

Q&A: Iditarod Rookie Questions

1. How many dogs do you have?

At the moment we have 37 adults in training, three retired dogs, eleven 4-5 month old puppies, and three 2-week-old puppies. I guess that is about 54 in total. We generally keep our kennel around 40-50 dogs.

2. What made you want to run the Iditarod?

This is a tough question for me to answer because there are so many reasons. I guess in many ways I feel that I was destined to run Iditarod. I grew up with dogs and although I never planned to run Iditarod, I recently found myself in a prime position to give it a shot. After a long break from dogs, I came to Alaska 3 years ago to see if mushing still gave me any thrills. Turns out it did, and my competitive nature really got me hooked on racing. I ultimately decided that I was going to do the big race right around Iditarod time last year. I had just completed a 300 mile qualifier race and found it to be more fun than I had expected - so much more - that when I got to the finish line I wanted to keep going. This made me wonder just what it would feel like to go 1000 miles by dog team! Within another month I had fully completed my 750 miles of qualifying races and was set to move forward with the new plan. Having a mission to spread the important message that Bristol Bay is a sacred place bearing one of nature's most perfect resources, salmon, has also inspired me to run this year. The Iditarod receives more publicity than any other sled dog race in the world, and I hope to capitalize on this in hopes of keeping Alaska wild. Probably the biggest reason that I want to/am excited to run Iditarod is because of our dogs. We have an amazing group of young dogs who love nothing more than to run on new trails and camp under the stars with their master. The bond that we already share overwhelms me and, no matter what happens, one thing is for sure, our bond will undoubtedly be stronger after those 2 weeks on the trail. Hopefully this race is going to be the just beginning for this team. I think that they could have what it takes to be world champions someday. Winning the Iditarod someday is our dream and this year's race is just a small part of that goal.

3. How many booties will you need?

I will need at least 1500 for just the Iditarod. If you include training and other races that we will need to run to practice for Iditarod, it will be somewhere around 3000-3500 booties. At \$1 each it can be quite an expense for mushers (especially ones like me who don't have someone to pay for them). So this year I am going to try to sew a few booties to save some money (I figure I can cut the costs in half if I sew). I have no clue how long it might take me to sew thousands of booties or how my craftsmanship will compare to the store bought ones, but I have lots of friends to help me test!

4. How will you start a fire on the trail?

Yes, lighters can freeze up on the trail. The trick is to keep them someplace warm, an inside pocket or in your mitten works well. And always have back ups and waterproof matches, and back ups of those. Equally important is having some good fire starter, newspaper works as well as Heet (our cooker fuel).

5. Favorite checkpoint?

I have no idea yet. I will have to get back to you after the race to let you know what my favorite checkpoint *was*. At this point I probably am going to like the place where I take my 24-hour layover because I will get to sleep lots. I will probably like White Mountain too because it is the last stop and if I make it to there, I will be confident that I can make it to Nome, a feeling that will be sure to surpass ecstasy!

6. When did you realize you wanted to be a musher?

Three years ago when I was living in Oklahoma. I realized that sitting in a big cement building staring at a screen was not the way I wanted to spend the rest of my life. I decided it was time to go to Alaska

and start living life in the outdoors. Turns out I was right, nothing in this world compares to the serenity I feel after a long night of mushing under the full moon and northern lights.

7. Have I improved over the years of training?

This will be my 4th season of mushing in Alaska and, yes, we have improved dramatically since starting out. I don't think anyone is spectacular at mushing when they first start out. There is just no possible way to be prepared for all the things that might happen on the trail until all of those things actually happen to you. My first year of mushing I got lost in every race. My second year I still got lost a time or two and finished near the back of the pack in most of the races and even earned the Red Lantern in one. This past season we really started to improve as a team. It became apparent when we clinched our first win in April at Freddie's Midnight Run. This season we hope to continue to improve and find out if that win was just an accident or not. We have high hopes for the team this season, not just for Iditarod but also for the Alaska Excursions 120 (Dec), Knik 200 (Jan), Tustumena 200 (Feb) and Denali Doubles (Feb), a few of the races I plan to compete in this year. Overall I think the biggest improvement has been in the quality of dogs that we have been raising over the past few years. The enthusiasm of these guys is unsurpassed, it will be interesting to see if other teams can compare in spirit and drive.

8. What will be the hardest part?

I am going to guess the not sleeping part. I tend to get a little crunchy without my ZZZZs, so this could be a challenge. Another thing I am worried about is trying to stay organized enough to not lose any of my important gear. Likely some weather conditions such as whiteout blizzards will bring some difficulties, this is where I will have to rely on the dogs to get through it.

9. Are you scared or excited?

Definitely both. Right now I am more excited than scared. I get scared when I look at the countdown ticker and realize my time is slipping away, and how in the world am I going to fundraise enough money (another \$14000) to get myself to the starting line? Tim says, "don't worry it will happen." I am worried.

10. What is life in AK like?

Not like anywhere else. It is filled with intense beauty everyday. Mountains, snowflakes, sunsets that last forever, rainbows, northern lights, glaciers.....and more! But it is not for everyone. You have to be a certain kind of person to handle it. Lots and lots of snow, cold, no electricity, no running water, outhouses, hard labor, chopping wood.....and more!

11. Have you seen moose on the trail?

Definitely, lots of times. I have never had anything too bad happen though (knock on wood!). In the winter they like to stay on the trails when the snow is really deep because it is easier to walk. They can leave really deep moose holes in the trail which can also hurt dogs badly and even break their legs if they step into one in the wrong way. The closest call I have had with a moose was in the fall time. I was training on a 4-wheeler and a moose came out of the woods from beside me, he ran into the team between the wheeler and the wheel dogs, I could have reached out and touched him! I kept my thumb steady on the throttle and he ran along with the dogs for a few strides before crossing the trail and continuing on. That was a rush!

12. What breed of dogs do you have?

Alaskan Huskies. It is a mix breed, bred for speed, endurance, coat, feet, toughness, leadership, and appetite. Google can probably tell you better than I can what exact breeds have made up the Alaskan Husky over the years, but I would say they are a unique breed that you can't really characterize based on how they look (like show dogs). If you look closely you will notice a very wide range of features (size, color, coat, etc.) among different sled dogs. Generally kennels that have been in the business for a few

generations have their own unique look and characteristics. Ours are known for good feet, good appetite, very friendly, and tough headed. Many of the dogs in our kennel are on the smaller side (40-45 lbs). We have lots of black and tans, several red, some white with black spots, others are grey and a few are white.

13. Do you think you will win in the next 5 years?

I sure hope so! That would certainly be the coolest thing I can think of happening to our team and me. I think we have just as good of a shot at it as anyone to win within 5 years. Reasons I think this: we are young. Most successful mushers will tell you having a solid group of dogs around the same age is a major key to success. Our team is young and many have grown up together, which is an important part of creating a cohesive, team-attitude at an early age. I am young, which (in theory) should give me an advantage in energy and stamina over the many 50 something mushers on the trail today. What they have over me, however, is experience. Several mushers have done the trail more than 20 times; it will take me many miles to reach that kind of experience. This is where I hope my partner, Tim, can pass a little of his 23 years of Iditarod experiences along to me. Another reason I think we have just as good of a chance as anyone to win is that the bloodlines in our dogs are incredibly similar to today's Iditarod champions. For example, both Lance Mackey and Mitch Seavey's dogs share the same ancestors. If we looked at all the top 10 teams of the past 10 years, I bet there would be lots of shared great-great-grandparents. That's just how breeding racing dogs work. Mushers know that breeding the best dogs makes the best next generation so the best dogs get breed a lot and those lines are shared across kennels over time. There are other reasons I think we might have a shot at the winner's circle, but time will tell if my theory is right.

14. What are the names of your best, fastest and favorite dogs?

I am going to answer this question better with a video later, but just off the bat I would start with the ones on the T-shirt. Yes, I picked them because they are the cutest, but they happen to be the best at leading the team too. We have Manilex, Blue Steel, Moto and Gabbana. Others that are on that list are Raven, Eagle, Billy, Aqua, Polly, Kevlar and Winston. There is so much to share with you guys about these amazing dogs I look forward to introducing them to you!

15. How will you drink water?

This is a good question, and will be tricky but essential. I will keep juice and small bottles in my coat and hopefully my body heat will keep them thawed. At each check point I will refill my insulated water bottle and hopefully it will stay thawed for a few hours. I will thaw my frozen drinks in my dog food cooker while I prepare a meal for the dogs. This is also how I will heat up any trail food I may have brought (pizza, lasagna, soup). It is always a challenge for the musher to get enough liquids and dehydration can really zap your energy, so it will be very important to drink up big time at the checkpoints too.

16. How much food will I need?

I will send out lots of trail snacks and prepared food to the check points. Not exactly sure how much, but I would guess around 4000 calories worth per day. I plan to make some health snacks like granola bars and trail mix to munch on going down the trail and then have some tasty, high fat and calorie meals like pizza and lasagna for the checkpoints. Sounds like a lot, but the dogs will need about 10,000 calories worth of food per dog per day!