

## **Pre-Race Training**

Getting a team of dogs ready to run the Iditarod requires year-round preparation. In this excerpt from the "Frequently Asked Questions" section, you will learn about the training that takes place during the different seasons. In addition, puppy training will be discussed.

While the Iditarod itself is only two weeks long, preparing a team to run the trail requires months of physical training. In addition to making certain that the sled dogs are in good physical shape, mushers must also act as 'coaches' year round for their team. Encouraging each dog and teaching them what to expect is a crucial responsibility for the musher. In addition, year round training helps a musher gain the respect of their dogs, with the time spent before the race establishing the musher as a confident team 'leader'. Finally, only a happy dog will perform well, so mushers spend time during all months of the year ensuring that their dogs are mentally ready for the Iditarod.

### **Training is different during each season of the year:**

#### **Spring/Summer Training**

The spring and summer are technically the off-season for an Iditarod Kennel, but by no means does this imply that mushers have nothing to do. Summer training takes place from the day the race ends through the start of fall training. Dog care is still essential during these months, and most mushers believe that working with their athletes is as important in the summer as it is in the winter. It is too hot to run the dogs throughout much of the summer, so mushers figure out other things to do with their dogs. Martin Buser, from Big Lake, Alaska, has been known to "free-train" his dogs during this time of the year. When he "free-trains" he takes 20 dogs at a time to an inactive airstrip and lets them all run loose,

together, for an hour or two. Jeff King, from Denali, Alaska, has made large puddles of water for his team to run through when they pull an ATV, enabling him to run during the warmer summer months. Just recently, he has also taught his dogs how to swim in a lake by his house - a fun activity for them that is bound to cool each dog off during warm summer days!

## **Fall Training**

Fall training begins when the weather cools down enough for the dogs to run in harness. As a general rule of thumb, serious fall training cannot begin until the temperature is below 50 degrees unless it is raining. Since a dogsled isn't designed to run on dirt, mushers use a variety of wheeled vehicles to train their dogs during this season. An All Terrain Vehicle (ATV), also known as a 'four-wheeler,' is the most common training vehicle used by Iditarod mushers. ATVs are great for fall training because they have brakes that make it easy to slow the dogs down - it isn't easy to stop a 16-dog team at the beginning of a run on a sled! In addition, when uphill are encountered, mushers can use the motor to assist the team. Many think of the fall as the weight-training season, when the dogs rebuild their muscles from the off-season.

Sled dogs, in general, are incredible athletes: They could easily run 8 - 10 miles on their first run of the season. However, mushers usually start out traveling shorter distances during the first week in the fall, only running their dogs a mile or two. Each dog will run 3 - 4 times a week in the early season. Every week or two the length of the run is extended, and by the end of the first month teams are often traveling 10+ miles per run.

Fall training concludes when enough snow falls for dog sleds to be used... But snow isn't guaranteed by a certain date in Alaska! On some years, there isn't enough snow for a dogsled until late December. ATVs, since they provide more control than a sled on little snow, are used until a musher has enough snow to run a dogsled. While a dogsled will slide fine on an inch or two of snow, it is

difficult to stop on such a small layer of snow because snow hooks and brakes won't dig into the frozen ground very well.

## **Winter Training**

Winter training begins as soon as enough snow accumulates on the ground for a musher to use a dogsled. Generally, since training on an ATV provides more resistance than a sled (which slides easily over the snow), the length of the first training run on snow can be double the longest training run during the fall months.

The first run on snow is very exciting for mushers, because most prefer a dogsled over an ATV. For one, a dogsled is silent; ATVs have loud engines. In addition, sleds can travel on narrower trails, increasing the routes available to mushers.

For some kennels training for long distance races, runs in the winter will get as long as 80 miles. Mushers will also simulate racing conditions in training, running 50 miles, resting for a few hours, followed by an additional run. Many mushers also view shorter races, ranging from 100 - 300 miles, as great training tools for long distance races. While winter training is important because it gets the athletes in good physical shape, hours spent on the trail are also instrumental in helping a musher bond with their dogs.

As you have just read, training aims to prepare a team of dogs both mentally and physically for the long journey to Nome. The Iditarod only lasts two weeks, but all kennel owners agree: It is what the musher does during the other 50 weeks of training that matters most.