



Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race®

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PRESS RELEASE

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Philip Esai named Honorary Musher for the 2015 Iditarod

Wasilla, Alaska – (December 19, 2014) – The Iditarod Trail Committee announced today that long-term Iditarod volunteer, Philip Esai, has been named the 2015 Honorary musher. Each year, the board of directors of the Iditarod Trail Committee have honored one or more people, not necessarily mushers, who have made a significant contribution to the sport of sled dog racing.

Philip and his wife Dora have participated in every race as a volunteer since the beginning. The Athabaskan Indian couple would house mushers in the early years of the race at their cabin along the banks of the Kuskokwim River at Big River, located half way to McGrath from Nikolai. Their daughter Marty remembers, “There was no room in the cabin because mushers were sleeping everywhere.”

The Esai family would cook pots of moose stew, moose steaks, beaver and the occasional lynx fry. The coffee pot was always on for anyone traveling the trail, not just the mushers! Philip also greeted, fed and housed 50 mushers for several years at the Runkles bison camp located along the Farewell Burn Trail in the Peloc Hills 40 miles out of Nikolai. More recently, Philip and Dora set up a 12x14 wall tent complete with a wood-burning stove and spruce bough floor for mushers to sleep in at the Nikolai checkpoint.

Philip was a hard working volunteer who worked on the original trail from Rohn towards McGrath. Most recently, at age 72, Philip helped with re-opening 28 miles of trail destroyed during the Turquoise Lake Fire in the Farewell Burn. He was instrumental in locating the original trail and helping to chain saw, move trees and brush, all during average temperatures between 25 and 30 below zero each day.

Philip had also gone out on the trail over the years in search of lost mushers and lost dogs. He regularly volunteered as a checker and once stayed up for 48 hours to make sure his duties were complete. Philip loved the race and the trail and would do anything to help the Iditarod succeed. He was a dog musher from his early childhood and felt a special connection to the dogs and the mushers.

Philip passed away on May 21, 2014. He is survived by his wife Dora, daughters Marty and Jacque, son Daniel and son in law John, as well as many grandchildren. Mark Nordman, Race Director for the Iditarod said, “His laughter, hardworking spirit and good cheer during the Iditarod race will be greatly missed.”

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As is tradition, representatives of the family will participate in a variety of activities prior to and during the race. Attendees will hear more about Philip's contribution to the Iditarod at the pre-race Mushers Banquet at the Dena'ina Center on Thursday, March 5th. Additionally, a representative of the family will help to honor Philip by wearing the honorary #1 bib and riding in the sled basket of the first musher to leave the start line in downtown Anchorage.

Iditarod XLIII will get underway at 10:00 a.m. on Saturday, March 7, 2015 in downtown Anchorage at the corner of 4th Avenue and D Street.

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