

February 26, 2006

A record field of twenty-three 14 - 17 year old mushers left the start line for the 29th Junior Iditarod. The University of Alaska College Savings Plan sponsors the Junior Iditarod. Thirteen thousand dollars will be awarded in scholarships to the top five finishers and the recipients of the Humanitarian Award and the Sportsmanship Award. Contestants include ten girls and thirteen guys with sixteen rookies. The race ran 138 miles from Willow to Yentna Station Roadhouse and back. Melissa Owens of Nome was back to defend her title.

Snow was forecast for race day. Mushers were in Willow an hour before the 10:00 start for sled checks. As start time drew close, snow began to fall. It was a welcome sight and improved conditions drastically. Gary Paulson who was there to handle dogs for one of the young mushers was pleased to see the snow. He felt that there would be more cushion on the trail, and the ride wouldn't be as bumpy. The snow followed the juniors all the way to Yentna Station.



In the winter, there are only 3 ways to travel to the Yentna checkpoint where the juniors have a 10-hour layover before returning to the Willow. The obvious is by dog team and the remaining two options are snowmachine or plane. Bush flights in Alaska are by sight, so due to the snow reducing visibility the planes were grounded. This created a challenge for race officials who usually fly out to the layover spot. Quickly, a plan was created to get the race marshal, judges, doctor, veterinarian and Teacher on the Trail out to Yentna by snow machine. There were only 2 snow machines for 6 passengers. So, as is often the case, necessity is the mother of invention and the snow bus was called into service.

A lodge owner loaned us a machine with a freight sled. The doctor drove while race marshal, Andy Moderow; race judge, Ellie Claus and the WFTOTT™ rode the bus. It was an awesome experience seeing the trail from the same level as the mushers rather than flying overhead.

Once the juniors reached Yentna Station, they parked their dogs and began chores - cooking for the dogs, giving foot massages, bedding them down and then finally heating their own food. Having completed their chores, the juniors spent time around the campfire. The snow ended, the sky cleared and temperatures dropped to 20 below zero by morning. After an eleven-hour layover plus time adjustment for starting position, the leader, Micah Degerland left Yentna at 3:18. It was a frosty run to the finish line. Micah



captured the 29th Jr. Iditarod title in 11 hrs 59 minutes followed closely by Rohn Buser and Ellen King. Congratulations! Check www.jridiarod.com for complete results.

The Yupiit School District in Tuluksak, Alaska entered a team in Junior Iditarod driven by Robert Tikium, Jr. The school owns 14 dogs. Using the dogs to deliver curriculum, the whole school is involved in the care and training of the team. The students use the dogs to tie their native culture to present day Alaska. It's a tremendously valuable experience for the children to realize that customs and ways of living dating back to early ancestors have a place in modern life. The dogs offer students hands on learning experiences across the curriculum. The shop classes are responsible for maintaining the sleds and building doghouses. Students read to the dogs without the fear of being ridiculed by classmates or corrected by teachers for wrong pronunciations. Students write to the dogs. Students study genetics with the possibility of breeding. Mathematics activities include budgeting for the dog yard. This is the ultimate in educational experiences!



Congratulations to all of the Junior Iditarod mushers, their families and their teams. These young mushers showed perseverance, innovation, diligence, sportsmanship and a host of other character traits that the sport of mushing has helped them develop and hone as they braved the elements of the 2006 race. Best wishes to the 17 year old mushers who have graduated from Junior Iditarod!

Coming up this week in Anchorage, the 2007 WFTOTT™ finalists will begin the interview process. Teachers will be attending the Iditarod Winter Professional Development Conference. Vet check will be held at Iditarod Headquarters. Mushers and race fans will be attending the banquet where mushers will select their starting position. These along with a host of other activities lead up to the start of Iditarod XXXIV.

Stay Tuned and Happy Trails to All,
Terrie

