

Article: Innovations In Racing

By Andy Moderow

While it is true that dog mushing was used historically as a form of transportation, the sport itself isn't trapped in the ice age. Dog racing has evolved over the past 100 years in Alaska, with mushers taking advantage of new winning strategies, technology and dog breeds. Throughout this process, mushers have made drastic changes to what many consider to be standard pieces of equipment. The modern sport of dog mushing has some major differences from the dog racing of previous decades.

Take a quick glance at two dog sleds, built a few decades apart, and the changes become apparent. Sleds today are often built of lightweight metals or plastics - historically, wood and rawhide were used. Lightweight fabrics have replaced heavy canvas or animal skins for sled bags. Runners have quick-change 'plastic' bottoms, allowing a musher to remove a slower, scratched up runner and replace it in a manner of minutes. Modern dogsleds are considerably lighter; they also break less frequently and are designed with efficiency in mind.

Without a doubt, sled design will continue to evolve in the years to come. Iditarod Champion Jeff King, just after his 2006 victory, believes that his recent successes are partly due to his innovative equipment designs. His 'Old Man Sled' that made its debut just a few years ago has quickly gained popularity in the long distance racing circuits. The main difference between his design and an older sled is that the musher stands in the middle of the sled runners, with one compartment behind him or her, and the other in the front. The back compartment serves as a big seat, allowing the musher to sit down during long runs, reducing the fatigue that comes from standing upright for days on end. King said that competitor Ed

Iten, from Kotzebue, believes that the design will add years to his Iditarod career because the run from Anchorage to Nome won't remain as physically demanding.

Yet King wasn't done tinkering when he successfully built an 'Old Man Sled' a few years ago. In the 2006 Iditarod, Jeff took his previous years design and improved it further. Many competitors traveling the trail envied his work product, which he had completed just a few weeks before the race. In addition to driving the strongest and lightest 'Tail Dragger' yet, King had figured out a way to heat his handlebars. Using an open flame and a wick, he had toasty hands the entire way from Anchorage to Nome. This allowed him to work quicker - Cold hands often slow mushers down, as chores requiring dexterity take longer to complete. But his new system also had its dangers - At one checkpoint, King's sled caught on fire. This fire danger isn't going to prevent him from using his contraption in future years, though; Jeff plans to research flame resistant sled bags during the off-season, continuing his process of designing the perfect sled. He also realizes that experimentation is inherently risky, but he also knows that without it, winning is difficult.

Even on the race itself King continued to be innovative, improving his new sled design. When temperatures fell to -40 below zero, Jeff's newly designed hand warmers weren't performing as well as he wanted them too - The 'wick' didn't produce enough heat in those brutally cold temperatures. While moving, Jeff used a dog coat, his Leatherman tool and a few other random things to make it burn hotter.

Mushing has a long history in Alaska, but that doesn't mean things will always remain the same. Sled design is one small example of the many things that have improved over the decades. Improvement in veterinary care, dog nutrition, clothing, communications and trail maintenance has also changed the sport dramatically over the years. While the history of dog racing won't change, the future most definitely will.