

## **Article: Who Is Winning?**

By Andy Moderow

To the frustration of many spectators, figuring out which team is in the lead of the Iditarod isn't easy during the first few days of the race. Yet race fans shouldn't feel as if they are the only ones who are confused - The racers on the trail, too, can have great difficulty figuring out who is setting the pace to beat.

There are a number of run/rest strategies that have proven to be successful in previous races. Some mushers have elected to run long between rests, traveling 8 or more hours, before stopping for a long break. Other teams run shorter and rest shorter, taking shorter breaks more often. Both strategies, as well as a combination of the two, have worked out for race champions on different years, and there is no real consensus on which run/rest style is best. While evaluating race statistics can help a spectator understand what type of race a team plans on running, how well a strategy will work out isn't obvious until the last few days of the race.

Mind games between teams can also make following the race, on paper, difficult. Since breaks can easily be taken on the trail, many competitors stop between checkpoints in an effort to keep their competition guessing. Mushers will often rest just before a checkpoint and 'blow' through to make their competitors uneasy: As the team pulls through, mushers resting at the checkpoint will wonder; "Am I falling too far behind? Should I cut my rest a little short, and follow them out?" For similar reasons, many mushers will elect to camp just after a checkpoint, particularly early on in the race. This allows the dogs to rest in a somewhat less chaotic environment. At the same time, stopping just after a checkpoint sends mixed signals to the competition. The length of a musher's rest

on the trail isn't recorded, meaning that racers and spectators alike don't know how long a team rested, or how fast they ran, between two checkpoints. However, by evaluating other run times, it is possible to speculate how long a musher rested on the trail. As an example, say most top twenty mushers complete a run in 5-6 hours. If a team takes 12 hours to complete that same run, it is likely that they rested for 6-7 hours on the trail. However, in some instances, a long run time will indicate other things. Mushers can also get lost or face bad weather conditions, forcing them to run a stretch of trail at a much slower pace than other mushers.

The 24-hour mandatory layovers also make it difficult to figure out who is in the lead during the first days of the race. Because the start of the race is staggered, with one musher leaving every two minutes, the first team to get on the trail departed nearly 3 hours before the last team. To make up for this head start, some '24' hour layovers are nearly 27 hours long, holding back each team a specific length of time. This way, when each team departs from their '24', they have been allowed to run down the trail for the same amount of time regardless of their start time.

Not all mushers take their 24-hour layover at the same place. When a musher starts their layover, some mushers who haven't taken their '24' may jump ahead of them, waiting to take their layover further down the trail. When this happens, the resting team may actually be in the 'lead' - they just elected to stop earlier. Only after each team departs from their 24-hour layover can their position relative to one another be known.

In the first few weeks of the race many different things affect the race standings. Be careful not to draw conclusions too quickly: Nome is still far, far away.