

March 7, 2006

Greetings to Iditarod Educators, Students and race Fans,

Rainy Pass is the most incredible place - it's beautiful beyond description. As you might guess, mountains surround the checkpoint with the trail crossing the mountains at a lower point or pass. Yesterday, late in the afternoon as sunlight faded from the valley, the mountains to the east of Puntilla Lake shone a brilliant white as they were still bathed in sunlight. Last night the temperature reportedly dropped to 30 below zero. The stars were magnificent and the moon was bright enough to move around the checkpoint without a headlamp. It's quite amazing how much light is reflected off the snow. Believe it or not, you can see your shadow on the snow from the moonlight!

Most stories told by the mushers this morning at the Rainy Pass checkpoint came from a section of the trail called the Steps between Finger Lake and Rainy Pass. This is a section of the trail that drops sharply in a series of hairpin turns and switchbacks. The mushers that were in Rainy Pass this morning came through during the night. Number 13, Kim Kittredge (K2) perhaps had the best story. A couple of miles before the Steps, he was riding his brake lightly when it hit something and snapped. That left K2 without a brake for the steps that were icy, fast and treacherous. He and the team made it to Rainy Pass but before continuing on, Kim had to somehow repair the brake.



Trail from air - Farewell Burn

Being that the checkpoint was at a hunting lodge, Kim inquired about using their shop. Unfortunately, the shop had burned down a couple of weeks earlier. One of the employees took K2 out to the sight of the old shop and told him the vice was in the far corner. They found the vice in the debris and K2 was able to bend a piece of metal taken from the easy rider seat of the sled to fashion a new brake. K2 lost a couple of hours in repair but after climbing to the top of Rainy Pass at 3400 feet, K2 approached the Dalzell gorge and the Farewell Burn. The Steps and the Dalzell Gorge are considered to be the most treacherous portions of the trail.

Weather was closing in quickly at Rainy Pass so people moving along the trail by plane were lucky to be able to follow the teams today. Unlike past years, the Farewell Burn was covered with snow. Usually this area is bare because of winds blowing the snow off the trail. Having snow was a pleasant surprise for the mushers that made the trip through the Burn much easier for the mushers. From the air, the trail looked like a white ribbon that stretched for miles and miles through rubble, young Black Spruce and Birch trees. Teams could be spotted frequently along the trail. Find out where the Farewell Burn is located. How did it get its name? What challenges does it present the mushers?



Team on Trail - Farewell Burn

Tonight I'm in Nikolai, an Athabascan village of 100 located on the Upper Kuskokwim River. The checkpoint is near the river. Musher's are invited to sleep in the school on the gymnasium floor. There is a village café located in the community center where a burger and fries can be purchased for \$9. There are 19 children in this school - 11 children in K - 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 8 children in grades 7 - 12. There is a teacher for the K - 6 class and one teacher for the 7 - 12 class. The race is a special event for the checkpoint communities. The children are off school for a couple of days so they can help at the checkpoint and greet the teams as they come off the river into the checkpoint.

While visiting in the school, I saw this list of Athabascan Values. Compare these values that are important to the people in Nikolai to the values your culture considers important.

Self Sufficiency	Family Relations	Hard Work
Unity	Humor	Honesty
Fairness	Love for Children	Sharing
Sharing	Caring	Village Cooperation
Responsibility to Village	Respect For Knowledge	Respect for the Land
Respect for Nature	Practice of Traditions	Honor Ancestors
Respect for Elder and Others	Spirituality	Care and provision for the Family

The sled pictured yesterday was a toboggan sled. The advantage to this type of sled is the low center of gravity along with its strength and durability. Do your best to identify this sled.



Happy trails to all,  
Terrie