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Iditarod: The Last Great Race on Earth

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It's the first week in March and in sporting terms that means it is the time of the first sounds of spring. No not the crack of the bat hitting ball, but the sounds of dogs barking and men and women urging them on down the trail. These are the sounds of "The Last Great Race on Earth," the Iditarod.

This 1,159 mile dog-sled race from Anchorage to Nome has been contested in Alaska, where spring in early March is but a rumor, for over two decades now. The race commemorates the transportation of serum by dog sled to Nome to fight a diphtheria epidemic in 1925. Dog-Sled racing itself goes back into the late 19th century as a competitive sport, while the Iditarod was organized in the 1960s by Dorothy Page and Joe Reddington Sr. to save mushing from the growing trend toward snowmobiles.

The first race in 1966 consisted of two twenty-eight mile heats and was named the Iditarod Trail Seppala Memorial Race after Leonhard Seppala one of twenty drivers in the Great Race of Mercy in 1925. Seppala was a transplanted Norwegian who was already famous for having won the All-Alaska Sweepstakes of Nome three years in a row. The race was the first major mushing competition in the world.

The name "Iditarod" comes from the gold rush town of interior Alaska which sat on the major transportation and communications corridor linking mining camps, trading posts, and other towns.

This race evolved into the full-blown event we now watch by 1973. Thirty-four drivers and their dogs took on the course that year, in a race billed as 1,049 miles long, the last 49 miles symbolizing Alaska, the 49th State. The winner was Dick Wilmarth of Red Devil with a time of 20 days, 49 minutes, and 41 seconds.

The challenges are many. The elements often display their fury along the trails. Four years ago 150 miles into the race teams were bunching up because the trail ahead had been buried by blowing and drifting snow. A few days later strong winds and a rough trail had been compounded by overnight temperatures near minus 35 at Finger Lake.

In the 1990 race it was in turn too warm, too cold, the snow drifts were insurmountable, there were Buffalo on the trail, and two sleds were attacked by Moose, who tangled the lines and

stomped the dogs. The mountains and the tundra offer challenges of epic proportion. This year five time winner Rick Swensen has already been disqualified because one of his dogs died on the trail.

The place names along the trail are expressive and exotic. Finger Lake, Rainy Pass, Koyak, Shaktoolik, Skwentna, the Yukon River, Cripple checkpoint. This is a test of man and animal against the power of nature in which the unexpected is always expected. This winter is no exception. Snow has been as rare as sunshine, and plans were being made to use snow-making machines to prepare the trails for the race. Training was taking place mostly on frozen lakes. But then in early February several feet of snow buried the trails turning them into a quagmire of unpacked snow.

Some sixty mushers and their teams began the race last Saturday, and no one looks for a repeat of last year's record setting pace. Doug Swingley of Simms, Montana, was the first non-Alaskan to win the Iditarod, and he did it in record time of 9 days, 2 hours, 42 minutes and 19 seconds. This smashed the old record held by Swiss-born Martin Buser of Big Lake by nearly 33 hours, and was over ten days shorter than Wilmarth's winning time of 1973.

Buser will be heard again this year singing to his dogs, Swingley will be back to defend his title. Not competing is four-time champion Susan Butcher, who in 1990 was also the last woman to win the Iditarod. At age 39 Butcher, the all-time money winner and new mother, has retired.

During the last half of the 1980's the Iditarod was known for its battle of the sexes between Swensen and Butcher. T-shirts proclaiming "Alaska-where men are men and women win the Iditarod" were said to have irritated Swensen no end.

This year's competition has 60 mushers and their dogs, but prize money is down by \$50,000 from last year as a shoe company, pet food firm, and the Chrysler Corporation have backed away under pressure from animal rights groups. Five Alaska Dodge Dealers stepped in where Chrysler stepped out, and other Alaska firms have increased their corporate involvement.

Despite this sour note "The Last Great Race on Earth" really does live up to its name. The Dogs and their best friends challenge the elements and one another in a test of skill,

power, and endurance, over the course of 1,159 miles, almost any one of which can claim the life of a participant.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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