

Article: Lance Mackey On The Ice

By Andy Moderow

The bond between dog and musher isn't easily explained. Traveling 1,100 miles by dog team makes this bond much closer, but without any doubt, it is the 1000's of miles of training each year that connects the musher and dog team. Sleep deprived after the 2006 Iditarod, Lance Mackey came close to capturing in words this bond when he discussed what occurred between him and his team 5 miles out of Nome.

Spectators waiting for the 10th place finisher heard the announcer say that Lance had stopped a short distance from the finish line and was busy with his team. They were told that Lance was having a somewhat emotional moment with his dogs, and that his arrival would be delayed as a result. Even then, the point didn't get through. Lance's wife, Tonya, says she never saw her husband cry throughout a long battle with cancer, which he managed to beat. A mere 5 miles from Nome the Kasilof musher admits that tears filled his eyes.

The enormity of his stop might have been lost to those at the finish line because the spotter vehicle didn't have a chance to hear what Lance was saying to his dogs. Sitting around in Nome the next evening, Lance recalled those final moments on the ice with his team on the 2006 Iditarod. As any musher will tell you, arriving in Nome throws a musher into confusion - After 1,100 miles on the trail focusing completely on the dogs, some mushers even question whether they want to reach Nome, as when they get there, so much changes.

Lance knew that things would change when he arrived under the burlled arch, and that the people and excitement would distract him from his dogs. Pausing on the sea ice a few miles from Nome, Lance had one last quiet moment with his team

before the 're-entering' process began. Wind whistling overhead, he set his brake and walked to the front of the team. Patting his leaders vigorously while looking straight into their eyes, nose to nose, he told them: "Guys, when we get there, I won't be able to tell you, because of all that's going on. I'm telling you now: We did it. We did it."

One must wonder if these lines were sincere, or just borrowed from a Hollywood movie. Yet with more knowledge of Lance, you learn that the musher's moment on the sea ice was completely heartfelt. Wife Tonya laughed and shook her head as she spoke about her husband's relationship with his dogs. Since installing a 'dog door' into their house, on more than one occasion Tonya has woken up to find Lance asleep on the living room floor, surrounded by their 9 housedogs and several members of his racing team. Lance isn't an actor; the words he spoke to his team came from his heart. He's a true dog person.

What can be learned from hearing about such an emotional moment between musher and dog at the end of the world's most highly competitive sled dog race? It is evident that the race isn't just a race - it is but one small part of the mushing lifestyle lived by many each year. The bond between musher and dog that Lance celebrated a mere 5 miles from the finish line is what the Iditarod, and dog mushing, is all about. Without it, the mushing lifestyle wouldn't be complete.