

Name: _____

The Iditarod

The Race:

Sunday, March 6, is the start of the Iditarod Dog Sled Race. The Iditarod is a 1,049 mile race held each year in Alaska. The race follows an old Alaskan trade route that stretches from Anchorage to Nome. It traditionally starts in early March and commemorates the part that sled dogs played in the settlement of Alaska.



The Iditarod is considered to be the toughest race on earth. Each competing team is made up of 12 to 16 dogs and a *musher*. (Dog sledding is called *mushing*, and the driver of the dog sled is called a *musher*.)

The teams are required to make three rest stops during the race—one 24 hr. stop and two 8 hr. stops. Other than that, mushers and their dogs get little—if any—sleep, although they do stop at checkpoints for meals. It usually takes the winning team anywhere from 9 to 15 days to finish the race.

The Dogs:

The Alaskan Husky is the breed of dog used by most mushers in the Iditarod. They are hardy, intelligent, good athletes, and can endure extremely cold weather. The breed was first developed by the Athabascan Indians.



Iditarod dogs will burn up to 11,000 calories a day, so it's important to feed them well. Traditional dry dog food doesn't work for them. These dogs need a special mix of meats, fats, vitamins and bone meal.

To protect the dogs' feet from cuts and scratches (mostly from ice) they wear dog booties. Surprisingly, putting on these booties is quite a task; it must be done with bare hands to work the Velcro straps.

And, because they are made of soft material, the booties don't last very long. Either the dogs chew on them, or they wear out. The booties cost about 50 cents each. And, during the Iditarod, a musher may need up to 1,500 booties for his team. That can be \$750 just in dog booties alone!

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Mushing:

No one is really sure when or how using dogs to pull sleds began. But European-Americans arriving in Alaska in the 1900s found Native Americans using teams of 7 to 10 dogs to pull loads of up to 1000 pounds. Soon the newcomers were using sled dogs for transportation, exploration, trapping, hunting, hauling supplies, mining, and mail delivery.

Using dog teams, trappers could travel up to 50 miles a day and cover thousands of miles in a single winter. Alaska's gold miners also depended on dogs. Mushers would haul food, supplies and mining equipment to gold claims, and carry back gold on their return trip. Because the demand for gold was high, the price of dogs was high as well. A good sled dog might cost \$1,000. (That would be \$26,000 in today's money.)

Sled dogs were also very important to Alaska's mail service and, one of the most important mail routes was the Iditarod Trail!

The Trail:

The Iditarod Trail had been used for hundreds of years by the Inupiaq and Athabaskan Indians as a link among native villages. It wasn't just one trail; it was a whole network of trails that was more than 2,200 miles long.

During the 1800s, the Iditarod was used mainly for transportation and communication to connect mining camps, trading posts and other settlements that sprang up during the gold rush. It was mainly a winter pathway because in the summer it was nothing but swamps and bogs.

Of all the people who traveled along the Iditarod, the "Kings of the Trail" were the mail carriers (until airplanes replaced them). There were laws requiring that mail teams be given the right-of-way on the trail and that mail carriers be given special treatment at all the roadhouses (rest stops) along the way. The mail mushers were given the best seats at the table, the first servings of food and the best bunks for sleeping in.

The mail mushers fought blinding blizzards, extreme cold and 70 mph winds to deliver the mail on schedule. For this dangerous work, mail carriers were paid \$150 per month. This was a lot of money back in those days when things cost less. It would be like making \$4,500 a month today.