

Article: Why Race The Iditarod?

By Andy Moderow

Bill Pinkham, fresh off his 4th Iditarod, walked into Nome Iditarod Headquarters an hour after his finish. Sporting his racing clothes and a weather-beaten face, it was quite apparent that he was fresh off the trail. With that billboard of success, a long time Nome resident welcomed Pinkham into his hometown. The volunteer inquired if the 2006 Iditarod was Bill's first trip to Nome. Pinkham replied; "No, it's my 4th... Never come in high enough for people to recognize my name, though." He shrugged it off, and mentioned how, when leaving Willow, he thought that this might have been his year to break into the top-20. Yet even without breaking into the top-20, he was satisfied with his run and team. "I don't dream about winning," he said, "but I do set goals." Already thinking about coming back next year, it's the struggle that captures Pinkham: "What would I do without it?" he reflects.

By no means is Bill Pinkham an anomaly to the Iditarod. For many veterans of the race, the prospect of winning isn't too realistic, at least in the near future. But that reality doesn't prevent mushers from making competitive goals. For lots of people who run the race annually, there are races inside the race, such as the challenge of breaking into the top-20. For others, however, the prospects of winning in the near future seem bright. Ramey Smyth, with 11 Iditarod's under his belt, dreams of winning the race. Having finished as high as 4th, Smyth knows that he a strong contender. Yet also drawing him back to the race each year is his desire to test himself and to interact with his team of dogs.

The Iditarod draws all types. Some mushers don't even think of it as a race. Bryan Bearss, who just completed his first Iditarod, sounded as if he was describing a work of art when

portraying the race, fresh off the trail: "It was pure joy," he said, smiling ear to ear. Elaborating, Bryan noted that it was something about the "beauty" and the "fresh air" that made the experience for him, along with the pleasure of seeing his dogs do what he had worked so hard to train them for. A few miles out of Nome, Bryan was surprised by the urge to turn around and stay out on the trail, not wanting the great experience to end. Talk to most Iditarod finishers and you'll find that they can relate to his mixed emotions.

For some, Iditarod dreams even change over time. Melanie Gould, finishing 18th in the 2006 race, enters the Iditarod because it's a great challenge. Her recent top-20 finish hasn't changed the main reasons why she chooses to run: For her, a love for the trail and traveling with her team draws her out each March. But she admits that it is fun to see what her team can do, and with her recent competitive runs, competing a little has entered onto her radar screen. Even still, however, she claims that it's the trail lifestyle that will bring her back in the future.

Even the top performers in the race admit that competition isn't the only lure for them in the Iditarod. DeeDee Jonrowe enters the race each year attempting to pull off a win. With her past race record, such dreams are clearly realistic. But another draw to the competition is the partnership she forms with her dogs, and without it, the race wouldn't appeal to her: "I wouldn't do [the Iditarod] with a snowmachine," she adamantly said.

Of the reasons to run the race, all mushers agree that, without the dogs, the Iditarod wouldn't have the same appeal. This makes perfect sense when you look at what racing the Iditarod requires of a musher, year-round. If you didn't like dogs, you probably wouldn't choose a lifestyle that would necessitate being around a kennel for 365 days a year. Since you can't park a dog team behind a garage when the season is over, mushing is a lifestyle that all competitors live each day. Once a year this lifestyle is showcased in the Iditarod for all to see, but only for two weeks. Better not blink during that time: Before you know it, all the teams will return to their private lives, continuing to do what they love.