What is the Iditarod?

Sled dogs have been used for thousands of years as a way to travel in the winter time. Without the hard working sled dogs, the native peoples of the north would not have been able to survive. The dogs allowed the natives to move in search of food, trade with neighboring families, and communicate with others.

As more and more people came to places like Alaska in search of gold and riches, the sled dogs again played a very important role. Mail, food, and gold were all delivered by dog team. People would move from place to place with the dogs. The dog teams and their drivers became symbols of the pioneer spirit in the northland.

In the winter of 1925, the town of Nome on the Bering Sea Coast was hit with a serious disease called diphtheria. The children of Nome were sick, and medicine was needed to save them and stop the disease from spreading. The Bering Sea was frozen for the winter, airplanes couldn't fly through the storms, and no roads or railroads came anywhere close to Nome. The sled dogs saved the day. 18 teams and their mushers each took a turn carrying the medicine a total of 674 miles to reach Nome. Balto was the famous lead dog of the team that brought the medicine the last miles to Nome. The sled dogs were heroes, and a statue of Balto was placed in Central Park in New York City.

As railroads, cars, airplanes, and snowmobiles arrived in Alaska, the sled dogs began to be forgotten. An important part of the native culture was disappearing with the dogs. This bothered people, including a man named Joe Redington, Sr. Something had to be done to preserve the tradition of the sled dogs. The Iditarod race was started to preserve the sled dog culture.

The Iditarod is a celebration of the loyalty and courage of the sled dog. Sled dogs have played a very important role in the history and culture of Alaska and the North Country.
These children live in Grayling, a village along the Yukon River. They love to watch the teams as they pass through.

The race starts in Anchorage on the first Saturday in March every year. Between 55 and 75 mushers from Alaska, Canada, the Lower 48, and other countries around the world compete in the race. The winner usually takes nine days to finish the race. The last place team takes two weeks or more. Click for more on this topic.

The Iditarod places humans and dogs together in a very challenging event that strengthens the bond between all members of the team. Teamwork is the only way to get to the finish line.

Sixteen dogs and one musher (person who drives the sled) make up a team in the Iditarod. No help is allowed the teams. The single musher in every team must spend lots of his or her time caring for the dogs, feeding them, and making sure they are always happy and healthy. The dogs must be full of energy and be willing to work for the musher. The musher holds the dogs in high respect. The dogs hold the musher in high respect. The musher and dogs are a true team.

The Iditarod is a race where men and women, young and old, all compete for the same prize. Everyone is an equal competitor. "...common sense and good sportsmanship shall prevail."

Unlike most sports, many dog sled races, including the Iditarod, do not have separate divisions for men and women or professional and amateur. Most mushers would say that the distinctions between men and women and professional and amateur mushers do not matter on the Iditarod Trail. Mushers help each other whenever needed. Every musher can recall fond memories of times when the companionship of being on the trail was far more important than the competition. As the rules say, "Common sense and good sportsmanship shall prevail."

The history, challenge, teamwork, and sportsmanship that come together to make the Iditarod create a unique event that deserves the title The Last Great Race on Earth™.

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