

IDITAROD 2005

This year's Iditarod (known as "The Last Great Race") starts from Anchorage, Alaska on Saturday March 5th.

79 mushers and some 1500 sled dogs will start the 1122 mile race to Nome. Being an odd-numbered year, this year's participants will take the southern route to Nome. After the first 533 miles common to both southern and northern routes, the teams should this year turn south at Ophir and travel to Nome via Iditarod, Shageluk, Anvik, Grayling, Eagle Island, Kaltag, Unalakleet, Koyuk, Elim, Golovin, White Mountain, Safety and finally finish at the famous burlwood arch in Nome itself.

The race commemorates the 1925 Diphtheria Serum run to Nome, during which a relay of sled teams (including most importantly, Leonard Seppala and his famous lead dog, Togo) carried 300,000 units of antitoxin serum from Nenana to the suffering population of Nome in just 127.5 hours.

The first Iditarod Race was held in 1973 and it has been run every year since.

Although all sled dog enthusiasts will enjoy following the progress of the race via the internet, for those of us whose special interest lies with the Siberian Husky breed, our attention will largely be on the progress of Karen Ramstead and her "North Wapiti" team of Show and Working Siberians.

2005 is Karen's fifth Iditarod. Her team failed to complete the gruelling course at her first attempt, but her determination ensured that her team ran proudly through the burlwood arch in 2001. Although her team came in last place and received the "Red Lantern" award, they did her proud and finished the race fit, healthy and, as Karen said at the time, capable of turning round and happily running all the way back to Anchorage. This to me is what characterises the Siberian Husky, not raw speed over 3 miles, but the ability to run up to 100 miles a day, day after day after day. In 2003 she was forced to scratch before finishing the race, but more than made up for that by finishing in 2004 with the 3rd ever fastest time for an all-siberian team.

I for one am eagerly looking forward to seeing how Karen gets on this year and will be following her progress on the official Iditarod website (www.iditarod.com).

The Iditarod and "cruelty"

In recent years, some uninformed "animal rights" organisations, have attacked the Iditarod as a cruel and evil event, where merciless, "win-at-all-costs" mushers "force" their poor dogs to run in appalling conditions, simply to win the prize money. This is complete and utter boloney! The vast majority of dogs in the Iditarod are not raced for money or fame - only a few teams end up "in the money" and even for them it is questionable whether they break even on the venture. (Max Hall, one of the few British mushers who have run the race, said some ten years ago that his most recent Iditarod run had cost him over £40,000).

Care of the canine participants in the Iditarod, is the absolute priority of race officials and their health and safety is given the utmost consideration. These dogs only work because they want to work. Ask any musher, whether they race seriously or only run their dogs round the local park - if the dogs don't want to run, no force on earth will make them do so. This is what happened to Karen Ramstead on her first Iditarod - her dogs simply decided that they were not going any further!

Watch the exhausted mushers at the Iditarod checkpoints - what do they do first? Eat? Sleep? - NO! they check their dogs, paying particular attention to their feet, they feed and water their dogs, they make sure their dogs have fresh straw to sleep on and then and only then, do they feed themselves and sleep. No injured or sick dog is allowed to run and if tragedy happens and a dog dies (for whatever reason) the whole team is scratched from the race and a full enquiry is held into the circumstances and reasons for the death. Having said

that the injury and death rates for the Iditarod (and long distance sled races generally) are incredibly low.

The symbiotic relationship between man and dog is a marvel of both nature and history. The Iditarod is the strongest possible symbol of this symbiosis. Man and dog united in a common aim, bound by ties of mutual love, respect, and physical effort (the Iditarod is much much harder on the human participants than on the canine ones!). The human beings involved are much less suited to the conditions and backbreaking work involved in running the Iditarod than are their dogs.

Don't fall for the crocodile tears of the animal rights activists. Here in the UK they care so much about the fate of captive minks a few years ago that they freed hundreds of them only for them to devastate the local wildlife before dying themselves in a hostile environment.

For the vast majority of those who actually make the start gate in Anchorage, finishing is the real and only victory – these are people who love their dogs above themselves, love the wilderness and don't run to win, but run to RUN!!!

There are so few opportunities for us overcivilised humans to reach out to the natural realities beyond our concrete jungles. Most of us will never achieve our ambitions, but we do have our dreams and driving a team through the burlled arch at the finish of the Iditarod is one of the best of them!