

March 13, 2006 - Unalakleet & Shaktoolik

Greetings to Iditarod Educators, Students and Race Fans,

The sun is shining, it's warmer and the winds have calmed a bit here in UNK making it easier for the mushers, vets, checkers, spectators and dogs. Folks who live here are wearing ski goggles as they come out to greet the arriving teams. They really have the right idea. Granules of snow blown by the wind are sharp, almost feeling like granules of sand when they hit your face and eyes. We're definitely not as well suited as the dogs are for this kind of weather.

It's been an exciting day. This morning I joined the Bering Strait School District Broadcast team for a videoconference with schools in the lower 48. Local musher and Iditarod veteran, Rick Holt offered his expertise as the kids asked questions. Students on the broadcast team have prepared video segments for the shows. You can log onto the sight and see all of the video clips at www.mushing.bssd.org. The student broadcast team at the checkpoint has just completed interviews with Chief Veterinarian, Stuart Nelson, Sarah Love, DVM and musher Ramy Brooks. Tomorrow afternoon, the team will move to Nome anticipating the first musher across the finish line.



BSSD Interview with Ramy Brooks



Jeff King told an incredible story about his trail experience into Unalakleet. He was dozing off a bit during the run; he hit a bump in the trail and tumbled off his seat onto the side of the trail. As he woke up and jumped to his feet, he had the feeling that something was wrong, then he sees a dog 15 or 20 feet out in front of his team. Checking his leaders, he saw they were both

there. As he walked back through the team he realized it was one of his wheel dogs. Not a good situation as this lead dog has the nasty habit of letting you within a couple of feet and

then runs off a little further. Jeff grabbed the best dog snacks and moved toward the tricky little dog. The dog forgot about the 'catch me if you can game' - the salmon steak snack was just too much to pass up. Jeff caught the dog only to realize his sled and team were passing him. Now a bad situation just got a lot worse! He couldn't let go of the dog to chase his team down and it was pretty cumbersome hauling the dog and chasing his team at the same time. One minute he's leading the race and the next he's standing in the bush with one little wheel dog watching his ride to Nome go down the trail. . He's running after his team and sees the dogs disappear over a little hill with the sled following. Jeff is calling to his lead dog Salem - Whoa! Tone of voice is important here. You have to use just the right tone of voice, can't be yelling like he wanting to because the dogs will just get more excited and keep going! Jeff crests the little hill to find that Salem had stopped the team! He really stomped the snow hooks (both) into the ground as he put his wheel dog back into the team and snacked everyone, especially Salem. He pulled the hook and continued on his run. Talk about going from the top of the world to the bottom and back to the top all in about two minutes!

As you look at the current race stats on the Iditarod website, you may wonder why the speed varies so much. You might see a musher who is traveling at 3 or 4 miles per hour another musher who is running at 10 or 11 mph and other at 7 or 8 miles per hour. How can teams vary so much? A lot has to do with the rests the mushers take outside of checkpoints. There is no way of keeping track of the time the dogs are actually running in between checkpoints and the time they're being snacked or camping out on the trail. To calculate miles per hour, it's simple math dividing the distance traveled by the elapsed time. You can view a very in depth breakdown of each team's race by clicking on the musher's name when viewing current race stats. As the race gets neared to Nome, you'll want to watch the speed of the teams, number of dogs and rest time. As of this point, there is no clear-cut winner. Teams are moving up the leader board while other teams are slowing down. This is going to be an exciting finish. Look back in race history to see what the closest ever finish was. Who were the mushers and how much time was between them as they crossed the finish line?

I had the opportunity to fly to Shaktoolik for the afternoon. What an awesome checkpoint! The Village of Shak is on a little spit of land that juts out into Norton Sound. There is one road that runs through town with houses, a store, a school, a power plant, the city well and



Shaktoolik's main street



Pam's Taxi of Shaktoolik

armory spread along the sides of the road. No cross streets, just one long main street. Shaktoolik is a Malemiut Eskimo village of 230 residents. Reindeer herding is a major part of the local economy. From this wind whipped checkpoint, the Iditarod Trail leaves land and travels over frozen Norton Bay to Koyuk. The airstrip is a couple miles from town so I took Pam's Taxi into the checkpoint.

The apparatus pictured yesterday between the runners of the sled were the brake and the drag pad. The drag pad is often made of snow machine track and some times has spikes on the bottom. The musher stands on the drag pad with all or part of his/her weight to slow the sled. For stopping and maximum speed reduction, the musher uses the brake. Just like a car, the musher can break lightly or strongly to slow or control the sled. What are the two claw-like things planted in the snow out side of the runners?



Happy Trails to all,
Terrie