

March 3, 2006 - The Day before Iditarod

Greetings to Iditarod Educators, Students and Race Fans,

The last ten days in Alaska have been busy, busy, busy! I've visited Wasilla High - home of the Warriors, Iditarod and Larson Elementary Schools in Wasilla as well as Lake Otis, College Gate, Huffman and Ptarmigan Elementary Schools in Anchorage. The teachers and students here are just as excited to begin their Iditarod learning as students are in the lower 48.



How fast do you think we're going?

I've had the opportunity to visit Official Iditarod Artist, John VanZyle at his home/kennel/studio in Eagle River. His dogs are Siberian Huskies. Being as busy as he is around race time, John and his wife, Jona aren't always able to get the dogs out for runs to use up that sled dog energy. Instead, the dogs run on the wheel. It's a GIANT version of the wheel that you'd find in a hamster's cage. It's a favorite form of exercise for the dogs!

Mushers selected their starting positions at the Thursday evening mushers banquet. Nearly 2000 race fans, sponsors, mushers and family members flocked to Sullivan Arena to be entertained, honored and select starting positions. After dinner, mushers came to the stage in the order they registered for the race to select a starting position. Every musher has a strategy for selecting the time he or she will leave Willow. Some consider the daytime temperature, as they would prefer to run their dogs in the cooler part of the day. Others will want to establish a certain run-rest schedule. Some want to leave at the end of the pack; others prefer the middle, while others have a "lucky" number. Some are superstitious and others want to run near a team they've trained with. You can check starting positions at the Iditarod, Cabela's or Anchorage Daily News. Most race experts consider this field of 83 teams to be the best ever. There are 25 of last year's top 30 mushers competing this year with 8 out of the top 10 from 2005 returning for another race.

It's not unusual to see teams of dogs lined out here on the shores of Lake Hood at the Millennium Hotel, race headquarters in Anchorage. Many of the mushers travel great distances and once they arrive for the vet check, they stay in the area. This is also the sight of Iditarod Trail Committee's dog handler training. Local mushers sometimes have their own handling teams but other mushers only bring a few handlers. Harnessing and

delivering a dog team to the starting line requires about 20 people. Each of the dogs has a handler, 2 handlers for the sled along with the mushers who is one the brake and another individual who is on the drag pad. These dogs are excited and ready to go. They aren't big on staying in an orderly line and progressing to the starting line in an orderly fashion - they need a little help.



As I mentioned in a previous message, many of the mushers hold a reception prior to the race start to honor their families and sponsors. I've been able to attend two events - one for John Baker out of Kotzebue and the other for Ramy Brooks from Healy. It's always good to see Ramy, his wife Kathy, his daughters Abby and Molly and his Mom, Roxy Wright. Ramy's major sponsor is Cellular One. Good luck to Ramy in Iditarod XXXIV!

The streets of downtown Anchorage have been covered with snow and shortly; mushers, spectators, Iditariders, fans and media will be arriving for the Ceremonial start. I'll be riding 11 miles with Tollef Monson, number 52, of Kotzebue. Stay tuned for the experiences of an Iditarider.

