

The Great Race

They call it the Last Frontier. The scenery is breathtaking, the wildlife diverse, but it's also a perilous place. Many people live off the land, fishing, trapping and hunting animals for food and skins, stockpiling for the long harsh winter. America may be the land of the free, but it's Alaska that is truly the home of the brave.

There are people who are tougher still, however, so tough even most Alaskans think they're crazy. These are the Iditarod mushers. Men and women who race dog-sled teams for weeks, over frozen rivers and snowy mountains, going day and night, in temperatures getting down to -40C. They bed down with the dogs in the straw for only half an hour of sleep before getting up to keep pushing on in the relentless 1600km race towards Nome. These people are a breed apart.

The day of the race dawns bright and blue in the city of Anchorage. It's -12C with not a breath of wind and overnight the main street has been turned into a snow chute. Utes pull up towing huge trailers with wet noses sticking out of wooden kennels. The mushers emerge, in heavy-duty snow gear, boots crunching in the snow. They unpack sleds and lay out harnesses while family members are sent on the coffee run, returning with oversized cups of a watery American brew.

Then you see the dogs. They're gorgeous Siberian husky and Alaskan malamute mixed breeds with black and white and honey-coloured coats. Jumping down from the truck, they take a good look around, their almond-shaped eyes curious in their intelligent faces. Handlers fill bowls with meat and start putting hand-sewn booties on their paws to stop snow compacting when they run. Fans get selfies with their favourite teams and wish them luck. You can hear people discussing their picks for this year's race, making friendly bets, but the barking soon drowns out talk.

There are people and dogs everywhere but it's easy to spot the big names.

Martin Buser, the strapping champion stands wide-legged, a head above the rest. He's won the Iditarod four times and finished 33 times and has now been inducted to the Alaska Sports Hall of Fame.

Aliy Zirkle, the tall, blonde woman with an all-American smile poses for photos with fans. She has come second three times but has never taken out the race altogether. This could be her year.

Mitch and Dallas Seavey, the father and son duo, have been racing the Iditarod for years and are locked in a fierce rivalry. Mitch has won twice, Dallas four times and the younger Seavey is the defending champion after his record-setting run of eight days, 11 hours and 20 minutes last year.

These mushers will begin here at the ceremonial start before heading north to Fairbanks for the race restart. It's been moved from Wasilla as there's not enough snow over the Alaska Range this year.

The new route is slightly shorter but will take them into the heart of the Arctic wilderness, along the frozen Yukon River and through small rural villages. They'll have to stop in at 15 or so checkpoints — all but one inaccessible by road — on the way to Nome on the edge of the Bering Sea.

There's a mandatory eight-hour rest stop and a 24-hour rest stop but the mushers can choose when to take them. All start with up to 16 dogs but must finish with at least five — they can drop off tired dogs at checkpoints but cannot pick up new ones.

The huskies are eager to start, jumping and straining at their leads, yapping with excitement. People cram into second-storey offices along the street and jostle at the railings of carpark buildings to get a good vantage point. TV crews line up the best shot and a huge boom with a camera attached swings across the chute. This is the biggest sporting event of the year and has all the enthusiasm and pride of small-town America. A local-girl-made-good sings the *Star Spangled Banner*, the mayor of Nome cracks a few jokes, schoolchildren cut a ribbon and there's a military salute. The dogs are so excited, squealing and barking, it takes one handler per dog to restrain them as the teams are led, one by one, to the starting line. Then the booming voice comes over the sound system announcing each musher. Ryan Redington, grandson of the "Father of the Iditarod", is out first and he

A 1600km dash across freezing Alaska is an annual magnet to tough — some say crazy — men and women and their eager sled dog teams. Welcome to the Iditarod, writes Anna Harrison



Checklist

ALASKA

GETTING THERE

United Airlines flies from Auckland to Los Angeles, with return Economy Class fares from \$1209, on sale until November 30.

united.com

Alaska Airlines flies direct to Anchorage from many US cities including Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Seattle, Portland and Honolulu. alaskaair.com

Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race on the Chena River.

Picture / Getty Images

comes blazing down the street. The dogs strain at their harnesses and mushers wave to the cheering crowds as they ride past, a foot on the brake to keep from racing off. There are 72 teams; few will finish.

The most famous Alaskan mushing team has been enshrined in lore. Balto was the lead dog on the final stretch of the serum run, where teams relayed lifesaving antitoxins to Nome after diphtheria broke out in 1925.

Huskies were vital in Alaska's early days, transporting mail and freight overland to far-flung places. But after World War II, as small aircraft became more common and the "iron dog" — the snow machine — was invented, the tradition all but died out.

So in the 1970s, Joe Redington snr created the Iditarod, an endurance race to help keep dog sledding alive. Now keeping dogs is pretty common and sprint and long-distance races are held around the state throughout the winter.

For a taste of the mushing life, you can go to Fairbanks and visit one of the many kennels near there. Jessica is a musher at Paws for Adventure. She isn't racing the Iditarod this year, instead planning for its sister race, the equally long Yukon Quest. Her dogs need to be kept active but the hour-long route with me through the woods and back again is barely a stroll in the park for them. I'm wrapped up in a huge snow jacket and bundled into a sleeping bag in the sled; Jessica stands on the runners at the back. All I can see is a flurry of flying paws and bouncing tails as we take off. It's jerky as each dog pulls in a slightly different



direction and the sled slides around over the snowy track. Jessica shifts her weight on the runners to control the movement. Then we get into a steady clip and as the icy wind hits my face I'm forced to bury myself further into the sleeping bag. Strategy is a huge part of these endurance races. Jessica tells me as we pick up the pace. Mushers are constantly calculating speed and distance and rests, and recalculating as they have to drop injured or sick

dogs at checkpoints. Tactics are not without controversy either. The Seaveys are known for taking modified sleds that allow them to rest up to four dogs at a time on the trail. Jessica says she listens to her team as she goes, reading their body language to see whether they need to stop. Many mushers try to take a breather during the day so they can race for longer stretches at night — it's harder on the humans, but easier on the dogs who prefer the really cold temperatures. It's often difficult to eat along the trail too as it's so cold your body doesn't want food. But you have to keep your energy up and Jessica has lots of fruit

THE RACE
Iditarod 2018 starts in Anchorage on March 3. Go to iditarod.com for details.

THE DOGS
Paws for Adventure is one of the many kennels near Fairbanks. Go to pawsforadventure.com

ibly strong, these dogs are more marathon runner than crossfit athlete. The ones at Paws for Adventure are fed the energy equivalent of 75 Big Macs a day, I'm told.

The huskies in the yard are tied to green box kennels with straw strewn around in the snow. One comes up to me and sniffs at my boots; there's possum fur in my socks and I wonder whether he can smell it. I bend down to say hello and then he looks up at me with those soft brown eyes. I fall in love on the spot. Wacker is his name, but he is gentle and sweet and simply delightful.

The dogs I meet seem to be happy and healthy and full of energy. But huskies are definitely working dogs. It used to be that dog teams were necessary to get around. These days though, sled dogs are raced and as new records are set, the competition gets harder and faster. Whereas the Iditarod used to take 20 days when it began in the 70s, teams have halved the time they can run it.

Dogs have died on the Iditarod. Although the average number of dog deaths over the past decade is about one a year, this year is a particularly bad one. Three dogs collapse on the trail and one overheats in a plane while being flown home. It's devastating for all involved — for most mushers, losing a dog is losing a friend.

Mushing wisdom holds that you can't make a dog run if it doesn't want to. If a musher pushes their dogs too hard, they will refuse to move. So the relationship has to be one of mutual respect.

A musher and the team rely on each other for survival out there in the harsh conditions of an Alaskan winter. Mushers have to keep making decisions, hour by hour, that ensure they keep the dogs' trust. So when it comes to it, you don't really own the dogs, the dogs own you.

Over the following days, everywhere you go, shop assistants and office workers are following the GPS tracker online. Souvenir shops are full of stuffed toy dogs, Iditarod books, and pink T-shirts reading "Alaska: Where men are men and women win the Iditarod".

Hotel lobbies and information centres have huge whiteboards set up with grids charting the arrival and departure times of the teams at each checkpoint. Several names are crossed out — people who have "scratched" from the race out of concern for their health or that of their dogs. But Mitch Seavey has streaked ahead, followed by a chasing pack of four teams, including his son.

Professional photos appear online of tiny figures in a vast snowy landscape. Tales of sportsmanship and hardship emerge. One musher falls asleep while eating a piece of cheese out on the trail. Another goes flying after hitting a rut while dozing and doesn't wake until he face-plants in the snow. One man stops to wait for his fiancée several places back after hearing she had a rough time in a storm.

Then, after just over a week, I hear that Mitch Seavey, with icicles stuck to his moustache, has arrived in Nome and won the race. At 57, he's the oldest person to have done so. He has shattered the record too, completing the run in eight days, three hours and 40 minutes. His son arrives less than three hours later, coming in second; Aliy finishes 8th and Martin a day later, back in 32nd.

But it's not over yet. Teams continue to arrive over the coming days and the widow's lamp, hung at the finish line, guides them home. In the old days, it would be lit to help a musher on the mail run find his destination at night. More importantly, it meant there was a team still out on the trail. The Nome lamp remains lit as mushers pull up, some with touches of frostbite and all bone-tired, but most pleased just to have finished. There are quite a few who don't. Finally, after 12 days, Cindy Abbott and her team come in, the last ones to arrive — and the lamp is extinguished.

Soon everyone will pack up and return home but the legend around their feats of endurance will continue, keeping the traditions alive, keeping isolated villages alive, a bright spot in the middle of the long winter. And next year even more mushers will arrive, rookies and veterans from around Alaska and the world, to test themselves and their dogs in the Last Great Race on Earth.

After our short run, the dogs' faces are frosted with ice, the moisture from their breath freezing on their whiskers. They don't look at all tired; instead they're alert and curious. They're also surprisingly small. Lean and incred-