

Article: Rest During A Race?

By Andy Moderow

Anyone who has followed a long distance sled dog race knows that nearly all teams rest a minimum of 10 hours a day - and some rest longer. The mushers obviously don't sleep during most of this time... If they did, sleep deprivation wouldn't set in like it does for every musher on a race. So what keeps a musher busy during a rest on the trail?

On long distance races, the time resting at checkpoints is, in many ways, the most demanding time for the musher. While the dogs can pull into a checkpoint and begin to rest immediately, it is up to the human to provide bedding, food and water, often several times during each break. In addition to basic dog care, time must also be spent on repairing equipment or vet care. Then, once everything has been done for the dogs, the mushers can relax.

So how hard is it to feed 16 dogs, massage a few stiff shoulders, fix a dogsled and give each dog a warm bed of straw? In theory checkpoint tasks shouldn't take very long, but the realities of the trail make simple tasks difficult. For one, many duties along the trail require a musher to take off their gloves or mittens; putting on or removing booties from a dogs foot is a perfect example of a task that is nearly impossible to do while wearing gloves. When the temperature is -40 below zero, mushers often have to pause and warm up their hands between putting boots on each dog. The cold weather wears down a musher in other ways during a long distance race, as well. During the most extreme conditions, a musher wears bulky clothing resembles a space suit much more than a business suit. This clothing is difficult to move around in. Bulky boots make walking difficult, especially through soft snow, and nearly every task at a checkpoint requires the

musher to walk; whenever a musher feeds their dog team, gets straw, picks up drop bags, or looks for race officials, they move by foot.

Simple actions like giving a team water requires much more time when on the trail than when home, at the kennel. When water isn't available during a rest, mushers must melt snow to 'make' water for their team. Melting snow takes some time and requires specialized equipment, including a dog food cooker. Suddenly, just getting access to water requires that the musher unpack their sled, pull out their dog food cooker, walk to the place at the checkpoint where the cooker fuel is given out, return to their sled, add the fuel, light the cooker, find a patch of clean snow and place a pot of snow on the contraption to melt. Every few minutes a musher must add more snow. After twenty minutes, the musher has a few gallons of hot water. After feeding the team, all equipment must be repacked in the sled, in preparation for the next leg of the race. For most people in the US on a normal day, getting water requires turning on a faucet; for mushers on the Iditarod, the task can be often much more time consuming.

Further complicating all of a musher's tasks during breaks on the trail is sleep deprivation. Even when rested, taking care of a dog team requires several hours of the musher's time, and as a result, they must cut back on their own sleep to remain competitive. After a few days of racing, mushers become extremely tired. Fixing sleds becomes difficult, because figuring out the best way to make a repair isn't easy when exhausted. Walking a few hundred yards to retrieve drop bags feels like walking several miles when all the musher wants to do is sleep. While many mushers may feel like pulling into a checkpoint and immediately going to sleep, they all know that doing so won't help their team rest. Making certain each dog gets what they need on a break is the highest priority for all mushers on long distance races. As a result, a rest becomes a lot of work for the musher, because without a rested dog team, racing becomes impossible.