

The Last Great Race on Earth

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They call the Iditarod the Last Great Race on Earth, and for good reason. It's an experience beyond sport, a tribute really to the survival way of life familiar to many Alaskans. For ten days or so, no musher is allowed to accept any help from any individual—no dog food, no firewood, no one to carry even a pail of water, absolutely nothing. Each team runs with twelve to twenty dogs for four or five hours at a stretch, the unspoken law being that a musher jumps off and runs up every hill, often in hip-deep snow. At night, temperatures dipping to as low as sixty-five below zero, a musher might crouch on the runners behind the sled and doze as the dogs tread along a flat stretch, but those uncomfortable catnaps are virtually all the sleep the lead mushers take in ten days.

At the end of each running period, they pull the dogs up and start the tiring process of healing and feeding their team. They hurry, with swollen and partially numb fingers, to unhook all the dogs' leads and get them nestled on a ground cloth. They check paws for ice cuts, dress them with medicine and bandages and little protective booties. As the dogs sleep, they then hustle to build a fire and make hot gruel for their animals. Sometimes they have to chop down a tree for firewood.

By the time the dogs are fed and the sled is repacked, they rehook the team and run again. The musher hasn't even sat

down during this three-hour rest period. If a moose attacks the team out on the trail and the musher must shoot the animal, he must also take the three or four hours necessary to skin the moose and bury its carcass in the snow. Disrespect for the wilderness is not tolerated in Alaska.

Yet as sturdy and as self-sufficient and as inspirational as the Iditarod mushers are, my most vibrant memory of the race is of the dogs. To me, watching the Alaskan husky in action is as thrilling as watching the magnificent thoroughbreds at Churchill Downs. These are the greatest endurance athletes in the world. Barely able to stand on wobbly legs in moments of extreme exhaustion, the husky will push headlong into a blizzard if his master asks him to.

I remember when Libby Riddles became the first woman to win the Last Great Race. She cried as she hugged her lead dog, and the first words that emanated from her blue lips were, "He would die for me out there, and I would die for him."

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