

Iditarod '06 Journal

by
James Warren



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This Journal is an extension of the book, Following My Father's Dreams by James and Christopher Warren. We invite you to read, enjoy, and share this incredible journey.

Jim Warren

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In Appreciation

Just getting to the start line of Iditarod with a trained team is a daunting task. When I think of all the people who have helped us and the thousands of hours we spent, it is overwhelming. But at the end of the day I have to say the person who has contributed most, even more than me, is my wife Jennifer. She is the love of my life, the mother of my children and my best friend. Words cannot adequately describe my appreciation for her support so I'll just leave it with this: Thanks Jennifer! I love you.

Jim

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Introduction

In planning for the 2006 Iditarod we embarked on a plan to combine dogs with another kennel. Its purpose was simple: Make a bigger pool from which select winning caliber dogs. It is a good idea and will take a couple of growing years to know if it really will work.

The plan was that I would run the 'yearling' team this year. A team of dogs not yet tried; dogs with physical potential but not yet run under the grueling conditions encountered on Alaska's Iditarod Trail. Yes, it may sound crazy I really did leave some of my Iditarod veterans in the dog yard and ran untried yearlings. As one would expect there were surprises, a number of the dogs did not perform up to Iditarod standards. We scratched on the way to Ophir with 8 remaining dogs and about 600-700 miles ahead. It is disappointing. There will be changes.

This journal chronicles the weeks of dog training in Michigan's Upper Peninsula in preparation for the race. Entries by both Jennifer and Jim chronicle the race. We hope you enjoy.

Fall Dog Training

September 5, 2005: Jen, Whitney and I just returned from SledDog Lodge where we were doing some last minute maintenance getting ready for fall training for Iditarod '06. Yes I plan on running and look forward to it. Where ever it leads, I am ready!

September 16, 2005: I turned the loaded dog truck north onto Interstate I-75. As I traveled, the neatly formed rectangular fields of ripening grain gave way to an occasional patch of forest, then more and larger patches of forest. Finally, it was nearly all forest. Some of the red maples were sporting a few colored leaves. A flock of Canada Geese coming down for a landing flew along side for a few moments curiously eyeing the bright red truck and dog trailer. The sense of freedom worked into my brain and displaced the clutter of everyday life. Yes, I was free. The air was clean, the sun was out, and I was at peace. The destination was our SledDog Lodge in Michigan's Northern Upper Peninsula near the Lake Superior Shore. It is clean there, cooler, and a great place to spend time with my dogs. Life is good!

In the morning just after dawn I had the first team on the trail. It was only a short run but enough to signal to the dogs we were going to be doing a lot of running during the next few weeks. They were happy.

The dogs were very excited during hook-up. Some couldn't hold still; I had to harness them bouncing and jumping. I wish Buster wouldn't bark in my ear. The cool weather and pent up energy of a restful summer had them wired beyond belief. But they were

respectful of my wishes and most were watching me closely. They know what I expect on hook up. I was thrilled by their good behavior although excited. We didn't experience a single chewed neckline or harness. There were no fights. When it was time to go, they just dug in and ran. Brothers Swen and Hartley were in lead with brothers Falcon and Ernie behind. They looked well matched and eager. Sparrow tried her dominance move by jumping on Gateways side of the line but when I stopped and pointed my finger at her she knew what I expected and immediately jumped back on her side. Frankly this was a neat run. The dogs know me and are happy when I am pleased.

So, with much of the basic dog nonsense out of the way, we are ready for the next level of getting these dogs to race competitively. I know the top drivers understand this well. I am learning and am keenly aware of my limitations. It is something of a mystery, not easily taught or learned.

I noticed this was coming together about mid winter last season. The dogs took me on some very fast and long runs. I was astonished at just how fast and far a motivated dog team can run. And, to make matters even better, they were having fun and were no more tired than if they had done a slow run. So how do I get it together so they can show their stuff during a race? It does little good to only have fast training runs. We have to demonstrate our capabilities in the critical arena of competition. I am excited about this new challenge.

Yes, I believe we have passed a landmark. The basics are pretty well in hand. Now is the time to take the next step; learning how to train and run a competitive dog team.

September 23: I stepped out on the porch about 5 am. The moon and stars were spectacular, bathing the quiet forest with a soft light making it an inviting place in the predawn. Siesta the porch dog greeted me with her normal stretch and yawn. Her smiling face and wagging tail is always a heartwarming way to greet the day. I spoke softly to Siesta not wanting to disturb this special morning.

With the trappings of civilization never far away, I went to the coffee pot, the computer and hurricane updates on the TV. But it is thrilling to me to be able to step away from it all and into the ancient rhythms of the forest and of the dogs. Little has changed there for millennia. It has a draw on me that is unexplainable.

September 25, 2005: Sunday morning and the weather is too hot to run the dogs. It is 62 degrees with a steady rain. So I cleaned the cabin, arranged my clothes and generally stalled so I didn't have to put on the rain gear to water and scoop the dogs. They are sleeping in their houses anyway and will not mind the delay.

I watched the Hour of Power TV program. It is a program of unbelievable value and promotes the power of positive thinking in a religious framework. It is right on target for me and is a good refresher to keep my priorities straight. I have watched it for over 25 years whenever I can. The service was a celebration of "little Schuler's" 25th year and was a sentimental time.

With no one but me here, there is time to think today. The power of positive thinking is in the actions that follow and resulting success it generates. That is where my head has been and what has driven my actions. But even greater, much greater, the value is multiplied when one is able to encourage and motivate

others to shift into the positive thinking mode. I would like to find a way to do just that! Yes, something to think about on this soggy Sunday morning.

The rain has been steady since dawn. The forest is starting to change color with the leaves several shades brighter as yellow replaces the green. But the signs of the changing seasons are signaling that big changes are coming to the forest. Sunday dinner is warmed up chicken with some rice and maybe a veggie. Not too exciting but it will have to do.

September 26, 2005: It is 57 degrees and pouring rain at 6:30 am at SledDog Lodge. I am considering running the dogs, only because the wet trail will help cool them, otherwise it would be too hot. I am starting to become concerned with the small amount of running we've done this month. It has been just too hot. Dogs can't get good runs without high risk of hyperthermia. It isn't just something Mother told you to worry about; it kills! With my energetic and hard charging dogs, I fear they are even more at risk. I'll finish my coffee and oatmeal, and then make a final decision. I have plenty of chores to do here so my time will not be wasted.

October 7, 2005: At SledDog Lodge it was 6:15 am when I stepped on the porch with my full steaming cup of coffee to check the weather. It was 38 degrees and a cold steady rain was falling. This is tough weather to run dogs, but it must be done. The warm weather has me well behind the mileage target for training the dogs. It isn't just an arbitrary target; it just isn't fair or healthy to expect dogs to perform at the distances we run unless they have been adequately conditioned. So, I

will have a second cup of coffee and put on the rain gear and slosh out into the dog yard.

It is amazing when running in this weather to see the steam and heat rolling off the dogs. They are happy and love running in the cool and wet conditions. They come back into the yard just covered with mud and so happy. They want to play and rub against me and wiggle a lot. I come away a soggy mess of mud mixed with dog hair. I smell more like a dog than a dog does.

October 16, 2005: Reflections of a past Iditarod: I came away from Iditarod '04 with experiences that had a lasting impact on me.

No stranger to emotional struggle, I have, as a firefighter shared in the heartbreaking loses of a loved one; the helplessness when a child dies; the gut wrenching fear of fighting a fire from inside a burning building. I learned to reach deep within myself and find the strength to get the job done, move on, and let time heal the wounds. I relied on that reserve of strength.

Iditarod took me a place where I had no more reserve; I had nothing left, when I reached within for a little more.

It was past Unalakleet on the seacoast of Norton Sound. On one side was the open sea with a shelf of ice reaching maybe a half mile out to sea. On the other side was rolling tundra and a series of steep climbs called the Blue Berry Hills.

I had dreaded the climbs with the hamstring re-injury I had experienced 400 miles back the trail. I stopped the team for a breather after a couple of grinding climbs with my leg throbbing with every heartbeat. I had been struggling with the leg for days and it was wearing on the dogs. This was the steepest climb we'd seen and it had taken a heavy toll on my

strength; I was sweating profusely. As I looked at the hill towering above I could see the summit about a mile away. It had a plume of snow blowing over it extending a couple hundred yards downwind. I estimated the wind velocity from the horizontal projection of the plume to be maybe 50 miles per hour, perhaps more.

My heart sank. We had struggled mightily on the hill only to face the brutal wind ahead; a strong enough wind on the summit to blow us over the side. I looked behind. Silly me. It was as bad behind as ahead. I looked at the resting team and didn't see much appetite for what we were about to face. I mentally reached deep within for some self-encouragement; anything to prop up my failing will. There was nothing left. I looked human frailty square in the face, standing in a place where there was no sympathy, none, for the frail.

In desperation I shortened my gaze to the next rise and mentally committed to not looking at the summit. I limited my attention to only a few yards ahead. I got the dogs up with an encouraging voice. It sounded strange to me and in sharp contrast to my deprived state. We moved ahead with tiny objectives sometimes only as long as the distance between trail markers.

The summit was blown bare of snow, the wind was bad, and the going was rough on the boulders and gravel. I was thankful when we began to descend. There were five of those damned hills.

It was during one of those climbs while struggling in agony we took a short rest. My eyes locked onto the eyes of Ruby, one of my dogs. I saw understanding and a kindred spirit looking back at me. My human arrogance melted away and I no longer saw the dog as my servant and me the master. We simply

had different roles. We were much more alike than we were different.

This view of the dog has continued with me and I have a different relationship with the dogs now. No, I have not become an animal rights activist nor have I become a vegetarian. I now simply appreciate their beauty as another creature, one created as was I, both for a different purpose. I do not understand why or for what purpose. I only understand we shared in a struggle, we were a team of muscle and blood, and we were much more alike than we were different.

November 13, 2005: Yesterdays 32 mile run was demanding on the dogs. It was 53 degrees when we got back to the dog yard, much too warm for the dogs. Partway home I had to stop to cut a fallen tree with the chain saw and thought I'd extend the stop for a good cool down for the dogs. I noticed Eric, one of the two-year-old males, was panting with his mouth more than wide open, an ominous sign of overheating. He panted for this way for more than 15 minutes. I offered him a pan of cool water but he preferred to stand with his front feet in the water rather than drink it. OK with me, it cools him either way. The other dogs seemed content to watch me work with Eric. They seem to know and appreciate the care when one of them needs special attention. Dogs are amazing creatures.

Back in the dog yard while I was unhooking the dogs and placing them at their houses, I noticed Alto lying resting, a normal behavior for him. He was also holding his left front foot off the ground and his leg was shaking. When I walked up to him to investigate he held his foot even higher as if to tell me the problem was the foot. I gently checked his shoulder, leg and then foot. When I touched one of his toenails he

squealed in pain. He let me palpate the toe and toenail to check it thoroughly. The toenail was split back into the flesh of the toe, a painful injury. I made a mental note to repair the toenail with superglue the next day after some of the tenderness from running had subsided.

I was squatting alongside him with one knee on the ground. He crawled gently up into my lap with his sore foot elevated. He placed his head and shoulder firmly against my chest and looked up into my eyes. I gently hugged him and told him I'd take good care of him. We shared an embrace, reaffirming our commitment to each other, bonding as team mates to face the trails ahead.

This gentle moment has remained on my mind. This is a dog among dogs. With muscles of steel and the heart of a champion, he has finished two Iditarods, much of it in lead. I recalled when he and I worked like brothers to find the lost trail on the wind swept slopes of Rainy Pass. His uncanny ability to scent and feel the trail, combined with my ability to view markers at a further distance because of the advantage of height, allowed us to regain the trail at least twice when the marker had blown away or had fallen and had become covered with snow. Amazingly, he started Iditarod '04 with a foot partially healed and held together with superglue and mole skin after a dog bite. He never limped once in 1100 miles.

But that day was one of recommitment, a soft moment, one of love and admiration between team-mates that had shared many miles of trail, struggled together on the climbs, and endured the pain of injuries without complaint.

It is hard to describe the relationships with the dogs. It seems to go beyond words; at least my ability with words. Dogs are amazing creatures.

November 23, 2005: This dog training is a lot of work! The last few days are typical. Sunday morning my brothers John and Gary left SledDog Lodge after a few days of deer hunting. By 11am I was on the trail for a 30 mile run. It rained most of the run and was just miserable for me. But the dogs were cool and ran hard. By 8pm I was settled in by the toasty wood heater and on the phone looking for a handler.

Monday began at 4:30am with paperwork and correspondence for most of the morning. I got on the trail by 2pm targeting a 30 mile run then a trail rest, followed by a 20 mile to a cabin rest, followed by a 15 mile run home. All did not go well when Ian, a 70 pound yearling became exhausted and fell headlong in a mud puddle and couldn't get up. I ran to him and pulled him up and out of the puddle and held his muddy head on my lap for a few minutes while he regained his composure. I tied him securely to a tree planning to pick him up on the way home. A few minutes later with wet snow pelting my glasses and visibility in my headlamp almost zero, I called a "gee" command thinking it was the driveway to Jim O's cabin. It wasn't. Brutus performed flawlessly and took the whole 18 dog team off into the woods. He was visibly agitated by my incompetence. I finally got to Jim's, humbled by how easily simple mistakes can cause an otherwise good run to unravel. Then on the 15 mile trek home, with the temperature dropping through 20 degrees, the engine on the ATV stopped and wouldn't restart. So at midnight on a muddy logging trail with tired dogs it was up to the dogs to drag me and the dead quad home.

We got in about 3am. The good thing was Chris was there and was planning to help with the next days run.

Tuesday, up before daylight, we prepared and started a run that was to take us 30 miles to the mouth of the Little Two Hearted River, rest there and then run the 15 miles back. It was a good run and we finally finished eating our venison stew about 10pm, tired.

Wednesday, again up before daylight, I checked the computer weather radar and found the forecast for a foot of snow and winds gusting up to 60 mph. Well we needed to drive 300 miles downstate to prepare the Christmas Tree Farm for sales. So, we had a fast breakfast and were on the snowy roadway by 10am trying to stay ahead of the heaviest part of the storm. It was a long drive on slippery roads.

So now home, almost too tired to think and very happy for spell check on this computer, I wonder if I'll hold up to the strain of training.

December 10, 2005: There are dogs that excel and earn a place in the heart and mind. The brothers Swen and Hartley are such dogs.

Swen and Hartley are from a litter bred at the kennel of Jeff King out of Beta and Ruby. We gave them Scotch-Irish names. Colin and McRae were named in honor of Colin McRae the Scottish WRC rally car driver. Hartley was named in honor of my kid's Grandfather Warren's favorite lady, his mother Maude Hartley; a red haired woman with a disposition to match who 'made a difference'. Swen, not a Scotch name, was named in honor of their maternal Grandfather, Duane Swenson. Swen and Hartley were special dogs from birth. They are from generations of the best dogs in Alaska and named after special people.

Swen began acting strangely when Chris went away to college. A yearling then he seemed kind of sad, almost depressed. I became worried about him but didn't connect the dots at first. Then thinking he may be missing Chris, I took a boot of Chris' and walked to Swen in the dog yard at SledDog Lodge. He drove his snout all the way down into the big size 12 boot, sniffed for a good minute and then ignored it. He began a habit of staring down the driveway then at the cabin. He spent much of his time looking down the driveway. He even slept in a position where he could watch the driveway. I concluded he was lonesome for his friend Chris; he was looking for his return. Chris' scent in the boot had given him hope.

It happened when Chris came home for Christmas. Swen noticed instantly when the tall figure emerged from the cabin and walked toward the dog yard. He seemed to not quite believe it was really happening. When Chris got close Swen was almost at a loss for a way to respond. I watched as a very happy dog welcomed a young man home. It was a scene I will never forget. Maybe it was because I too understood how Swen felt. Life was good when Chris was there.

Swen was a great candidate for more leader training. He was confident, fast, and good natured. He was run with a lot of different dogs and learned a lot. He became an outstanding leader by the time he was 3 years old. Now at four years old he is in his prime. His muscled body shows hard lines through his thin white coat. A handsome dog, he is fast and a hard charging Alaskan Husky; he is destined for Iditarod.

Hartley was much like Swen but was more aggressive. He had the habit of getting even with other dogs and carries a few battle scars on his face. He mellowed a lot after neutering but continues the habit of

biting the butt of any dog that balks in front of him. I used him to train a number of 'balkers'. It is great trail entertainment.

Hartley doesn't look much like a sled dog. His fold-down ears and general demeanor gives him a Labrador retrieve look. But don't let that fool you. In Iditarod '04 he didn't have a slack tug for over 1100 miles. But he was pretty tired getting into Nome and according to Chris he dropped to rest on the snow at the finish line even before the team stopped. He had put it all on the line literally for over 1100 miles.

Swen did a lot to train his brother Hartley as a leader. Hartley responded and now is much like Swen. They have the interesting habit of 'yucking it up' while running together. When one of them misses a command, they seem to be teasing each other much like a pair of adolescent humans. They are poking fun at each other and having fun while running.

Earlier this week, we finally shifted from training with the quad (atv) to sleds. I planned a 10 dog, 20 mile run just to get the mechanics of running with a sled back in control. With Swen and Hartley in lead the team was awesome. I braked heavily for the first 15 miles and then had to break trail for over a mile in about a foot of new snow. Then when I tuned them on the trail to home, I let them cut loose. Geeeee! They hit 17 mph and leveled off at 15-16 and were doing it with ease. This is an unbelievable speed for dogs trained to race distance events. After a couple of miles I braked to slow them slightly because of the one shorter legged female in the team was starting to feel the strain of the blistering pace.

So it is with the dogs Swen and Hartley; special dogs that carry the names of special people. It has

been my privilege to train and run these outstanding dogs.

December 24, 2005: A Time of Reflection:



Al, Jim, and Chris, 1986

Yes it is the day before Christmas. My wife Jennifer and son Christopher, and Daughter Whitney are traveling here to SledDog Lodge to celebrate, rest, and play with their dogs. This is a great time for the Warren family.

The flame from the wood heater is shedding a soft orange glow across the dark room and the computer screen glares into my eyes as I write. Curious, I checked Amazon.com to see if the 'Look in The Book' feature had been added. I searched under Books, then Iditarod to find the book listing. I was stunned to find our book was listed in 2nd place. Number 2 out of 138 books! I was really stunned. How did this happen?

I wondered what my Dad would have said, had he been sitting across the dark room in the empty chair lighted softly by the flame in the wood heater. I think he would have been as stunned as I.

In the absolute quite of the predawn at SledDog Lodge, I was taken on a memory trip, back to my childhood at Christmas in my father's home. I was nine years old when my family finally moved out of my maternal grandparent's house. Dad's war disability kept him from working most jobs so he hadn't been able to afford housing until then and by most standards we'd have been considered poor. We didn't see it that way. But, looking back we didn't have much. I remember the vegetable garden we grew for fresh and canned veggies. There were the chickens that kept us in eggs and fresh meat. There was Rusty the family dog that did just about everything right. Summertime earnings were often spent on school clothing and ammo for hunting, another fresh meat supply. We also netted fish from the nearby river. Life was good.

I was the first in the extended family that went to college. I was fed up with poverty, especially intellectual poverty; the poverty of ideas and generation of personal options. But money for tuition and books was scarce. Not deterred, I cleaned chicken coops, washed trucks, plowed fields, and worked at just about anything I could find. Life changed for the better when I landed a co-op job at Chevrolet. My first paycheck was much more than Dad's. He was thrilled for me but it must have hurt him to see his pitifully small paycheck.

Christmas was a family time. We got (stole) a tree from the neighbor's hemlock grove. They were ugly trees but we didn't know any better. Christmas morning was a great celebration. We crowded around the kitchen table with some of my Uncle's families for a big

breakfast followed by gift opening around the Christmas tree. Then, we all went to Grandpa's for an extended-family dinner. What a crowd, kids everywhere. After dinner we played football in the snow, and then went back inside for round-two of the best food a kid could get.

I didn't think about it until I had children of my own. Dad was always there, the almost invisible man in the background, and not a person to take the spotlight. Nobody really knew much about his disability because he never complained and seldom talked about it. The military doctors had told him his heart damage was permanent, severe, and he could, with no warning, die at any moment. Every day he lived was his last, including Christmas. A deeply religious man, he did the best with what he had and beat the odds to live into his seventies.

Yes, this is a time of reflection. I think of the birth of Jesus and its unimaginable impact on millions of lives. I think of my Father, his life wrecked by a war, but he still dreamed and never complained. I think of my own good fortune, and wonder why I get to do the kind of things Dad could only dream about. And I wonder about the book, *Following My Father's Dreams*, the book that was never intended to be. How on earth did it get to second place on Amazon? Life is full of wonders. And perhaps Christmas, the birth of Jesus, is the greatest wonder of all.

January 5, 2006: Have you ever dreamed of what it would be like on your first time driving a team of dogs? It is something that you will remember a long time. After thousands of miles logged behind a dog team, even I can remember the first ride. It was at Caribou Lodge which is on a mountain above the tree

line near Talketna, Alaska. I re-lived that first ride yesterday watching Jon Estep take his first ride.

Jon was on his second day here at SledDog Lodge. He graduated college a few days ago and is spending the next few weeks helping us with final preparations for Iditarod. Like most, he spent some time getting the right combination of boots, gloves, dog-clothes, and then went out to the dog yard to help Nate Lambert with the morning watering and scooping. It is a strange new world the first time you walk into a yard with 30 huskies. They all clamor for attention but then they bark and shy away from the newcomer. Soon the dogs warm to the newcomer and are happy to get pets and attention. The dog yard is like walking into a room filled with extended family. Everyone knows everyone else and talking is constant and without formal nuances. There are smiles and tail wags everywhere.

Nate, who recently went on his own first dog sled ride was busy giving Jon tips of what to do and not do. It never helps much because a dogsled is so different from anything you've ever done. You have to get on and do it.

I showed Jon how to harness the dogs. He seemed to have it down well and harnessed most of the 4 dogs himself. I could tell he was surprised at the heavy feel of the well muscled huskies as he walked them over to the gangline to hook them on.

He was hooking up dogs of almost legendary fame. Beta, the many Iditarod runner and on a winning team of Jeff King, was one of the dogs. Beta, at 10 years old, is still one of the hardest pulling dogs in the yard. Then Peg, another King Iditarod dog, is mother to many top dogs. Oh yes, Pepsi, a good leader and not distracted by anything, was placed into lead position. He is recovering from an infection that nearly took his

life. Then there was Rachael, a wonderful 2 year-old who is becoming an outstanding leader. Jon had an all-star team but at the moment he couldn't care much about the history of the dogs. He looked as if he was trying to figure out the strange thing he was about to ride on. Sleds are mysterious things, actually almost prehistoric relics.

I led out of the yard with the snowmobile. As we left I could tell Jon was focused on keeping the sled upright and braking enough to slow the team. He made it out of the dog yard and onto the nearby trail. Things went smoothly, a credit to Jon, but I don't think he was having fun yet. Then a couple of miles out, his voice seemed more relaxed over the radio, and he also looked much more relaxed. As we got near the end of the 5 mile loop, the dogs were smiling as was Jon. Once into the yard with the dogs secured, the team and Jon were smiling even more.

Yes, here only a few hours, Jon is now an experienced Musher. Jon's first dog sled ride is now a memory, no longer a dream, it is real.

January 12, 2006: Jon Estep and Nate Lambert are here at SledDog Lodge as handlers are doing a great job caring for the dogs and doing the hundreds of fragmented tasks that are required to put a team into the Iditarod. They also tolerate the frantic musher, yes me, while I pull together the final details. It is a special treat to work with them.

They had the chance to run some dogs in the Tahquamenon Country Sled Dog Race. The dogs loved it and so did they. They each ran 4-dog teams and got a good feel what racing sled dogs is all about.

They are looking for a chance to handle for someone who is going to Iditarod but currently other volunteers have filled the available vacancies.

Chris ran his 12 dog team. As expected his finish was way down in the standings, typical of a team trained for distance but running in a short distance race. He wanted and got a solid run that was technically clean and good racing experience of some of the younger dogs.

Final Preparations

January 21, 2006: Getting ready for Iditarod is overwhelming us. The trail supply shipment must be ready to leave in a few days and we cannot make an error. What we ship is what we will have on the trail.

Everything is shipped out in what are called 'drop bags', about 60 in all totaling about 2000 pounds. They are just big plastic sacks similar to what is used by farmers to bag grain. They are carried by bush plane to the checkpoints and will be waiting for us when we arrive. I will have to dig them out of a pile of snow, empty them along side of the sled, and re-supply me and the team. It costs us to ship them to Anchorage, and costs us again for the bush plane delivery to the checkpoint. This is a big cost to the Iditarod Musher.

In the meantime I am getting behind on emails and phone calls. I hope people can understand the situation but unless one has run Iditarod there may be no good way to appreciate the finality and almost panic that besets the musher at this stage. In the predawn here at SledDog Lodge, I am surrounded by copies of race-plans, sticky notes, and to-do lists, all intended to be sure nothing, absolutely nothing, hinders the success of the dogs. They do all the hard work; I get to do the worrying.

Feb 2, 2006: Shipping of the drop-bags is complete. We now turn to the final phase of training to get both the dogs and musher mentally ready to run the 'run of a life.' Mental preparation is not a small chore.

It is not widely understood that the musher is the weak link in the team. It is humbling to watch the dogs

strongly moving ahead while you are crumbling mentally and struggling to keep it all together. Anyone who thinks running Iditarod is a big ego trip has no idea what it is like to spend two hard weeks being reminded just how frail a human is. You fear letting down the dogs who have worked so hard. Yes the dogs seem to deserve better than their human team-mate on the back of the sled. Your role becomes one of servant. You feed, check and medicate feet, cover them with straw while they sleep, rub their sore muscles, and generally support them in every way you can. You sleep on the straw with them in the cold where you can watch over them. Yes, you become a servant to the dogs, you are part of a team of muscle and blood, and you pray for the strength to not let them down.

Feb 4, 2006: SledDog Lodge has become an oasis of dogs, sleds, and mushers. The days are filled with dog teams coming and going. Barks of happy and excited dogs fill the air and replace the normal solitude. It is an exciting place.

Nate Lambert and Jon Estep are here helping me with the dog training. We are busy with daily chores and the training runs. There seems to never be enough time in the day.

Occupying one of our nearby cabins is Iditarod rookie, Trent Herbst, his wife and child. He will leave in a couple of days for his cabin in Homer, Alaska, to finish his Iditarod preparation. He is running the dogs from the kennel of Dr. Richard MacAuley. The dogs look to be ready for Iditarod. Trent, like most rookies, is starting to worry knowing it is only a few short days before, 4, 3, 2, 1, go! It will be sobering for him when his dogs enter the first forest section after the start and he realizes,

training is over, this is for real, and everything depends on me and those 16 beautiful friends.

In our other cabin is Tom Roig who is concentrating on Iditarod qualifiers. Tom is from the Cleveland, OH area and has recently finished strongly in the Seney 300 and will be running in the UP 200 in two weeks. His dogs look happy, strong and well matched. I love the appearance of his team. He has selected dogs that have a profound 'right look' for sled dogs. They are beautiful. Tom and his wife Brenda in addition to their day jobs provide guided canoe trips and dog sled tours at their Valley Road Outfitters near Shreve, OH, at web www.valleyroadoutfitters.com

Both Trent and Tom have remarked on the great trail system here and have enjoyed the quality of this great snow country at SledDog Lodge. For me, it is great to have people around during the training season. This is much better than the isolation I had while training alone much of the time for '04 Iditarod.

February 17, 2006: Brutus has a broken toe and will not be able to lead in Iditarod. These words were hard to write, I had been avoiding it. It seemed like if I didn't say or write the words maybe it wouldn't be a fact, like a bad dream. His contribution to the team in Iditarod '04 was one to remember. He became the spiritual leader of the team. He was a big encouragement to me and showed great survival instincts when in lead. He did things you just can't train into a dog and saved us from disaster. I will miss him. But we have to press on.



Alto, Ernie and Team Driven by Nate on a Fast Downhill

February 18, 2006: Well the UP 200 Sled Dog Race started yesterday evening in Marquette. I left town just before the start after participating in a book signing with two other authors. It was a strange feeling to be at a sled dog race with no dogs, kind of like a day off. This was the way I planned it, choosing to focus on

rest and getting the last items ready for Iditarod starting in two weeks.

But I was not happy, there was too much missing. I had no dogs with me. Chris was in MN working at his co-op assignment, and Jennifer and Whit got bogged down with life and didn't get their entry in early enough to race the Jack Pine. Sometimes I wish I had a whole pack of kids so I could play with the younger ones while the older ones went off on their own. Some people are lucky enough to have grandchildren. Maybe I could find some substitutes

February 18, 2006: SledDog Lodge, 6 am, with 18 inches of new snow. The tall pines are heavy with the hanging snow, a classic picture of winter in the North country.

This morning is a milestone. Our dog training is finished. We only need to pack the last items, load the dogs, and head for Alaska, Iditarod '06. I am ready, the dogs are ready, and it is time to go.

I think back on the incredible amount of time, work and money expended to get this team ready. It is easy to remember but I quickly blank from my mind the long, cold, and sometimes wet nights spent on the trail training the dog team. I am sure only a few really understand what it takes to get to this point. But it is now behind us and Iditarod is soon. Good!

I look forward to again seeing the trail and hope my schedule allows me to run in the daylight the sections I ran at night last time. It is really spectacular country, it doesn't get any better.

February 19, 2006: We were pummeled with over 2 feet of snow here at SledDog Lodge. Temperature is about zero. The dogs have to burrow

down to get into the door of their house and to their warm straw beds. This is normal winter in the North Country along the Lake Superior shore. The air is clean, silence is everywhere and it is good for my soul.

We are watching the Hour of Power TV church. Sunday morning for me is a time to reflect and turn my mind to the messages from God. I have watched this program for many years and am convinced the positive and uplifting message is very worthwhile. It focuses on the value of positive thinking and how purpose driven actions can bring great benefit to life. I wish I could find a way to support that message. I just know there is a way but I can't quite grasp how.

The rest of the day will be spent in final preparation. We will finish the packing, load the sleds packed with trail gear, and get ready for loading the dogs tomorrow morning. Then they are off to Alaska. I will winterize the cabins here at SledDog Lodge, arm the security system, and then take the remaining dogs to the Homestead Huskies kennel at our Christmas Tree Farm downstate in Linwood. I will travel by plane and meet the dogs in AK.

On an ominous note I read about an Iditarod Trailbreaker's death in an avalanche in the Dalzell Gorge. The snowmobile and driver are buried in about 30 feet of snow and at this point it is too dangerous for recovery. It is a reminder this is wilderness and there are risks along with the pleasures of traveling bush Alaska. See http://www.cabelasiditarod.com/coverage_2006/cov06_feb16_01.html for press coverage.

February 20, 2006: I happened on an article while scanning the Anchorage Daily News about a dramatic rescue by the military during the Yukon Quest.

Here is the link:

<http://www.adn.com/news/alaska/story/7449429p-7359677c.html>. It is sobering. Wild storms can and do rage in unprotected areas. I hope we are fortunate enough to miss them.

It is much too quiet here at SledDog Lodge now that the Iditarod team is gone. The veteran dogs that are left behind seem to know and were subdued, even while I was feeding. Brutus just ate his food and layed down on the snow looking toward the woods. When I walked over to his circle and he looked over his shoulder at me as if to ask, "Are you left behind too?" He showed no emotion of any kind and turned back looking at the woods. His broken toe has taken him out the line-up. We will have to surgically repair it later this spring.

Yes he is a dog that can save the day. When things get ugly he instinctively does things you could never train a dog to do. In Iditarod '04 on a fast downhill near the Happy River I was panicked when I saw him almost sit down, sliding all four feet, and causing the team to bunch up behind him just as he went out of sight around a corner. It thought, "Moose on the trail!" A fraction of a second later I noticed two dog teams off my left side in disarray in a 50 foot ravine. I was able to wrench the sled up on one runner and somehow, just in time, we stopped sliding toward the ravine. I looked ahead and saw Brutus at maximum speed stretching out the team. He had somehow known we had to slow and took the only actions he knew. It was only 2 or 3 seconds out of the life of a dog but it was enough to endear him to me forever. I'll miss the big ugly guy.

February 23, 2006: So what do mushers think about during the last few days before Iditarod? Perhaps

my years of auto racing has conditioned me to manage the count down. But words like focused, intense, and not-connected all seem to fit the picture. The cure? Get on the trail. The sooner I am on the trail the happier I will be.

I know well that my physical contribution will be important; I am the 17th dog in the team. So today I went to the fitness center one last time. For a couple of miles I did wind sprints similar to conditioning for soccer. Then I did a few more just to be sure because running on a track is much easier than running uphill in deep snow. My age, 61, is no small issue and noticeably it is harder every year to keep in top shape.

The problem is nobody wants to be the weak link in the team. I know somewhere in Alaska in the dark of night after hours of putting it all on the line I will be running in the snow on a steep uphill, sweating, panting and at maximum heart rate. Nobody, absolutely nobody, wants to be the weak link. But as the human I am physically inferior to the dogs and will be the first to fail. My only alternative will be to jump on the runners gasping for breath. Out of deep gratitude I will say over and over between pants, "Good Dogs" while in awe of those beautiful dogs.

Sure we, the team, will have many easy miles where boredom is the enemy. And we will have the challenges of wind, cold, zero visibility, bare ground, overflows, flowing streams, wet feet, bruised muscles and sometimes illness. There will be times we'll have to reach deep within for a little more and hope it is enough. Each will be reassured and encouraged by the strength of the other; together we are stronger, a team of muscle and blood.

The big race

March 1, 2006: Only 3 days until start of Iditarod '06. I am in Anchorage with a strong and healthy dog team, and everything is ready. I can't wait to get on the trail with my dogs. I want to see this country up close and soak in the grandeur, the majestic nobility that is Alaska. This land speaks to my soul.

Hardly anyone comes away from AK the same as they arrived. Yesterday was an example. Gregg and the crew had lost rear brakes on the heavy dog truck of Al Hardman's that had gotten the two teams and sleds to AK. We were at the repair shop in Anchorage at 8am but still had to quickly drop the dogs so they could pee. So we found a bare street corner near the shop and were dropping dogs while the mechanic was impatiently waiting. A well dressed professional looking lady stopped and began talking to Gregg and asking us tons of questions. Yes at 10 degrees F on snowy street corner a fine looking and well dressed lady was talking to a couple of grungy guys dressed in well soiled and smelly dog handling clothes with 33 wiggling and happy dogs connected to the truck. This was an unusual combination; of course we took time to chat with her. At the end of the conversation she dropped a over a hundred dollars in Greg's hand and told us to get a good breakfast. Stunned, Gregg was reluctant to take the money and was a little taken back by the generous act. He was very grateful. After surviving a white knuckle drive over mountain passes with a disabled truck, then a frustrating time of finding someone who could fix the truck, we hope this is an omen of good fortune for the rest of our race.

Then, Greg's handlers Sara and Jarrett announced they were getting married on Thursday, here in AK. Well that was a surprise and now we have to figure out how to appropriately congratulate and support their decision even with a ton of Iditarod stuff to do. Yes, unusual things happen and people are changed in this great land we call Alaska.

March 1, 2006, Second Entry: After getting each dog a physical exam at Iditarod Headquarters this morning, we drove up to Willow and onto the lake that will be the restart location on Sunday. We hooked up teams of 8 dogs then Nate and I headed out the trail for a 2 hour run to keep the dogs in shape. It was a perfect day. The sun was out, the wind was calm, and it was maybe 8 degrees. I hadn't taken my best mushing gear so was trying to stay warm was going to be a challenge. The dogs exploded off across the lake and into the woods on the opposite shore. We ran down several miles of lakes connected by frozen swamps. I was braking heavily but even with the fully loaded sled I could slow them only to about 14-15 mph. The mountains of the Alaska Range loomed ahead with more mountains behind. It doesn't get any better than this!

I was filled with awe watching the team as they ran. They were running straight ahead with the easy gait of a well muscled and capable Alaskan sled dog. Their trail hardened muscles rippled under their full winter coat. They are from generations of the best dogs in Alaska; they are born to run far and fast.

In the bright sunshine the shadows of the running dogs danced crazily on the snow beside the team. The gang line shadow bounced rhythmically between them. Behind them was the shadow of the loaded sled and heavily coated musher. I thought these

shadows on the snow could have been made thousands of years ago and would have looked exactly the same. They are there for an instant then forever gone. Ancient shadows on the snow; so little has changed. I felt privileged to watch this timeless dance of life in this great land of snow, ice and unending cold.

Jim: March 3, 2006: Tomorrow is the start of Iditarod; the ceremonial start on 4th Avenue in downtown Anchorage. It is a festive event with thousands of people lining the streets for miles. It is a one of a kind experience. It runs about 11 miles and ends just outside of Anchorage.

I am honored by Lee Nowak who bid and became my Idita-rider for the second time. The Idita-rider gets to ride in the Musher's sled and gets all the fun with none of the work. Lee and his wife Claudia have enjoyed sled dogs and events such as Iditarod with much enthusiasm. I marvel at their wisdom. They did not buy dogs; they simply enjoy other's dogs. Could there be something to be learned here?

My wife Jennifer is here along with daughter Whitney. I am happy they took time from their busy schedules to share the start. Whitney will be riding the second sled behind me out of Anchorage. The second sled and Musher is required for safety because excited dog teams have been known to bolt into the crowd with unbelievable swiftness.

Yesterdays Anchorage Daily News used a photo of our dogs at the veterinarian physical exam to headline their Iditarod article.



Iditarod Vet Health Check

The rest of this day will be spent double checking the details. When we leave for the back country on Sunday I want nothing to hinder the success of the dogs. They rely on me to solve problems before they occur, saving valuable energy for the trail.

I selected number 74 so I will start out of Willow about 4:28 in the afternoon. My race plan call for me to run through Yentna, 42 miles into the run, and up the river to Skwentna another 35 miles where will rest for 5-6 hours. This will put us on the trail out of Skwentna before dawn heading for Finger Lake. Then comes the Happy River Steps and on into Rainy Pass. Then the Dalzell Gorge lies ahead before we get into Rohn, over the Alaska Range. Out of Rohn I will camp for 4-6 hours at Buffalo Camp, or Bear Creek Cabin, halfway to Nikolai. It is said if you arrive at Nikolai with a dog team and still have your wits, there is a good chance of making it to Nome. It is also said things can and will happen; this is a dog race, nothing is sure. But the team and Musher condition at Nikolai is a pretty good

clue of how things are going. You may want to copy my run sheet to follow along.

I am running the Puppy Team or sometimes it is called the Yearling Team. My job is to get all of them to Nome rested, happy and healthy. It is simply a long training run; the real thing under real conditions. They will need the experience to run as A Team dogs in the future. This means I will be aiming for a 12-14 day run and somewhere in the middle to last of the field. Greg Hickman will be running the A Team and will be pressing for a competitive finish. My dogs Hartley and Sparrow are running with Gregg. I wish Gregg and the dogs the best of luck.

Yes I am getting a little nervous. But it is almost all because of the physical confinement. Both the Musher and dogs need a lot more space than we've been getting lately. But, there is little now to do but wait out the clock. By design I had everything ready ahead of time so I could arrive at the start line rested; a competitive edge in endurance racing. About all I have to do is show up and get on the sled. So my pre-race is almost boring with nothing to do but relax and wait out the clock. I am almost too relaxed. Over the years I have prepped for hundreds of races, this is just one more. I know the territory well. I am sorry to disappoint those who expect a frantic, nervous, frayed and wired demeanor. Winning at this kind of race is all about planning, preparation and execution.

Jennifer's Journal entries were added while Jim was on the trail. Jim's entries were added later.

Jim: March 6, 2006: (From previous notes) What is it like to be the musher at the Iditarod? The start line is not as great as it looks. Sorry for being blunt but the start line is something to endure, get through, pay your dues, and put on a good show. It is for the fans and they seem to love it. The dogs don't care, they just want to run, anywhere anytime. Swen always seems puzzled by all the commotion. It doesn't faze Hartley. Alto lets it get him so wired he is nearly berserk. Brutus begins to ignore the crowd and just looks ahead; he just wants to "get out of Dodge in a hurry!"

For me, it is a time of doing a dance between two personalities. One is the cheerful, smiling, dressed for the trail, posing for photos kind of person. But the other side is focused beyond belief. It is keeping track of the clock, being sure all the harnesses, gang-lines, sleds, and people are available and ready to spring in action looking and behaving professionally. This is the big league and it needs to show. This is not the time for a colossal screw-up. Too much has gone down to get here, way too much, to look like amateurs.

Then it is 4, 3, 2, 1, go!. The power in the lunge of the 16 dog team surprises me, no actually it frightens me, and is a reminder that a trail hardened team has awesome power, and they are using all of it out of the start chute. You talk to the dogs so they hear your voice above the din of the onlookers; you want control over this maniacal team to keep them running down the middle of the roadway and not into the crowd.

The restart, the real beginning, out of Willow takes you across a small lake for most of a mile. The dog's feet churn up a steady spray of snow while I am braking heavily just to keep the speed from getting to high. Chunks of ice and snow are hitting, stinging, my

face. But the dogs are running hard, going somewhere, and just enjoying being dogs. This is what they were born for, and this is what they love. I think, "They are heading down the trail like flaming idiots with wild reckless abandon and no thought of what may lie ahead. And some of them have been there so they should know what lies ahead." For the moment I am of the notion the dogs are different than am I. They are living in the present with no regard for the trail ahead; all that matters to them is now. Then the reality of the situation sinks in; I am no different. I have both hands and feet firmly planted on this sled and I am by my own free will charging across this lake with them. We are much more alike in so many ways than we are different. We are living in the present; we will deal with what lies ahead when it faces us.

With the pressure of the start line behind we are in our own element. Not a time to relax we must stay alert, vigilant. Our wilderness skills will be tested severely in this frigid arena where Mother Nature is in control. Far away from the din of the start line there are no cheers, no eyes of the spectator, or flash of the camera. For the dogs and driver this is the real Iditarod. Our own frailty becomes obvious; our weakness triggers fear; fatigue causes the steps to be uneven and staggering; mental depletion causes words to come slowly and seldom in sentences. Time and miles wear on. We are a team of muscle and blood in this great of land of ice, snow and unending cold. Rest revives the spirit, food refuels the blood while the muscle rebuilds strength.

Jim: Willow Re-Start: Leaving the start line was a relief. After the months of intense training and preparation at last we were off. The dogs ran easily

across the frozen lakes and swamps through dozens of groups of tailgaters, Alaskan style. I was amazed at the numbers of people out having a picnic 20, 30, 40 miles and more from the start line.

Alto, one of my experienced leaders and especially important to the team started to slow with his head low. He was in obvious distress. Only 5 miles from the start I had to stop and put him in the sled bag with severe stomach cramps. He was very sick.

My race plan was to run though the Iditarod Checkpoint of Yentna, about 35 miles from the start and then run another easy 35 miles up the flat river to Skwentna where we would rest. I had Alto checked by the vets in Yentna hoping to take him in the sled all the way to Skwentna. But when the vet checked him, she noticed he still couldn't stand without hunching his back. We surmised he may have been accidentally poisoned, perhaps automotive coolant leaked where he could reach it. It was a big loss. Utah was the only leader I had left with Iditarod experience. She is known to be 'bullet proof' and is very reliable. With no choice I pushed on with what I had. I wished I had Brutus at that point but quickly dismissed the futile thought. We rested in Skwentna with a light snow falling. I slept well on the straw alongside of the dogs.

Jim: Skwentna: We left the Iditarod checkpoint of Skwentna just before dawn in a steady snowfall. Soon the snow gave way to intermittent sunshine showing the mountain of the Alaska Range looming ahead. About 20 miles out of the checkpoint the trail began to deteriorate. The bottom was breaking out of the hardened trail make big snow holes that sometime were three feet deep and a hundred feet long. The dogs would fall into the holes and struggle in

the deep snow to pull the load through to the far side. The weather seemed too warm but I couldn't really tell if it was warm or we were just working much harder than normal. I couldn't help the dogs much. If I got off and tried to push, it just made matters worse because I couldn't run in the deep snow. I tried getting off on the side but that was even worse.

I noticed Tyne, a young male of Al Hardman's from the kennel of Susan Butcher, with a slack tug line. I stopped to check him and found his shoulder had a pulled muscle. Knowing sometimes dogs can work though this I left him on the line. I didn't need an additional 50 pounds in the sled at this point. Soon, it was evident he needed to ride. He was hopping on 3 legs and crying out when his 4th leg hit the snow. I felt so sorry for him. He had done all he could and just couldn't bear the pain any farther. He happily rode the next 30 miles into the checkpoint of Finger Lakes. He seemed to be looking up at me and smiling, happy to be riding.

Jennifer: March 7, 2006: Well, he's off and running, and Whitney and I are back at the farm. Whew, what a weekend!

At the start in Anchorage, Whitney got to ride the drag sled out of Anchorage and was amazed at the fans lining the route. They offered the mushers cookies and muffins in addition to cheers of support. I haven't seen her smile so much in a long time.



Anchorage Start

At the restart in Willow, things were reasonably calm. Jim and the dogs were looking much healthier than in '04. He was not nervous, and seemed to be down the trail, mentally, before he started.

The Willfords from Gladwin joined us to help handle dogs. Gordy is Jim's barber, but was a professional photographer at some point. He took some fun pictures, which I will add soon. The family decided to take a vacation to see the start, and enjoy Alaska. Jim was able to get them tickets to the musher's banquet, and they met many of the top competitors.

I haven't used the web site in 2 years, so please be a little patient. Jim gave me a bunch of instructions that I didn't really follow, so I will probably break down and read the manual. Chris is not traveling the trail this year, so I will be waiting for Jim to remember to call from the checkpoints!

Jim: Finger Lakes: The vets thoroughly checked the dogs at the Finger Lakes checkpoint. The report was not good. Most of the dogs had shoulder or other muscle injuries caused by the miles of snow holes. Their advice was to massage with the Algaval, a liniment to stimulate blood flow, to help them work through the stiffness and sore muscles. So I started a massive campaign to massage, stretch and Algaval the whole team. They loved the attention but it was a lot of work for me when I could have been resting.

It was a splendid afternoon at Finger Lakes. It was sunny with no wind. The mountains were showing off their best and it was stunning. The mountains may be beautiful to look at but they are not friendly especially in the night when weather is stormy. But I chose to enjoy the beauty and deal with the rest later.

I rested on the straw in the tent at the checkpoint but couldn't sleep. I thought of the Happy River Steps in the trail ahead. I had been beaten half to death the last time through them. I have taken some beatings in my time but the Steps had been one of the worst. I had hoped to run them in the daylight but that was not to be with the sun dropping fast. The dogs really needed the rest but I shortened the rest an hour and headed out. I wanted to have tired dogs here so I could control their speed in the treacherous stuff. I have to admit with memories of my last trip through the Steps I was more than a little nervous.

Before leaving I asked Rachael Scdoris and Tim Osmar what their plan was for leaving. They said there was no plan other than getting the teams ready and go. I could tell they were nervous too and for good reason, Rachael is legally blind. One can only imagine what was going through her mind as she prepared her team. I felt a little guilty about my own apprehension, at least I can see. I left ahead of them with the sun well behind the mountains.

The Steps are about an hour into the run. So after about an hour I began slowing the speed of the team and getting things in control. The large brake we had installed on the sled seemed to work well and was a big comfort to me. I noticed headlamps behind and 'gave trail'. Rachael and Tim passed us moving very quickly.

This is Rachael's second attempt at Iditarod. How gutsy is that for a blind person? I admire her but have to wonder about her good sense. Minutes later I heard dogs barking ahead and stopped my team to await the trail to clear. We were running in a 3 foot deep snow trench that is slightly wider than a dog sled. There is no room to pass and any attempt would make a big mess. I thought someone had crashed on one of the steps or other steep chutes. After about 15 minutes the dogs were still barking so I inched ahead. I found Rachael struggling with her snow hook firmly imbedded in the center of the icy trail. The dogs were barking and jumping making it even harder to extract the imbedded snow hook. We both worked at it. I pounded it with her axe and did loosen it but even with both of us trying it couldn't be freed.

Finally in desperation I told her she'd have to cut the rope and I would bring the hook down to the next checkpoint. Incredulous she asked, "Have you ever

cut a snow hook free?" I replied, "Sure have. Sometimes it is the only way when you have dogs pulling on the sled." She reached for her knife but I shouted, "No, put your knife away! Let me cut it." I didn't want to see her animated team rocket away in the dark and her with an open knife in her hand. I cut the rope and as her dog rocketed away her head lamp hit a tree branch and fell into the trail. Now what? There she was blasting downhill in the dark with no headlamp. I thought, if anybody can deal with that, a blind person can. As I started ahead, a few yards away she had hooked down with her second snow hook and was waiting for me. She was happy to get the head lamp. She left in the dark. I still had the Happy River Steps to run and was still anxious. Ahead I had a blind girl rocketing down the same trail like there was no tomorrow. Again I felt a little guilty about my own apprehension. The Iditarod can teach some forceful lessons in humility. I was pretty humble just about then.

Even on a good day the Happy River Steps are a Musher's worst nightmare come true. We plunged over a 50 foot cliff. If the warning signs were still there, I didn't see them. You are into it before you know it. The trail descends, drops, so steeply all you can do is to stand on the brake and lower your body as close to the snow as possible; your butt is actually dragging at times. The heavy sled snaps left and right whipping your arms as if it is trying to free itself from the steel grip of your hands.

I had already made it through most of the steps unscathed, the last was coming. As we plunged down a short ramp into a switchback left I had control of my team. Swen was following my 'easy' command and the oversized drag brake with carbide studs was restraining

the sled. We made the switchback barely in control. I saw sled skid marks going over the edge. I was thankful I was not joining them.

At the end of the ramp there was another switchback, not near as bad as the one up the hill. Ahead I saw Rachael in the dark trying to pull her heavy sled off the trail out of my path. She had no dogs! I was able to stop for a moment. She had gone over the side, plunged down the mountainside, hit a tree with her body and pretty well lost track of the rest of the plummet. She was disoriented and almost in shock. I told her I'd try to catch her dogs and tie them off. I passed her and in a few yards dropped down on the level river; the Steps were behind us.

Ahead I saw an overturned sled and two tangled dog teams. Tim had tackled her lead dog and somehow got both teams stopped. My snow hook didn't hold in the loose snow and my team plowed into the tangle. Rachael was coming behind pushing her sled.

We worked frantically to get the dogs connected to her sled and the teams separated. This is a dangerous condition. Dog fights erupt and instinctively more dogs join the fight with catastrophic results. Serious injury to dog and human do occur. The death of dogs is a real possibility. There we were, two men, a blind woman, and about 45 dogs in a big tangle in the dark down on the Happy River.

We finally got it all fixed and were off. My run down the Steps had been without mishap. Her run? That is her story to tell. I suspect you'll be reading about it somewhere else. Geez, I admire her guts but have to wonder if it is worth the risk. I wish her well.

Some of the rest of this run into Rainy Pass is pretty bad. It is seldom mentioned because the hideous Steps are so spectacular. At one point my sled was in a

whiplash and sliding toward a drop off. I couldn't say how much of a drop; maybe it was 10 feet, maybe a hundred. I jammed my foot toward the brake pad but missed. In a perilous slide I had only enough time to wrench the sled over on its side and hold on. My legs dangled momentarily over the edge but we made it. That was too close.

I think Iditarod Musher Terry Adkins comment is true. There are parts of the trail that brings one closer to God. But you'd better do your praying before or after because things happen too fast on the trail.

Leader Swen was the star that night. We had trained for the 'Easy' command but you never know if it will really work when the trail drops into a steep descent. When I would call 'easy' and tap the drag brake he'd drop to about half speed. He listened to me and responded instantly. The rest of the team followed his lead. You just have to love a dog like that when your butt is on the line.

Jim: Rainy Pass: I arrived at Rainy Pass Checkpoint in time to rest the dogs well and then run in daylight over the pass and through the Dalzell Gorge. If all went well I would be able to depart the next checkpoint, Rohn, in daylight too, a good thing. The temperature was about 30 below so I chose to not sleep in the straw alongside the dogs. While sleeping in a room with about 20 other smelly mushers sprawled on the floor I awakened when I tried to roll over. It seemed I was trying to roll up hill and thought I may be laying on a boot or something. I discovered the sweat in my parka had frozen solid and I really was trying to roll up hill. So, I just crawled into my sleeping bag thinking my body heat would thaw my parka liner. It did but it also soaked my sleeping bag which now would

become a thin frozen mess. Without anyplace to dry it in the next 150 miles I hoped I wouldn't need it in an emergency.

The moisture in the parka liner should have alerted me to a developing problem. I had been running and pushing the sled much more than should have been necessary. Although I was holding up well to the physical demand, it should have been a clue the dog team had problems. My job is to manage the team, not become one of the dogs. This would become evident later and was a significant error.

While filling my water jug at the Lodge a familiar voice greeted me. It was Dean ?. I first met him under a most amazing condition. It was in the Seney 300 in a twisty section of trail where you can't see your leaders much of the time. He had lost his team and was walking down the trail with his back to us. My dogs ran him down, literally, driving him face down into the snow. When we stopped there were 6 dogs standing on his back. The dogs had a hard time figuring out what they had caught on the trail. They weren't overly willing to let him get up. I felt so bad about that incident I apologize every time I see him. Today he was snowmobiling the Iditarod Trail for his second time and he is over 70 years old. Good for him.



Jim and Team Crossing Rainy Pass in the Alaska Range

The valley leading from the Rainy Pass Checkpoint to the actual Pass is over a mile wide and is open rolling tundra, no trees, just a little brush in the sheltered areas. There were several places where avalanches had filled the valley with its jumbled snow, brush and rocks. This is near where the trail breaker died in an avalanche a month ago. It only takes minutes before the trail is drifted-in leaving only the wooden lathe trail markers to show where the trail was. This was perplexing Swen, the Lead dog at that point. Once he stopped the team. A white dog standing in a world of white, stared ahead, looked left, looked right, and then looked back at me as if he were asking for my help. I gave him the "Ahead!" command and then talked to him occasionally to shore up his failing confidence. He ran with no problems for 3 or 4 miles. Suddenly he did a U-turn and brought the whole team back to me on the sled. He laid down on the snow and turned over on his back like a puppy, scared. Well this was unexpected. Yes, a four year old, confident leader

was scared in a big, white, windblown world with no trees. He was looking to me for something. Although I understood the dog I had to strongly show my expectations of him. Scared or not, tired or rested, bewildered or not, I expected him to 'lead' and take this team over the mountains. I thought, "I sure wish Brutus was here!" I scolded Swen and grabbed him by the collar and ran, dragging him the 80 feet back to the front of the string of dogs. He knew he'd better not do that again. I hoped he didn't see through my stern response. Dogs often seem to read ones mind and it takes special effort to disguise ones true feelings. But the objective in running a puppy team is to teach and give confidence. Dogs need to know that, "Together we can do this!"

We continued on in a white world of drifting snow. It was white above with a light snow falling. The mountains of both sides were white. And everything under our feet was white. The Team and I stood out as foreigners with our colors of red, brown and black. The only visible sign of the trail was the upright wooden lath markers.

Suddenly Swen took a course change to the right, off the trail, jumping to break trail in the deep drifted snow. I had a hard time getting the team stopped. Swen had spied a small patch of willow brush about a ¼ mile away down on the valley floor. It seemed he wanted to be near trees and the patch of brush was going to have to do. A musher behind took over breaking trail, we followed.

Ahead, over Rainy Pass was the Dalzell Gorge, a white knuckle ride. I had no real problem with it in '04 but it was a sled driving challenge. But I knew there may be surprises with inexperienced leaders. They are known to balk before the ice bridges causing tangles and

the team and musher to slide down into the water. We ran through the Dalzell Gorge with no incidents but there were a few tense moments. Yee Haw! Two down and one to go: The Glacier out of Rohn. If I cut the rest for the dogs in Rohn we can make it in daylight.

Jim: Rohn: I was delayed getting out of Rohn negotiating with the vets to retain the dogs they thought needed to be dropped. I was beginning to worry about attrition of the team and didn't want to drop a dog unless it was absolutely necessary. I was willing to risk carrying one in the sled. Both King and Cookie had been ailing since the 'snow holes' and to make matters worse several other dogs were ailing which shifts the burden to others. Carter was slow getting up to speed after rests. Utah, my only remaining experienced Iditarod leader, seemed weak but I couldn't find anything wrong with her. I had been running Ernie in lead with Swen, but Ernie had a sore shoulder that I had been massaging. Falcon's sore shoulder seemed to have healed but there was a dog yipping occasionally in the team. I couldn't tell which dog but it seemed to be Falcon. Both Raven and Olive had sore shoulders but seemed to be improving. My team like many other teams had a lot of dogs with dings after the snow holes between Skwenta and Finger Lakes. I was successful at negotiating to keep King but dropped Cookie.

Jennifer: Rohn: Jim is over the Alaska Range and into Rohn as of when I am writing this. He's dropped two dogs. Unfortunately the first was Alto, who brought him in to Nome last time, with diarrhea. Hope he doesn't have that canine flu they were warning us about. Jim will be relying on Utah, who ran in '04 and Swen, brother of Hartley, and son of Beta. Most of the

dogs in the team can lead to give Utah and Swen a break. The second dog dropped was Tyne, with a shoulder in Rainy Pass. Tyne is a sweet little black male from Al Hardman's kennel. I haven't run with him, so I can't tell you much more.

Jim: Nikolai: We left Rohn about dark heading for the windy Kuskokwim River. About an hour out was the Glacier Climb but the trail was routed around the Glacier and it was a cake-walk. We were heading for Buffalo Camp about 41 miles out and halfway to Nikolai. This is a remote area even by Alaskan standards.

The dogs seemed tired and were stopping when faced by even a slight incline. It was dark and I couldn't tell exactly what was happening within the team. But I knew I had to push the sled up the many hills. What a difference between this team and the one I had in '04. I didn't even remember there were hills here in '04. I was sweating profusely but was determined to make it to Buffalo Camp. I don't think I have worked that hard in years. Into Buffalo Camp I fed, med'ed, and massaged the dogs and then found an open space on the spruce bough floor in one of the Tents. I had shifted to race plan B which was designed to give the dogs more rest to try to overcome some of the ailments that were plaguing the team. Plus I was dead tired from the running and pushing. As I pulled up my sleeping bag a voice in the dark asked how it was going. It was Dean. I slept hard!

After 6 ½ hours we left for Nikolai. King was ailing even more and now we were pulling him. He had not pulled since Rohn; the vets were right. I was becoming even more concerned with the team after their poor performance on the last run. I couldn't put my finger on just what was going on but knew extra rest was in order. My race plan B called for more rest for the

dogs at least until the Yukon River. I planned to stay at least 8 hours in Nikolai, and then stay for my 24 hour layover in McGrath, not Takotna as originally planned. This would allow me to break up the runs into Ruby giving shorter runs and one more rest period. I dropped King in Nikolai and massaged and wrapped Falcon's wrists. The vets commented on the low body fat on Spelaman and Duke and warned that they may not be allowed to run on the Yukon River if wind and temperatures were adverse. But they were eating well. Some dogs like Duke were eating over 10,000 Kcal per day and still losing weight. I gave Duke and Spelaman a coat to wear while resting.

While in Nikolai I mentally reviewed the race plan. We'd accomplished the first objective which was to get through the rough stuff of the Happy River Steps and the Dalzell Gorge in daylight where possible, over the Alaska Range, without injury or broken sled. The second objective was to pace the team giving adequate rest to ensure a good attitude of the dogs. I had already adjusted the race plan to do that. But I was perplexed by the continuing muscle ailments and was working with the dogs that showed remaining soreness. Those that had more severe problems had been already dropped. Another challenge ahead was the cold forecast at Cripple and wind on the Yukon. In Alaska's interior a forecast of 'cold' means approaching 50 below. Does that mean that anything warmer than that isn't cold? I had been warned by the vets 2 or 3 times already that the thinner dog may be at risk and might not be able to continue. I had been feeding them all the fat and supplements they would eat and they were eating a lot in the cold; more than I'd ever seen dogs eat. I would be able to pick up more dog coats at Takotna, then more at Ruby and Unalakleet. Overall I had 12 dogs

and a good race plan. We still had a long way to go, over 700 miles, but I was satisfied I had a good race plan and I was doing all that could be done for the remaining dogs.

Jennifer: March 8, 2006: I was at work late, still catching up from the trip to Anchorage. The phone rang; Jim was calling from Nikolai. I am guessing he didn't have a clue what time it was here in Michigan. He sounded healthy, and not too tired, but had that don't-be-surprised-if-I-don't-make-it thing starting up. He had dropped Cookie at Rohn and was going to drop King with a sore shoulder. He says that Utah is sick; if he has to drop Utah, he will have no experienced leaders. One section of the trail had been rough on the dogs, with lots of sore wrists and shoulders in the team. Swen balked going out of Rainy Pass, and turned the whole team back to the checkpoint, laid down and put his paws in the air, begging not to go. He laughed, but of course, he is counting on Swen and Utah.

Finally, he got the team through the gorge, to Rohn. The stretch from Rohn to Nikolai is long, and he took a planned rest in the middle. So his times are slow.

Okay, I told him, just be patient and let Utah work through her tummy flu. So he may stay there awhile. The trail from Nikolai to McGrath is long, and it is where he had trouble last year. Not a great place to start out if Utah can't lead, and Swen won't. He does have other leaders, but not ones who have been on the trail. He hopes to get to Nome before the finisher's banquet. We will just have to wait and pray for a miracle healing on the dogs.

Jim being Jim, he will do his best to finish. And he will also start thinking about how he will do better

next year. He won't be able to give up this sport until he has had a good run. I'm just hoping he isn't going to try to break Col. Vaughn's record for the oldest finisher of the race. If he does, I could be working late for many, many more years.

Jenifer: March 9, 2006 (later): Jim is taking his 24 hour break in McGrath, rather than Takotna. There is a good picture of Jim going to Rainy Pass in the Anchorage Daily News from day 3 of the coverage. I couldn't get the link to work so just inserted the picture.

Chris called to say Jim left him messages from Nikolai (yesterday) and McGrath, then he called and talked to me from McGrath. In Nikolai, he was more coherent, but told Chris's machine, "I'm not sure what day it is --maybe it's Tuesday, but there is a crystal blue sky and it's beautiful." He said that Happy River Steps were "wild," and the Dalzell Gorge was "interesting." He told Chris that a section of the trail had been very rough, and several dogs have injuries, so he would be resting more along the way.

Jim described his leader situation to Chris as "precarious," but "not hanging by a thread" with Alto out and Utah ill. He ran Ernie with Swen, but Ernie was "freaking out" in the rough stuff. Imagine Ernie putting on the brakes, and yowling "Wait, wait, this isn't right! Let me think about this!"

On the way to McGrath, it was about -30°F, which Jim described as "really cold." When he called Chris from McGrath it was sunny and 10°F. Here in Michigan, it has been 35° to 40° and has just started raining. The dog yard is one large, stinky mud pie. I had to rescue Peg and Gateway, whose houses were surrounded by lakes of muddy water. I might take 10°, or even -20°, not to deal with a March meltdown.

Anyway, Jim told Chris that he had Soap Here ride in the sled basket for the last part of the ride into McGrath, but hasn't mentioned dropping him. (If you haven't checked the dog list, Soap Here is the unusual name for one of Al's young males from the Butcher kennel.) Jim told both of us that things are going better than in 2004. It wouldn't take much, of course, since by this time in 2004 he had a concussion (with resulting blurred vision and numb fingers), a pulled hamstring, and a team of sick dogs. However, I think he really did sound better! I asked how Ernie's twin sisters, Olive and Raven, were doing, since they were leading during training. Jim said they were OK, but losing some weight.

All in all, it sounds like the normal ups and downs that are part of this race. Al Hardman is in McGrath, and I'm sure that is encouraging to Jim. Al's official role there is taking care of getting sleds that Greg and Jim don't use back to Anchorage. I guess one year, Al's sled stayed in McGrath all summer when someone forgot to put it on the plane!

I am once again too late at night to be trying to add pictures.

Jim: McGrath: While running into McGrath just for entertainment to help the boredom I looked in vain for the tree that had battered me in '04. I had the thought of cutting it down just to get even. Then I thought about how silly that would be. It wasn't the fault of the tree, I was to blame. I chose to go on in the dark after burning out all my headlamp bulbs. Now, sitting here in the warm and editing this journal, just the thought of cutting down the tree seems incredibly stupid of me. I think it best just to leave it at that. Perhaps the whole incident of going on in the dark should serve

as a testimony to the incredible drive and intensity that pushes on an Iditarod musher. (No I didn't mention stupidity! Go ahead and insert it if you wish. I'll not argue.)

About 5 miles from McGrath Soap Here refused to run. Knowing we were close to McGrath I put him on top of the sled and continued. There was little wind but this was a cold run and I heard later it was down to minus 39°F. I was getting sleepy on the runners with growing suspicion of the onset on hyperthermia.

Hypothermia is subtle and can sneak up on you. It is hard to reverse too. At the checkpoint I noticed as did others my erratic behavior while tending dogs. I had a terrible time getting the coats on the dogs another clue of the hypothermic condition. I even mistook Raven for Teller and removed her harness and connected her near the sled. Teller is a 'chewer' and to keep him from chewing his harness and that of his partner I had been pulling him back and connecting him with a cable to the sled. When I discovered my error I had to forcibly keep from laughing aloud. Maybe that was part of the hypothermia. If you've ever been hypothermic you know you might as well laugh because your brain is dysfunctional and you will say and do goofy things before it subsides. It may take hours to completely subside because of the carryover effect while your blood chemistry recovers.

After they checked the dogs the vet report was pretty good, the first good report I had received since Skwentna. So I fed, and med'ed the dogs then settled in for a 24 hour layover. The dogs were on a 5 hour feeding cycle and would get plenty of chow, plus snacks.

At the end of my 24 hour, I delayed departure in somewhat of a tiz over a medical issue I had discussed with the local medic. Even with reassurances I fumbled

with the issue. Finally angry with myself and wasting valuable time, I chose to ignore it. But the dogs were rested and wanted to go so I left McGrath in the early morning daylight. They looked great for the first ¼ mile but started to act up out on the river ice. I couldn't get them to continue for any distance without stopping. Teller had started his normal growling stuff and seemed to be causing upset. When upset Soap Here would just lock up and begin pulling back. The team would just stop, just as they would when some dog had to pee. But Teller was having fun. He'd growl at Soap, Soap would stop the team and then Teller would instantly begin flirting with Raven who was still in heat. Raven seemed to enjoy the attention. I wasted most of a half hour before finally figuring out how to cure all this nonsense. Finally, I connected Teller along side of the sled and away from the team. That did it. We were off. I couldn't remember anything in the Iditarod rules that prohibited running a dog alongside of the sled. Teller was visibly bummed. Too bad!!

The team was fast. They were even better than my '04 team on the grade to Takotna. And their overall time was as good even with the delay on the river. I was elated. The 24 hour rest seemed to have done wonders.

Jennifer: March 9, 2006: No, he hasn't called, yet. He checked into McGrath, which means he got through the place where he hit his head in 2004. This is good. His speed appears to be better, which is also good. The temperature in McGrath is about -20°F. Believe it or not, this is also good; the dogs like cold temperatures, and tend to stay healthier. Jim was scheduled to take his 24 in Takotna, but may have decided to stay in McGrath, which has better facilities

plus air freight. We shall see. Maybe he will call, but I am working from home today, which he would not know.

Sometimes I wonder if I will ever live a normal life. I had a freezer delivered to replace one that broke down during last month's ice storm. We do not have standard width steps or doors, so I took off the hand rail and the delivery guys took off the door. I look around the house and shake my head. While most people would have replaced the doors long ago, we buy dog food. Lots of it.

Unfortunately, the dead freezer was full to the brim with people food. On the bright side, the dogs at home have had several days of venison in their food dishes.

With any luck, Chris has gotten web editing software by now, and maybe a phone call from Jim. Chris is in an internship in Minnesota for his civil engineering degree. So, no Iditarod for him this year unless he flies up for the weekend. That really does sound crazy!

Jennifer: March 10, 2006 8:30 pm: I don't know any more than you do, yet. Just that he scratched. I expect to hear something when he finally gets his thoughts together.

He left for Ophir earlier, but apparently turned around and came back. So something happened. Takotna is a better place to scratch, of course, since there is food and there are people there, and plane service back to McGrath.

When we were rally racing cars, we had a record for the highest consecutive finishes in the sport. An odd claim to fame, but it shows Jim's attention to detail and preparation. But sometimes stuff happens. Now we wait and pray.

Jim: Takotna: Into Takotna I rifled my drop bags for supplies. I needed enough food and fuel for two camps, Ophir and a wilderness camp. The sled was heavy and we were pretty slow on the grade out of Takotna. I noticed Dukes gait had changed; a gait I'd never seen before. A couple of miles later Falcon started bobbing his head then shortly he began limping. This was an ominous sign. To their credit both dogs were pulling even in distress. How could a team go from great to bad so quickly? My previous confidence started to wane.

Then about 5 miles out of Takotna and into the rolling hills I had to put Duke in the sled. He had a painful frostbitten scrotum and just couldn't run. Then, on an incline Soap Here began dropping to the snow. It seemed to be more than his normal 'quit' and when I checked him he showed some signs of a sore shoulder. I urged him on. Falcon's limp had gotten much worse. When I checked his shoulder he squealed in pain. I placed Soap Here on the sled with Duke and tried to continue with Falcon on the gangline. He began running on 3 legs and occasionally yelping in pain. I traded Falcon for Soap on the sled since I could get two on the sled but three dogs would have been a real challenge. That worked for a little way. Then that damned Teller started again with his growling and stopping the team so he could flirt with Raven. I guess the team had become conditioned to stop when Teller growled. I had to again connect him along side of the sled and he wasn't too happy with pulling in that position. I needed him to pull. With Teller unhappy and Duke with Falcon in the sled, I had just gutted the team of power. In just a few miles I had gone from near euphoria to despondency. What to do?

Moving slowly at best with frequent stops the team was struggling. I called "Whoa", and sat down on the sled now crowded with 2 dogs. My own tired legs from pushing needed a rest too. Falcon, now back in the team, stood with this head low. I put him back because at least he'd not stop the whole team. I pondered my situation while the team took another short rest. We were about 15-20 miles out of Ophir, I had lost track with my pushing of the sled. It was rolling hills and good trail but with 2-3 dogs in the sled and the extra food for 2 camps, the sled was way heavy. The dogs I had left were not the strongest. Among them was 38 Lb Utah who was still sick and hardly pulling. There was 35 Lb Spelaman who even when pulling hard she isn't much capability. So ignore Utah and Spelaman, I have seven dogs pulling a sled weighing 300 lbs. I was about ready to start throwing food overboard when it occurred to me that it was mostly downhill back to Takotna. I decided to return to Takotna and assess the situation there. I'd rest, reduce the food load and then head out again. Repeating the 5 miles was a lot better than trying to continue as we had been. But I hate to ever turn back.

When I turned the team around it caused a few tangles that needed to be fixed. I looked up at Swen in lead and he had turned around in place and was facing the direction to Ophir. He was making a statement on the subject: He wanted to go to Ophir. I know well dogs can't speak with words but they are capable of talking very clearly. Swen did just that. But when I turned him around he just starred down the trail and obediently took the team back to Takotna.

At Takotna the vets checked the dogs. Falcon, Duke, and Soap Here had to be dropped. While they worked with the dogs I had reduced a portion of the

food load and was almost ready to leave for Ophir but the vets insisted on checking the rest of the dogs. Bad news! Carter too had to be dropped because of a foot problem. Utah was feverish and was marginal at best. I tried to negotiate with the vet to keep Carter but lost. I shifted to Utah and claimed Utah's fever may be a normal temperature for her and pointed out she wasn't dehydrated. They relented and left her in the team with the promise of checking her in Ophir. Ravens shoulder was sore but they allowed me to take her with the promise of carrying her if she got worse. They were insistent she and Utah were to be rechecked in Ophir. They advised me that they thought Spelman was too skinny and would likely be dropped for her safety down the trail. Getting a little testy I told them I'd heard that several times already. The vets were in a rush to meet a plane and had to speed off. I was happy to be rid of them.

Bad news had come way too fast, like an avalanche. My team had been decimated and some of dogs still in the team were not in good shape and were likely to be dropped. With my head in a swirl I couldn't find enough graciousness left in me to thank the vets. To be really honest, I felt like cussing them out but down deep I knew they were not the problem.

So there we were! Eight dogs remaining with some of them marginal and 600-700 miles to go. I knew I could make it some distance farther, perhaps all the way to Nome, but could I could do it without demanding too much from the remaining dogs. The cold was some of the worst encountered in decades and it was an energy drain on the dogs. The worst may be the first few miles because of the extra burden of food and fuel for trail camping. But the trail was good, better than good. Was it worth the possibility of ruining some

of the best dogs? The problems with the team stopping and expecting me to run and push up the hills had been perplexing. I thought I had gotten rid of the problem, Soap Here. But perhaps the perpetrator was Teller who was still present. Physically, I was able to run and push the sled to help the dogs and had already done plenty of that. But could I do it for hundreds of miles? I'm not a kid anymore with limitless energy. This was going to be a judgment call. No matter which direction I took there would be good argument for the alternative.

I parked the dogs and wandered the checkpoint of Takotna then went inside for a burger and homemade pie. The food tasted much like sawdust under the conditions. I considered heading for Ophir and delaying the decision until then. I also considered the "no decision" option of just going on until something, an event, stopped us but thought that would be shirking my responsibility to my dogs. When running young dogs you have to be thinking ahead and be more sensitive to the dogs to not demand too much. I recalled my son Chris' response a year earlier in a similar difficult situation, "My dogs rely on me to take care of them." It finally came down to the dogs.

There would be little added benefit to the dogs to press on. The last thing I wanted was to push the dogs until they balked, a very bad thing for the dogs. I walked to my dog team circled them twice then went to the Checkpoint boss and scratched. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I've learned to never look back on hard decisions. I will not relent on this one.

Later, back in the McGrath checkpoint my judgment call for the good of the dogs was reaffirmed by the statements by some of the most experienced mushers around, Terry Adkins, and John Barron who

had also scratched. Their young dogs too were struck by latent injuries, failing will, and the loss of dogs. They too wrestled as I did with at what point is it better for the dogs to pack it in and race another day. These were decisions for the good of the dogs by men who don't quit easily. If there is error here it is for the benefit of the dog. They agreed scratching was a hard thing to do, very hard. I was happy to be in the company of men who can pocket their pride, make a hard decision, care for their dogs and move on.

I have to say I appreciated the council of Labon Barve, the checkpoint boss. In looking back, I am sure he had been in my place sometime in the past and knew what it was like to spend a year preparing for something and then face the hard reality of coming up short. He was a compassionate and kind man and I thank him for it.

Jennifer: March 10, 2006 10:45 He is okay. The story is that he was about 5 miles out of Takotna, when Duke and Soap Here stopped pulling. (Duke is a young dog of Al's that replaced Reba when Reba had a bad run before the start.) Then Falcon started limping. Jim decided to take them all back to Takotna to see what was going on, since it was closer than Ophir. Swen was really confused, and did NOT want to take the team down the trail the wrong way. After Swen and little Spelman turned the team back 180° toward Ophir, Jim put someone else in lead, but he didn't say who.

They all managed to get back to Takotna, eventually, with one dog in the bag. When they arrived, the vet checked everybody out. They recommended dropping all three plus Carter, a veteran from '04. This would leave Jim with eight dogs and about 700 miles to go. A tired 8 dog team in a storm on the coast could kill

you. If he had an experienced team, it would be possible. But at this point his experienced dogs were Utah and Stormy (who hate each other), and the rest would be trainees. Fat chance! By dropping out, he can prevent ruining the dogs from getting them too discouraged.

Jim got everyone back into McGrath, where he called me. He sounded like he had been rehearsing his explanation for hours -- he probably had a lot of people ask what happened. He should get to Anchorage sometime Saturday or Sunday. He wanted me to check on return flights back to Michigan, but I wasn't sure what day. The connection was not great, and he started to cut out. It looks like he should be able to get back mid week without too much trouble.

Thank you to those who called and sent notes. We are all disappointed, of course, but thankful that Jim and the dogs are safe.

Jennifer: March 12, 2006: I took yesterday off. I don't know where Jim is. He called from McGrath last night, not sure exactly when he would get to Anchorage. Maybe last night. Maybe today. I'm sure it is taking some coordination to get the 8 dogs and his sled shipped out. I was able to tell him how to change his flight. He said he had been calling my office all day, but of course, yesterday was Saturday.

Greg Hickman, who has the Team Michigan A team is down to 10 dogs, and no longer in the top 20. I haven't heard whether he has had any trouble, or who he has dropped. I am hoping Hartley, one of Jim's favorites, is okay.

Meanwhile at home, it was in the 50's here today. Our Iditarod veterans from last year, and the rest, are wading in mud and basking in the sunshine. I

made a little boardwalk in the part of the yard where the muck tried to steal my boots. Such a contrast from the picture in Unalakleet where the leaders were today!

I had a wonderful talk with a fan today who wanted to say how much he admired Jim. This person was about Jim's age, and he wanted to know how Jim did this, physically. Several other people have asked me this. So, here is the secret to being in Iditarod shape at 61: he works with what he has. Jim has always been an outdoors person, and keeps in shape by working with the dogs, and farming the Christmas trees. He has spent time at the gym, which has a track, but really doesn't do anything fancy. He doesn't take any fancy vitamin cocktails, just a Centrum and some glucosamine. Since they took away Vioxx, he uses naproxen sodium or ibuprofen for stiffness. He keeps his weight in a reasonable range, and eats a pretty average diet. His heart is strong. He takes statins to keep his cholesterol in check, I have to remind him about saturated and trans fats.

The Iditarod is a physical challenge for the people who compete, especially in the hills. The sled is heavy and the snow is deep, and it takes some core strength and aerobic conditioning. Mostly, though, it is a matter of staying healthy, overall.

Now, it is out to the dog yard with me to do some bucket-lifting.

Jennifer: March 13, 2006: Jim is finally in Anchorage. He called and is going to try to get home tomorrow. Of course, the storms whipping through the Midwest may change his plans. Minneapolis looked pretty challenging, with several inches of snow, and big snow removal equipment. I will have to call Chris tomorrow to let him know when Jim is coming through.

The wind here today was amazing -- 20 to 40 mph, with gusts up to 60. Another two inches of rain was in the dog dishes from last night's thunderstorms. The dogs here were totally entertained by a flying empty food bucket and plastic poop sled. It has been a few years since we got a big thaw, followed by high winds, followed by a freeze-up. Last time the phone poles tipped every which way, as if they had been out drinking. It will be cold tomorrow.

I did an interview on WIOG-FM today, on their morning show. This is a top 40 station, with energetic hosts. We had set up the time while Jim was on the trail, but they were still interested, and it was fun. I do like radio, since it is easy to mirror the tone of the hosts, and I don't have to worry about how I look.

While in McGrath, Jim did get to a computer in the library -- the internet is everywhere in Alaska. He is excited about the book -- maybe amazed is a better description:

Jennifer, take a look at our book on Amazon and you'll find it is listed as a 'buy together' with Rachael Scdoris book, the legally-blind musher.

It is interesting I went down the Happy River steps with her and Tim Osmar, her escort. On the last bad one she totally blew a switch back and flew over the cliff smashing her body into a tree losing her sled which tumbled down far enough to land back on the lower trail. Her mainline broke and dogs rocketed away. I remember vividly helping Tim and Rachael reconnect her dog team to a damaged sled, while all three teams were tangled. Rachael was pretty well convinced she would never live through Iditarod and I couldn't blame her. She was a basket case in the first

degree that night at the bottom of the steps on the Happy River. But she found the courage to go on and is still going. Good for her. I saw up close a woman with guts, the courage to keep going, the ability to overcome pain, but maybe a little stupid. Pardon me for being so blunt. Jim

I smiled at his description. Sounds to me like Rachael fits right in with all the rest of the Iditarod mushers -- guts, courage, the ability to overcome pain, and not afraid to look a little stupid on the way. You go, girl!

Jim: 13 March, 2006: Well after 4 days of patiently waiting we finally got a flight out of McGrath with our team and sleds. The plane was called the Caravan and was loaded with 9 total people. Interestingly there were about 30 dogs too that had been dropped by Iditarod mushers and were being flown back to Anchorage. Most of the dogs were loose. What a sight! I had one under my seat, one between my calves and the seat, one with his head under my right elbow, one with his head in my lap. We were solid, wall to wall people and dogs. It was good everyone there likes dogs. Jennifer would have gone nuts with so many friendly dogs to hug. The air was a little stuffy to say the least.

Jim: 14 March, 2006: As I watch the beautiful sunrise over the Chugach Mountains from the uncrowded Airport at Anchorage, I wonder if I'll ever come back here. I wonder if I have another Iditarod left in me. The race leaders are getting close to Nome at the moment and I am feeling like a 'dropped' dog must feel, kind of empty. There are things left undone that

were assigned to me; I failed to deliver. Although it was the dog team that failed, I have to shoulder the responsibility. These are things that grind against my base nature. I am not good at failing.

It is too soon to even think of coming back. After 500 miles of the toughest part of Iditarod I feel in perfect shape even after running and pushing on the uphill way more than should have been needed. I was ready this time; the dogs were not. However, if I come back for an Iditarod it has to be with substantial financial backing.

While waiting to be flown out of the checkpoint of McGrath, I heard multiple runner of Iditarod Terry Adkins say, 'There is something good about the Dalzell Gorge. It brings me closer to God. I prayed all the way down.'

Looking Back

Dogs: My standard for a dog team is my '04 team which was a mentally and physically tough team, almost bullet-proof. They never hesitated to do what I asked; they made up for my injuries by hauling me up many hills. No dogs were dropped because of the typical shoulder or wrist injuries. After the race I had people asking where I got the dogs or what I did special. The answer was they were just tough dogs. In comparison the '06 team seemed prone to injury and neurosis and was like driving a bunch of wimps. They definitely were faster but that is of little value if the team folds.

My job as musher was to manage the dog team. One early clue I should have taken more seriously was when the vets at Finger Lakes reported nearly every one of the dogs had some level of muscular trauma. They added that my team's condition was typical of many of the teams that had just come off a very bad section of trail. The vets thought that most of the dogs could 'heal while running' if I massaged and took special care of them. Looking back I believe these injuries were the critical factor that tipped the scales toward scratching. I believe it put additional load on the few remaining sound dogs causing them to wear down. Farther down the trail the team became a combination of injured and worn down dogs with 600 miles to go. But this developing scenario was not obvious to me as I watched the dogs run. They actually looked great leaving the checkpoint of McGrath after the 24 hour mandatory rest. Nobody would have guessed they were other than a healthy and

well rested team. However, evidence of their poor condition surfaced dramatically some 30 miles later.

Our situation was not unique. There were a number of teams struggling with the same situation. There were several teams that scratched under almost identical conditions. They were run by experienced mushers and had a high percentage of young and untried dogs. Fortunately some teams fared better than others.

I will make some changes so this doesn't happen in the future. The first is the dogs I race will be under my direct control during all of training. A number of dogs that were in my pool for the yearling team were out of my direct control for the final half of the training. It is my observation that diligent and consistent training of several of the dogs was lacking. By the time the situation became clear to me the alternatives were to drop out or do our best at damage control training. This was not a good situation to get into and I am committed to not making the same mistake again.

The second is to run the dogs in large-team configuration during the last part of training. This should work out any neurotic tendencies and support the final decision on which dogs to take cut for the race.

It was suggested that I should have backed way off the race plan and rested the dogs excessively to nurse them through. Well, I didn't. The seriousness of the dog's condition wasn't evident. And, this is a race not a camping trip and there will be failures.

There was a little bad luck too. I had chosen a strong front-end because it can overcome a lot of problems

further back in the team. I had Alto and Utah both strong leaders and 2 time Iditarod finishers. Plus I had Swen and Ernie as strong back up leaders but neither with Iditarod experience. Well, Alto became very ill 5 miles out of the start line with severe vomiting and diarrhea. After the stern warnings of the vets before the race regarding hyperthermia, I thought it best to have him checked by the vet at the checkpoint of Yentna with the thought of carrying him through to Skwentna. Well, the vet would have non-of-that and forced me to leave the dog at Yentna. Then, Utah became feverish and was weak at lead. To nurse her through I kept her out of lead. The vets wanted to have her dropped but allowed me to continue with the promise to watch her for dehydration. Now, my strong front end was reduced to a couple of inexperience leaders. They were doing OK but when some dog back in the team acted up they were too willing to stop to find out what was the problem. But, they took me through the Dalzell Gorge and Happy River Steps like veterans, a nice surprise and a credit to our dog training.

On the trail before Buffalo Camp I had assessed the situation and had activated my 'Plan B' which called for longer rest and extra camps. The longer rests began at Buffalo Camp, a trail camp between Rohn and Nikolai. Then I rested longer in Nikolai. Next I shifted my mandatory 24 hour rest from Takotna to McGrath. That would have allowed me to add a rest in Ophir which was not on my original race plan.

When leaving McGrath enroute through Takotna to Ophir the 12 dog team looked great and ran to Takotna pretty quickly. I was beginning to think the extra rest was already paying off. But it may have been a case of too-

little, too-late. After Takotna the team seemed to suddenly unravel. One explanation offered for this sudden change in dog performance was a downward mental spiral with the team feeding off the negative signals from the musher. The reality is I lost 4 of the 4 dogs with palpable injuries – it was physical, not mental, melt-down.

The puzzling thing is it happened on the heels of a splendid run to Takotna. At first it just didn't seem to make any sense. But after talking to Mushers who have run a total of nearly 30 Iditarods they helped me fit it all together. It was a combination of things. Less than diligent training for some of the dogs, combined with several injuries to dogs between Skwentna and Finger Lakes, caused the good dogs to have more demand on them to take up the slack of the injured. Finally we became a team with injured dogs and tired dogs much too early in the race. It was good judgment to not demoralize the remaining 8 dogs by pressing on.

Experience: The thousands of miles I have logged while training and racing dogs are piling up. The value of the experience is tremendous.

I was able to get to the start line at Iditarod '06 rested and ready. I was well prepared; I was rested; this was the plan. Some people actually thought I seemed somewhat disconnected. I guess they expected to see the typical tired, nervous and wired musher.

Actually, I have prepped for hundreds of races, mostly with cars, and know how to prepare both the equipment and me. Relaxed at the start line of a Pro Rally is never a good thing when you are seconds away from hurtling a

race car at speeds of 80-100 MPH down a forest road. You need to be wired, intense, and with gun-fighter reflexes. Split-second reactions are absolutely necessary. Dog racing is much different.

At the start of Iditarod, the better rested you are the better you can deal with the extreme fatigue you will experience on the trail. I will work at arriving at the start of future races just as rested, and maybe even a little disconnected.

Future Plans: It is May and too early to really know. I am leaning toward running several events in the lower 48, like Race the Sky in Montana. I want to run in the hills to train the dogs. I have also thought of the Yukon Quest, and the Serum Run. I will also consider an Iditarod but finances need to be in place before I make a commitment. So you can see several options are on the horizon. Maybe I will do all of them, just space them sanely.

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