

NEWS

Warm memories: GV man has front-row seat at Iditarod

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Why would anyone want to leave Green Valley's March temperatures to go where it is minus-38 degrees?

Donn Bruskiwicz, who recently returned from the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in Alaska, says it's simple: "It's something I have wanted to do for a very long time."

His son, Todd, had worked at Denali National Park and shared stories about the race. But the decision to go coalesced after meeting a man in Denver who had been a volunteer veterinarian at the race. His enthusiasm convinced Bruskiwicz that this was the year he would attend "the Last Great Race."

It took Bruskiwicz three days to gather all the clothes he would need to withstand the extreme cold. Temperatures in Alaska can be unpredictable — in 1973, wind-chill temperatures of minus-130 degrees were recorded during the race.

Bruskiwicz flew to Anchorage on March 1 to do a bit of sightseeing on his own before meeting the other nine members of his group: three Australians, three Canadians and three other Americans.

The first four days of the trip included sightseeing in Seward, a cruise around Resurrection Bay to search for Alaskan wildlife, and a day at Alyeska Ski Resort.

Back in Anchorage, Bruskiwicz enrolled in a four-hour dog-handler certification training program. The dogs are highly excitable before the race begins and volunteers are needed to help control them.

"I'm really glad that I had a chance to do this. It was my ticket to take some great photographs and interact with the mushers," he said.

The race began March 7, in Willow (pop. 1,658), about 70 miles north of Anchorage. From there the group traveled to McGrath (pop. 423) which served as their base camp for four nights. They stayed at the Hotel McGrath B&B where room rates skyrocket to \$400 per night from the regular rate of \$165.

"It is in a really remote area with no roads. The only way to get there is to fly, walk, go by snow machine or dog sled," Bruskiwicz said. While in McGrath, he had an opportunity to be a musher for a half-hour run with five dogs pulling the sled. He called it an awesome experience.

The group then traveled to the Athabashan Community of Nikolai (pop. 104) to watch the lead mushers arrive.

"Here we stood for five hours in minus-38-degree temperatures without any shelter. It was really cold but really exciting." Bruskiwicz was touched by the residents of Nikolai, who keep huge vats of hot water going which the mushers need to unthaw the dog food. At the Takotna (pop. 50) checkpoint many mushers take their 24-hour



Donn Bruskiwicz at the start line for the 2010 Iditarod race in Alaska.

mandatory layover to rest their dogs and themselves. "This was a great opportunity to talk to the mushers and watch them interact with their dogs." Takotna has the reputation for being the friendliest checkpoint on the trail and, according to Bruskiwicz, it is famous for having the best pie on the trail.

Bruskiwicz enjoyed seeing the interaction of the mushers and their dogs. Among the highlights: "I was able to witness the bravery and courage of mushers like Celeste Davis, who ran into a tree and came into the McGrath break room with two black eyes and a broken nose but still continued to race. I talked to Tammy Rose, who lost a contact lens at 2:30 a.m. during a white-out. She switched to her glasses which instantly froze and was then unable to see her lead dogs, but she also continued the race. There was never a moment of doubt that I wished I hadn't come. If I ever do it again I will go to Nome and be there at the finish line."

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