

THE IDITAROD - WHAT IT TAKES!

By Shelby

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QUESTION

What does it take to have a successful Iditarod Dog Sled Team?

HYPOTHESIS

I think well-trained, well-exercised and well-fed dogs with an experienced Musher are key to a successful Iditarod dog sled team

MUSHER SURVEY RESULTS

I originally thought that I could predict the winner of the Iditarod based on the type of sled raced, diet & exercise of the musher and their dogs, the weather and even lucky charms. What I found out is that each musher is as unique as their dog sled team. While there are certain top mushers, it is everybody's game and you never know who will be the first to Nome. I want to thank the Iditarod Education Department and the 18 Musers who took time out of their busy schedule to answer my questions.

TYPES OF SLEDS USED



Gatt Tail Dragger



Bernie Willis Sled



Easy Rider by Prairie Built



Lone Wolf Sled



CB Sled

Several mushers make their own sled which includes sit down sleds, non sit down sleds & race toboggans.

BREED OF DOGS

Alaskan Husky – AKA Mut
Aurora Husky
Greenlandic Husky
Euro Hound
Short-Hair Old Village Breed

NUMBER OF DOGS TRAINED AT A TIME

Range is from 4 to 35
Average is 13 – 19

HOW MANY DOGS OWNED

The fewest dogs in a Musher's kennel is 25
The most dogs in a Musher's kennel is 150
The average number of dogs at a Musher's kennel is 68

FEEDING SCHEDULE

The feeding schedules are pretty similar between the mushers. Most mushers feed their dogs twice a day plus snacks. When racing, the dogs will be fed up to 7 times per day. The dogs need a high performance diet with added meats and fats. One musher noted that water is given to the sled dogs warm and baited with meat so that they will drink all of their water before it freezes. This also provides additional calories for the dogs. The mushers try to eat 2 to 3 meals a day plus snacks, but they don't eat the high fat content.

EXERCISE SCHEDULE

The mushers and the sled dogs have different routines depending upon the season. The exercise routine is shorter in the fall and then they work up to longer runs in the winter.

TRAINING ROUTINE

One musher said that he starts slow with short runs that are about 3 miles and slowly increases the miles as the dogs become stronger. Equal rest as run time for both – 4 on and 4 off / 6 on and 6 off.

MOST IMPORTANT!!! DOGS FIRST – ALWAYS!

NUMBER OF YEARS RACING

With the total of 18 surveys received, the combined number of racing years is 304 years!
The average number is 16.9 years of racing experience
Range of experience is from 2 years to 40 years of dog sled racing

NUMBER OF MUSHERS SURVEYED THAT FINISHED IN THE TOP 30

11 Finished in the Top 30
One musher finished the race in 16th place with only 7 dogs in 9 days!

INJURIES

One musher scratched due to their dogs being sick
One musher noted that they injured their ankle and could not walk
One musher responded that their dogs quit racing

MUSHERS BE RACING IN 2012

13 Mushers will be racing in 2012
3 Mushers will not be racing in 2012
2 Mushers might race in 2012

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

Mandatory Gear that musher must have with him/her at all times:

Proper cold weather sleeping bag weighing a minimum of 5 lbs.
Ax, head to weigh a minimum of 1-3/4 lbs., handle to be at least 22" long
One operational pair of snowshoes with bindings, each snowshoe to be at least 252 square inches in size
Any promotional material provided by the Iditarod Trail Committee
Eight booties for each dog in the sled or in use
One operational cooker and pot capable of boiling at least 3 gallons of water at one time
Veterinarian notebook, to be presented to the veterinarian at each checkpoint
An adequate amount of fuel to bring 3 gallons of water to a boil

Additional Gear reported from survey:

Blankets, dog t-shirts, leg warmers, wrist wraps, runners plastic, ski poles, goggles, neoprene face mask, bibs, GPS, garbage bags, foot ointments, powders, lotions, fake toe nails, super glue, thermometer, space blanket, iPod, fur hat, mitts, hand and foot warmers, survival gear, several MP3 players, Via Instant Starbucks, Tabasco Sauce, batteries, insulated bucket to make dog food, bowls and scooper to feed dogs, dog coats for the team, dog first aid kit, sled repair kit, extra clothes, tool kit, snow hooks

LUCKY CHARMS

A Fossilized Walrus Tooth that was a gift from an Eskimo friend

A Good Attitude!

No lucky charms, but this musher spends a lot of time in a state of prayer

Anything that has come from or been to Nome has good JuJu – especially dogs! Also a SF Muni token and a skull and roses ring that has been to Nome twice!

The dogs provide the luck!

Does not believe in luck, but wears a Christian Cross

A Lucky Penny given to the musher by a good friend

Pictures of two special people - Lora Bingham and Weylin McNutt

An embroidered heart with a picture of the musher's girlfriend, his family and 2 dogs (Minnie & Blaze) inside his jacket

RED LANTERN

I was very honored to receive a survey response from the 2011 Red Lantern recipient, GB Jones. GB entered his first Iditarod in 2002 and his last race was in 2011, in which he was the oldest musher to finish at the age of 62. He was the last musher into Nome and got there just in time for the Musher's Finishers Banquet! On his last Iditarod run, GB carried the ashes of Lora Bingham to Nome and they were placed on the Bering Sea Beach. Lora had been a big fan of the Iditarod and passed away at a young age from breast cancer. Lora's parent's asked GB if he would carry her ashes and he did, as well as her photo up the trail. GB also carried a photo of Weylin McNutt who was his best friend and who taught him how to dog sled race and had recently passed away.

Awarding a red lantern for the last place finisher in a sled dog race has become an Alaskan tradition. It started as a joke and has become a symbol of stick-to-itiveness in the mushing world.



PURPOSE

To gain a better understanding of the Iditarod mushers and their training program

MATERIALS

Materials List for Dog Sled:

Rope for Harness
2x2 Framing Material
Screws
2 Razor Scooters

Materials List for Dogs:

Protein Meal which Lots of
Chicken, Meat & Fish
Dry Dog Food
Dog Treats
Stop Watch to Time Dogs
Lots of Patience

PROCEDURE

1. Cut the rope into a length that is long enough to fit the dogs and long enough to reach to the back of the sled
2. Tie the rope into harnesses for the two dogs
3. Cut the framing material in sections and piece together
4. Screw pieces together
5. Attach 2 Razor scooters to each side of the dog sled for wheels
6. Prior to testing the dog sled, go fishing with my Dad to get enough fish for my dogs for training with the extra protein diet
7. Test the dog sled!

DATA

The Iditarod is the called “The Last Great Race on Earth!” The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is an annual Alaskan sled dog race that starts in Anchorage and goes to Nome. The trail is composed of two routes: a Northern route, which is run on even-numbered years, and a Southern route, which is run on odd-numbered years.

The length of the race is officially set at 1,049 miles, which honors Alaska's status as the 49th U.S. state. The race takes from 9 days to 15 days to finish. The dog sled team starts out with 16 dogs and you must have no less than 7 dogs finishing the race.



I thought that it would be a fun experiment to see if I could experiment with the information I received from actual Iditarod mushers and put my two dogs to the test.

In April of 2011, I contacted Diane Johnson at the Iditarod Education Department to find out if I could get some information from the mushers about their Iditarod training. Ms. Johnson provided me with the names and mailing addresses of the 2011 mushers so that I could send them a survey about their training techniques. In exchange for the information, Ms. Johnson asked that I send my experiment results to the Iditarod Education Department and they will post my experiment online.

My survey included questions about the amount of training for both the dogs and the mushers, the diet of the dogs and mushers, as well as the sled type. I recognized that some of this information is valuable and top secret, so I did not ask the mushers to identify themselves. However, several mushers either signed their name or included their 2011 race finish number, so I had fun looking them up to see which musher responded!

With my science fair project, I am going to try to replicate a weeklong training of both my dogs and me. I started out the week of winter break by feeding my dogs a special diet and an exercise routine. My father and I built a sled and I began learning how to guide my dogs as a musher! I had already learned the commands for the dogs from my teacher when we studied the Iditarod last year. All that is left is to take all the knowledge shared with me by the mushers and try to have a dog sled team with my 2 dogs.

CONCLUSION

I was very excited to start my Iditarod dog sled experiment. I sent out 47 surveys to the 2011 Iditarod Mushers and I had 18 surveys returned. With the help of the 18 mushers who participated in my survey, I was able to gain first-hand knowledge on what it takes to be an Iditarod racer. What I learned from my project is that you can't train your dogs in a few weeks to be dog sled ready. And, the same goes for being a musher. It takes years of training and experience to achieve the level where you can race in the Iditarod.

My dogs were unable to understand any commands or pull the sled, they just sat there and looked at me. They enjoyed the extra protein diet, but that didn't provide any benefit with sled pulling. They were much happier running by themselves and playing. A true sled dog is excited to be hooked onto the sled, not my 2 dogs.

My dogs may never pull a dog sled and that's ok. What I set out to do is see if I could try to better understand "what it takes" to race the Iditarod. I learned that it takes true athletes with dedication, drive and experienced dogs. You just can't train for a couple of weeks and think you are qualified to run the Iditarod, it's a lot of hard work by both the musher and the dogs. And, maybe a little luck!

Results with Regular Diet

Test Date	Location	Outside Temperature	Distance Results	No Sled Time Results	Sled Time Results
2/18/2012	San Juan Bautista	60 Degrees & Wet	1/4 Mile	52 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/19/2012	San Juan Bautista	56 Degrees	1/4 Mile	45 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/20/2012	San Juan Bautista	62 Degrees & Wet	1/4 Mile	42 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/21/2012	San Juan Bautista	66 Degrees	1/2 Mile	2 Mins 31 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/22/2012	San Juan Bautista	75 Degrees	1/2 Mile	2 Mins 17 Seconds	Would not pull sled

Results with Protein Diet

Test Date	Location	Outside Temperature	Distance Results	No Sled Time Results	Sled Time Results
2/25/2012	San Juan Bautista	52 Degrees	1/4 Mile	53 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/26/2012	San Juan Bautista	62 Degrees	1/4 Mile	53 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/27/2012	San Juan Bautista	54 Degrees & Wet	1/4 Mile	59 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/28/2012	San Juan Bautista	56 Degrees	1/2 Mile	2 Mins 52 Seconds	Would not pull sled
2/29/2012	San Juan Bautista	56 Degrees & Wet	1/2 Mile	2 Mins 44 Seconds	Would not pull sled