

March 14 - Elim, White Mountain & Nome

Greetings to Iditarod Educators, Students and Race Fans,

It's been said time and time again, "Without the volunteers, the Iditarod would never happen." Being on the trail, I can see the truth in that statement. Volunteers come from around the world to be a part of The Last Great Race. Before leaving Unalakleet, I talked with a "checker" to see what that job entailed. As teams come in, a checker greets the team and records pertinent information - musher's name, bib number, time in, number of dogs and then checks through the list of mandatory equipment (vet notebook, promotional material, sleeping bag, axe, booties, cooker, and pot). This important information is relayed to the communication folks at the checkpoint who send it on to race headquarters so that the current standings can be kept up to date on the Iditarod website. It isn't necessary for mushers to "checkout" when leaving a checkpoint except after the mandatory rest periods. Time departing checkpoints is recorded in a less formal manner and also communicated to Anchorage by the checkpoint coms people so that time enroute can be tracked. The checkers are the first point of contact for the mushers as they enter a checkpoint so they also give directions for finding drop bags, water, straw, heat and parking. There need to be ample checkers at the early checkpoints because of the concentration of teams coming through. Further into the race, as the teams spread out, so is the work of the checkers. Checkers work in shifts so one is on duty 24 hours a day from the time the first team arrives in the checkpoint until the last team leaves. The checkers at Skwentna began their duty at about 8:30 pm on Sunday evening and by mid-day on Monday, all the teams had moved on down the trail. The checkers from Skwentna were transported up the trail to another checkpoint. Volunteering for Iditarod places you right in the middle of the action as long as the action lasts. From what I've seen on the trail, the checkpoint crew develops a great camaraderie. Many return year after year.

It was a beautiful flight from Unalakleet to Nome. We flew along the trail and saw many mushers traveling. I've been flying with Jeff Schultz, Iditarod's official photographer who was taking action shots from the air. We flew over all the checkpoints between Unalakleet and Nome. When the mushers leave Shaktoolik, they leave land and travel on the sea ice of



Where's the musher?

Norton Bay. Koyuk, population 297, marks the end of the long journey across the bay. We flew over a sled that first appeared not to have a driver but instead, the driver was lying on the sled bag perhaps napping as the dogs followed the trail over the ice. We landed in Elim, an Inupiat Eskimo village of 340. The checkpoint was in the old fire station where Mitch Seavey, Aliy Zerkle and other mushers gather for noon lunch. Moving on from Elim, the trail

crosses the ice of Golovin Bay and then returns to land for the rest of the race. Top priority for the day was to be at White Mountain when Jeff King finished his mandatory 8-hour layover. This Eskimo village has a population of 210. After leaving the village of White Mountain, we followed the trail inland to Topkok. From there the trail follows the coastline of the Bering Sea through Safety and then into Nome. The scenery from the air was breathtaking. In between White Mountain and Topkok, we saw a heard of Reindeer. It was a perfect day for flying - clear skies and very little wind.

While in White Mountain, I visited with all the leaders - Jeff King, Doug Swingley, Paul Gebhardt, Dee Dee Jonrowe, John Baker and Bjornar Anderson. Jeff has a 3-hour lead over Doug. Doug is about 2.5 hours ahead of Paul and Dee Dee followed by John and Bjornar. If things go smoothly for Jeff and Doug, they should come across the finish line as number one and two. The next several places are up for grabs. Gebhardt, Jonrowe, Baker and Anderson are speeding along. It will come down to whose dogs have the most to give on the last 77 miles into Nome. I expect to see King at about 11:00 pm, Swingley about 2:00 am, Jonrowe about 4:30 and Gebhardt very shortly afterward. There will be much celebration in Nome tonight!

Jeff King left White Mountain telling us that if everything went as planned, he'd see us about 11:00 pm in Front Street in Nome. Jeff was not out of the White Mountain for more than 10 minutes when returned to the checkpoint. We were all pretty surprised by his return. Folks who watched Jeff as he headed out on the trail reported that he stopped 3 or 4 times to rearrange dogs on his team. One dog in particular, Bernard, just couldn't get organized to focus on running. When Jeff returned to the checkpoint, he removed Bernard from the gang line and dropped him from the team. King quickly turned around and headed toward Nome, this time moving smoothly down the trail.



The sled part pictured yesterday was a snow hook. This could be compared to the parking brake of an automobile. When the musher stops, he/she sets the snow hook by stomping it into the snow. If the snow is of the right depth and is well packed, the hook holds pretty well. If the snow is too fluffy or not deep enough, an eager dog team can easily pull out the hook. When the dogs are parked at a checkpoint, the musher sets one hook from the rear of the sled and one hook from

the front of the sled to keep the dogs lined out. What is Jeff trying to his sled? Why does he need them?

Happy trails to all,
Terrie