

Iditarod Sled Dog Race: A Veterinarian's Experience

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The Iditarod Sled Dog Race has been called "The Last Great Race on Earth". This 1150 mile event from Anchorage to Nome commemorates the serum run of 1925 to save lives in Nome threatened by a Diphtheria outbreak. The Iditarod Trail, now a National Historic Trail, had its beginning as a mail and supply route. During this annual event, veterinarians volunteer to provide care for the dogs. Every dog must be examined at every check point to insure their safety and well being. The veterinarians on the trail have a large responsibility to help insure the health and well being of the dogs

Veterinarians have responsibilities and challenges encountered along the trail in remote areas in subzero temperatures. Special care and needs for the highly conditioned well trained endurance sled dog athletes are provided 24 hours a day during the 2 week event by the veterinary team and a large group of individuals including judges, checkers, handlers, pilots, communicators, and many other dedicated dog lovers. All totaled there are about 1500 volunteers that help make the event happen. The work is demanding and the weather conditions can be extreme, but the beauty of the interior of Alaska in the winter and the camaraderie along the trail is a great reward and an unforgettable life experience that attracts most involved to keep coming back for more.

The Iditarod Trail Committee (ITC) takes an integral role of providing excellence in dog care, not only during the race, but through an extensive program of pre-race veterinary screening. Within 30 days of the race start, each dog receives a cardiovascular examination including an ECG. A pre-race clinical pathology (CBC / Chemistry Panel) evaluation is performed and a microchip is implanted at this time for positive identification throughout the event. A thorough pre-race physical examination is performed on each dog by a licensed veterinarian within 14 days of the race start. Vaccinations must be current. All dogs are required to be parasite free within 10 days of the race start. Random drug testing is conducted. Urine samples are collected at the start, finish, and randomly throughout the race. Detection of performance enhancing drugs results in disqualification or permanent banning from the race. The level of health screening and health care during the race exceeds that which many in the human population on earth will never experience.

Before entering the Iditarod, rookie mushers are required to complete approved qualifying races. This provides assurance that they are experienced in providing the proper care (nutrition, hydration, rest, hygiene, and equipment) for their teams. The ITC sponsors a mandatory two-day seminar to prepare rookie mushers.

About forty-five (45) veterinarians volunteer their time on the trail to perform examinations on every dog at every check point, to administer any necessary treatment while dogs are on (or taken off) of the race, or in some oversight position of the event. During the race, over 12,000 checkpoint veterinary examinations take place. Veterinarians must be accepted and complete an annual ISDVMA sponsored course prior to being allowed to join the veterinary team.

Dog Team Diaries, also referred to as "Vet Books," are carried by each musher. Mushers present their book to a veterinarian at every checkpoint. The book serves as a written medical record for every dog in the race. As such, it is an important communication tool among all individuals over-seeing the welfare of the dogs.

A dog may be "dropped" from the team for any reason. The decision to drop a dog off of the team is made by agreement among the veterinarians, race judges, and mushers. Dropped dogs are monitored continuously by the veterinary staff until their return to Anchorage. Any dog needing follow up veterinary care is transported to a facility designated by the musher before being released from the ITC veterinary staff. Each dropped dog remains under the jurisdiction of the Chief Veterinarian until 72 hours after they have been released by the ITC veterinary staff.

All mushers competing in the Iditarod are members of P.R.I.D.E., "Providing Responsible Information on a Dog's Environment." Membership in this organization is not limited to mushers. Veterinarians and other interested individuals can also join. Those familiar with sled dogs understand and appreciate the guidelines established by P.R.I.D.E. as sound advice for the care of this special breed of dog.

The International Sled Dog Veterinary Medical Association (I.S.D.V.M.A.) publishes *The Musher and Veterinary Handbook*. This resource provides information for mushers and veterinarians. The I.S.D.V.M.A., an organization primarily of veterinarians with an interest and/or experience with working sled dogs, actively promotes and encourages welfare and safety. Many members of the organization have served as trail veterinarians during the Iditarod event or other sled dog race events around the world. The I.S.D.V.M.A. supports and encourages scientific research to better understand the needs of the racing sled dog.

Race policies and rules are written with emphasis on the proper care and treatment of the dogs. Any musher found guilty of in-humane treatment is disqualified and banned from competition in future Iditarod races.