so exciting. I took a small plane to Nikolai (population 104) to watch the mushers and their dogs. Another day was to the checkpoint of Takotna (population 50). At these checkpoints you could get up close and personal with the dogs and their mushers. Listening in to all the trail gossip was fun.

Then it was on to Nome to wait for the finish of the race of about



1700km. The atmosphere in Nome was electric with everyone glued to the race results. We were trying to keep warm inside while those on the trail were facing minus 40 to minus 60-degree temperatures.

Lance Mackey won and made history for his fourth consecutive win. In just under nine days. Then one after another they came in with the red lantern coming in four days later. My Scottish musher finished

with all of his 16 dogs. Also finishing was Newton Marshall from Jamaica.

The race is held under extreme rules regarding the wellbeing of the dogs. Not necessarily the mushers. Vets check the dogs at every stop and if they find anything wrong with the dogs, they are dropped, flown back to Anchorage. In Anchorage they are taken care of by women prisoners. There are no replacements for a dropped dog. There is a long list of



**COLD FACTS:** A resting time and place for dogs during the Alaskan Iditarod Dog Sled Race, left, and a rugged-up Marilyn Beaverstock in McGrath, Alaska.

rules. Mandatory stops are a 24-hour one and two eight-hour stops. One of the eight-hour stops has to be taken at White Mountain, the last major checkpoint 124km from the finish. Some mandatory items that have to be carried are an axe, fuel for heating the dog's food, eight booties per dog and snow shoes. They also need a book in which the vet writes comments about the dogs. All of this can be checked at any checkpoint along

the way and definitely at the finish.

All in all, I had a fabulous time. It was all that I dreamt of. One highlight was the experience of mushing on a frozen river. I only had a four-dog team, but it was amazing. The cold? What cold? It did hit minus 36 degrees a few times but who cares?

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