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The Great Serum Race

Balto, Hero of Alaska

Readers Theatre Summary:

The people of Nome, Alaska, are sick and need medicine. The only way to get the medicine to Nome is by dog sled. Balto, a sled dog, is one of the heroes of this story.

Characters:

Narrators 1-5

Dr. John Beeson

Frank Knight

Henry Ivanoff

Leonhard Seppala

Gunnar Kassen

Dr. Welsh

NARRATOR 1: It is January 1925. Nome, a tiny town in northern Alaska, is in trouble.

NARRATOR 2: Desperate for help, Nome sends out a telegram.

NARRATOR 3: The telegram reads: "Nome calling...Nome calling...We have an outbreak of diphtheria...No serum...Urgently need help...Nome calling...Nome calling..."

NARRATOR 4: Diphtheria is a serious disease of the nose and throat. Many people in Nome had already gotten sick. To stop this deadly illness, Nome needed anti-toxin serum—something it did not have.

NARRATOR 5: There was serum in Alaska. It was in a city called Anchorage. A doctor there answered the call.

DR. JOHN BEESON: Are you the conductor of this train?

FRANK KNIGHT: Yes, I am.

DR. JOHN BEESON: Good. This antitoxin serum needs to go to Nome right away. Some people there are ill with diphtheria, and the serum will save their lives.

FRANK KNIGHT: But this train goes to Nenana. There is no train to Nome.

DR. JOHN BEESON: Yes, I realize that. When you get to Nenana, there will be mushers—men who drive dog sleds— waiting. They will take the serum to Nome.

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FRANK KNIGHT: But doctor, Nome is 650 miles from Nenana.

DR. JOHN BEESON: The mushers say that they will get the serum to Nome.

NARRATOR 1: Frank Knight hauled the serum—all 20 pounds of it—onto the train and carried it to Nenana, where he handed it over to a musher named “Wild Bill” Shannon.

NARRATOR 2: Then the relay began.

NARRATOR 3: Shannon and his dogs carried the serum for 52 miles, through the night. The temperature dropped from 30 degrees below zero to 50 degrees below zero.

NARRATOR 4: A storm was coming. But Shannon did not stop.

NARRATOR 5: When Shannon arrived in Tolovana, he handed the serum over to musher Edgar Kalland.

NARRATOR 1: After traveling for 31 miles, Kalland handed the serum over to Dan Green, who traveled for 28 miles until he reached Johnny Folger.

NARRATOR 2: And on and on and on the serum went.

NARRATOR 3: From one musher, to the next, and to the next. It was January, and the wintry Alaska weather was unforgiving.

NARRATOR 4: The snow was falling, and the wind was blowing so hard that at times, there were whiteout conditions.

NARRATOR 5: This meant that the dogs could not see where they were going.

NARRATOR 1: It had been a few days since the serum left the train station at Nenana. Henry Ivanoff was traveling with the serum when his dogs tried to chase a reindeer.

NARRATOR 2: As he was untangling his dogs, Ivanoff spotted Leonhard Seppala. Seppala was a musher from Nome. He was known as the greatest musher in all of Alaska.

HENRY IVANOFF: Are you Leonhard Seppala?

LEONHARD SEPPALA: Yes, I am.

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HENRY IVANOFF: We're 150 miles from Nome. You traveled all that way?

LEONHARD SEPPALA: Yes. I have an eight year old daughter back in Nome. She's at risk along with everyone else. If you give me the serum, I'll travel to the next relay stop. It's 91 miles away, but I know a shortcut.

NARRATOR 3: Leonhard loaded the serum onto his sled. He headed toward Nome.

NARRATOR 4: The storm grew worse. The temperature was well below zero. The wind made it feel even colder. Leonhard had to decide whether to take his shortcut across a body of water called the Norton Sound.

NARRATOR 5: The sound was frozen, but the high winds threatened to break up the ice. If the ice broke up while Leonhard and his dogs were crossing the sound, they would fall into the water and freeze—and the serum would not get to Nome.

NARRATOR 1: Leonhard looked at Togo, his lead dog. It would be up to Togo to get the team across.

NARRATOR 2: Togo was one of the best sled dogs in Alaska.

LEONHARD SEPPALA: Togo, we really need to do this. It's risky, but it will make the journey so much shorter, and the serum will get to Nome faster. Come on. Let's give it our best try.

NARRATOR 3: The wind blew as strong as a hurricane, but Togo led the team across the ice that seemed ready to break up any minute.

LEONHARD SEPPALA: Hurrah! Togo, you did it! Good dog!

NARRATOR 4: The ice on the sound broke up just three hours later.

NARRATOR 1: Leonhard traveled to Charlie Olsen, who then traveled 25 miles to Gunnar Kassen.

NARRATOR 2: The storm was still raging. Many of the mushers had suffered frostbite from the winds and extreme cold. But Kassen knew that people in Nome were counting on getting the serum. With Balto as his lead dog, he headed out into the storm.

GUNNAR KASSEN: If I don't go now, the snow drifts will cover the trail, and I'll never find my way.

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NARRATOR 3: The snow was blowing. Gunnar could not even see his dogs.

NARRATOR 4: The dogs could not see either, but Balto knew the trail. He followed his instincts and pressed on.

NARRATOR 5: Then, suddenly, Balto stopped.

GUNNAR KASSEN: Balto! Hike on, Balto! Balto, mush!

NARRATOR 1: Still, Balto would not move.

NARRATOR 2: Gunnar got down from the sled to see what was wrong. The sled sat before a frozen lake.

NARRATOR 3: The ice on the lake was breaking up. If the team had gone ahead, Gunnar and the dogs would have lost their lives. Balto had done the right thing.

GUNNAR KASSEN: We'll have to go around the lake. Balto, your paw is wet! If it freezes, you won't be able to run ever again. I have to dry it off.

NARRATOR 4: The team got to the next stop.

NARRATOR 5: They were supposed to hand the serum to the next musher, but he was asleep. He did not think that Gunnar would make it so quickly.

NARRATOR 1: Since the other musher was not ready to go, Gunnar decided to continue on. He was almost sorry that he did.

NARRATOR 2: At one point, a high wind kicked up. Gunnar's sled flipped over, and the serum fell into a snow bank.

GUNNAR KASSEN: (Digging in the snow.) It's so dark that I can't even see the serum! I need to take off my gloves so I can feel for it. Oh...here it is!

NARRATOR 3: By taking off his gloves, Gunnar had exposed his hands to the cold. He now had frostbite, but he pressed on.

GUNNAR KASSEN: Balto, let's go!

NARRATOR 4: Balto got up. He was tired but ready to move ahead.

NARRATOR 5: Gunnar straightened up the sled, and the dogs and pressed on. Early the next morning, Gunnar, Balto, and the other dogs arrived in

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Nome. They had traveled over 50 miles in less than two days, through a raging storm.

GUNNAR KASSEN: (Tired and weak) We're here, and we have the serum.

NARRATOR 2: The serum had made it from Nenana to Nome in just over 5 days—a record.

NARRATOR 1: Usually, a trip of that length took a month.

DR. WELSH: Gunnar Kassen! We didn't think you'd make it, but we're so glad you did. Without this serum, we'd have lost more lives.

NARRATOR 3: With that, Gunnar began to slump down.

DR. WELSH: Get this man inside! He needs to be warmed up!

GUNNAR KASSEN: And my dogs. Don't forget them. They need to be warmed too. Balto, my lead dog, is a fine one—a wonderful dog and a great leader. Without Balto, I would never have reached Nome.

NARRATOR 4: Today, Balto is remembered as a hero.

NARRATOR 5: Balto lived at a time when people in Alaska were using dog sleds less and less. Cars and airplanes were taking the place of sleds.

NARRATOR 1: But at one time, dog sledding was very common. One important route that mushers took was the Iditarod Trail.

NARRATOR 2: Today, that trail is the basis for the yearly Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race—"The Last Great Race on Earth."

NARRATOR 3: This race among mushers commemorates the courageous spirit of the Alaskan mushers and their faithful sled dogs.