

North to Alaska for the Last Great Race

By Carly Torno

It is called the Last Great Race, and it is fascinating. Being a small part of the 2009 Iditarod was an amazing experience. The race is a commemoration of the journey taken by 20 mushers and over 100 dogs that carried serum to Nome, Alaska during the 1925 diphtheria epidemic. The dog teams relayed the medicine 674 miles through terrain too dangerous for land, air, or watercraft. Officially the race is 1049 miles long representing Alaska as the 49th state, but the actual distance is closer to 1100 miles and varies depending on which course is used for the middle 300 miles, either the northern course (even years) or southern course (odd years). The first musher usually arrives in Nome approximately 10-12 days after the start with teams continuing to arrive day and night for the next week and a half. This year's winner is Lance Mackey, who won his third consecutive Iditarod, taking him 9 Days 21 Hours 38 Minutes 46 Seconds.

My Iditarod experience began at the ceremonial start in Anchorage, which is always on the first Saturday in March and followed a day later by the official start out of Wasilla. The air was filled with excitement as hundreds of dogs leapt and yelped and howled and barked. These dogs are born and bred to pull, and there was no doubt about it. Once these dogs were hooked up to the musher's sled it took all the strength of the handlers to keep them from taking off. It is not unheard of to get run over by the dogs if you lose your balance or cannot dive out of the way. Adding to the excitement for non-Alaskan residents was getting a glimpse of Governor Sarah Palin as she helped kick off the race. Given her recent popularity she created quite a buzz that seemed to take the event planners by surprise. People and cameras were so packed around her I

caught only a glimpse of her hair. The excitement grew as the counting down began. Spaced 2 minutes apart the mushers each got their countdown. The dogs, whose paws had barely touched the ground, finally were let go by their handlers and they leapt forward with all their might. The 37th running of the Iditarod had begun.

The next stop on our trip was Yenta Station, which served as the second of 22 checkpoints for the Iditarod. The checkpoints range from 18-120 miles apart and provide veterinarians, officials, and food for mushers and dogs. Three rest stops are required, and one must be 24

hours. That morning, before the mushers were to arrive, we each received our assignment and spent the day preparing. My job was to call in to the checkpoint as the teams arrived. This gave everyone a good warning to make sure mushers did not get backlogged. A musher can't win a race at a checkpoint, but they

can sure lose one if there is a snag in the process. The anticipation of the first musher to round the bend was all one could stand. When the helicopters circled above and the snow mobiles came around the bend we knew the mushers were soon to follow. Seeing the dogs draw near was just plain awesome. As they got closer and closer you could hear the patter of their feet, the panting getting louder with their tongues swaying back and forth, and an occasional "gee" or "haw" could be heard if the musher wanted the team to go left or right. Upon passing we would get several "hellos" and "thanks for coming out to see the race". Being only the second checkpoint, and so soon after the start of the race, the musher's were close together and did not hang around too long before getting back on the trail. It was so amazing to see the teams up close and witness the relationship the musher's had with their dogs, as well as see the incredible desire these dogs had to pull that sled. I certainly hope to get the same opportunity next year.

extra fun as we had a sort of scavenger hunt picking up all the dog booties, used to protect their feet, which had fallen off along the trail. A dog team will easily wear out 6,000 booties in a single season, and although these booties are neat mementos, I will say it is very tough to get the dog smell out of them. Nevertheless, they are great souvenirs of The Last Great Race.



Top Iditarod contender Paul Gebhardt coming in to Yenta Station.

photo submitted by Carly Torno



Carly Torno



Circle T Realty was honored with the Buffalo Chamber of Commerce's most recent Appreciation Award. Witnessing the presentation of an American flag on Wednesday were (L-R): Steve and Cindy Torno, Leah Pruitt, Sherry Hanley, JoAnne Cockrell, Matt Torno, Kevin Raboin, Bob Winn and Martin Housler.

Photo by Mac Shadix

Leon County Relay For Life hosting 'Bunco Bash' fundraiser

The Relay for Life of Leon County will be raising money for cancer research and patient services with a roll of the dice March 28 at Jewett Civic Center.

Come this Saturday, raising money for cancer research will be all in the wrist when the 2009 Relay For Life planning committee hosts "Bunco Bash 2009" at Jewett Civic Center. The event gets under way at 6 p.m. with tournament style play and will continue until two full rounds have been completed or we're too beat to go on, said Skelton.

According to event organizers Amanda Skelton and Kristy Vandegriff, the group expects over 50 participants based on the interest of bunco in the area. "There are many bunco groups that meet and play regularly and some have signed up their whole group."

"This is a time for ladies to come together for some light humored fun all the while supporting a great cause. We hope to see this become an annual event that keeps growing and growing," stated Skelton. The ladies came up with the idea for the event because they are already a fan of the popular dice game and know several other area residents who also enjoy it.

"Bunco is becoming a very popular form of group entertainment," said Skelton. "Basically, if you can roll three dice and count to 21 you can play this game."

For the Bunco Bash, committee members are pitching in to provide what Vandegriff calls "heavy appetizers," such as meatballs, mini tacos and similar fare. "It will be a pretty big spread," she says. "Nobody will go away hun-

gry." The group also provides soft drinks, tea and coffee. Those who choose to do so may bring their own favorite food and beverage as well.

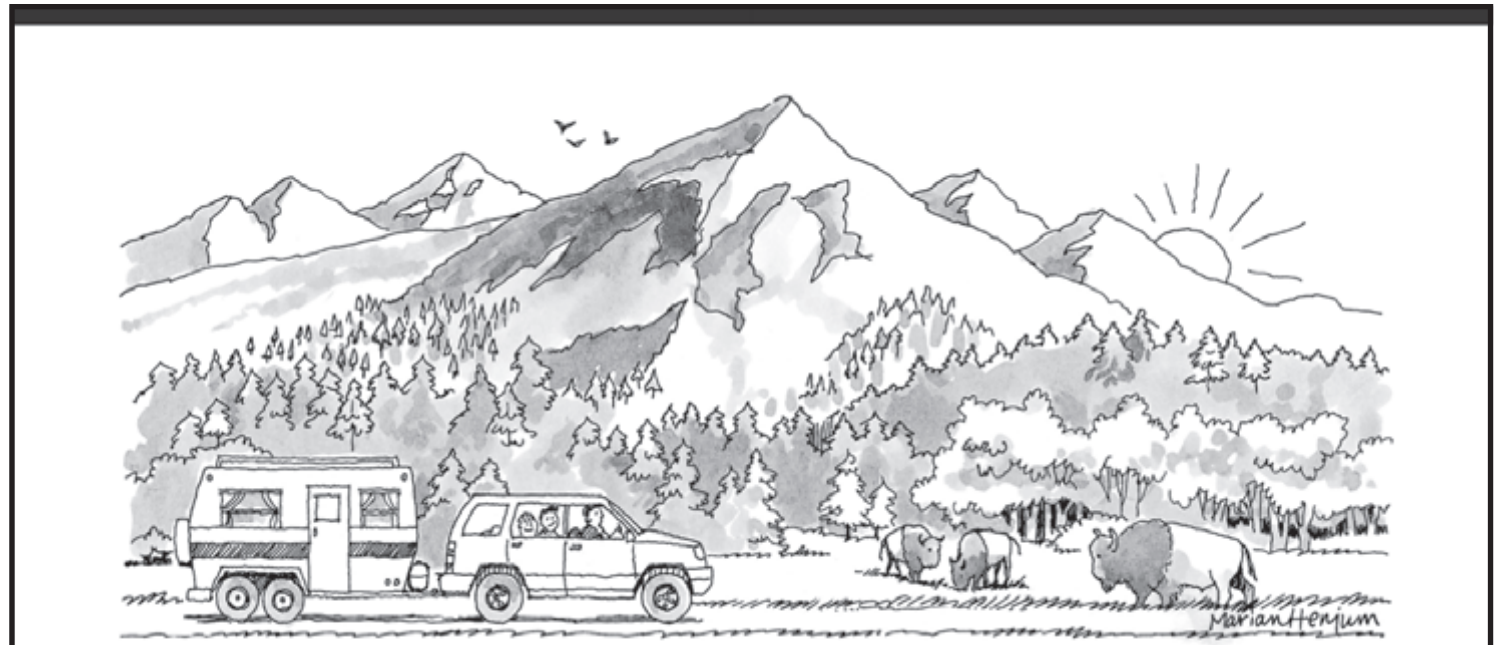
Cost to participate in the Bunco Bash is \$20 per person, which includes guaranteed prizes, snacks and beverages. "There will be winners

and losers and lots of prizes," Skelton said. "We have had some very nice items donated by county businesses."

There is still space available so call today and reserve your seat. For more information or to reserve a spot at the playing tables, call Amanda at (903) 322-9124 or Kristy at 903-626-6613.

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