

Dogged determination

Sledders, canines ready to tackle yearly trek through Alaska

By JEANNETTE J. LEE
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ANCHORAGE, Alaska
Mushers will struggle to slow their fired-up dog teams as they sprint through downtown Anchorage during the Iditarod's ceremonial start today.
The ceremonial start is only an 11-mile precursor, mostly to please Anchorage fans and tourists. Some 83 mushers and dog teams, about 1,340 dogs in all, will be trucked to Willow for Sunday's official start of the world's longest sled dog race.
At more than 1,100 miles, Iditarod mushers lead their teams over snowy tundra, mountain ranges, avalanche country and frozen seas and rivers en route to the coastal town of Nome in western Alaska.



Richmond, Utah, musher John Martin pets his dog Ruby during the Iditarod Trial Sled Dog Race vet check in Wasilla, Alaska, on Wednesday.

The restart was pushed 25 miles north to Willow from race headquarters in Wasilla for a third straight year because of scarce snow. In 2003, the restart was moved more than 300 miles north to Fairbanks because of too little snow.
Crews had to dynamite several trails in the Dalzell Gorge to lower the avalanche risk after a snowmobile volunteer breaking trail for the Iditarod was killed there in February by the sliding snow.
"We were successful in eliminating the majority of potential residual risks to wilderness travelers," said race director Stan Hooley.
The Iditarod, in its 34th year, passes 24 checkpoints in a string of towns, villages and wilderness cabins.
The tortuous endurance race commemorates a dogsled relay in 1925 that carried serum 674 miles from Nenana to Nome to

stop a diphtheria outbreak.
This year's top 30 finishers can expect to split a \$795,000 pot. Another \$40,000 will be divided up among the remaining arrivals to Nome. The winner will pocket \$69,000 and receive a new pickup valued at almost \$45,000. Last year's pot totaled about \$737,000.
Alaskan mushers, who make up most of the field, are aiming to hold off the Norwegians, who have pooled their dogs to win two of the last three races.
Last year's winner, Robert Sorlie of Norway, is not racing. But his nephew, Bjornar Andersen, is in position to bring home a championship. Andersen posted the highest rookie finish ever last year, cruising into Nome in fourth place.
Ed Iten of Kotzebue, Alaska, finished a close second in that race and has been quietly preparing all year for a first-place arrival under Nome's

burled arch. Iten has never won, but pulled in a mere half-hour behind Sorlie last year.
"They pulled it off twice, but barely the second time," Iten said, referring to Sorlie's wins in 2003 and 2005.
The Norwegians train their dogs to run slower but longer and with less rest than American mushers.
"Overall I think you're going to see in the teams a combination of both strategies," Iten said.
The field also includes two four-time winners and the Iditarod's only five-time champ, Doug Swingley of Lincoln, Mont., and Martin Buser of Big Lake will be looking to match the win record set by Rick Swenson of Two Rivers. Jeff King of Denali is looking for his fourth win.
Five sets of relatives are running the race. Mitch Seavey and his son Danny, 23, are the highest-profile family pair. Seavey

took the race in 2004 and finished third last year. Three of his sons, including Danny, have finished the Iditarod.
Rachael Scdoris, 21, could be the first legally blind musher to finish the Iditarod. Scdoris, of Bend, Ore., scratched last year in her first Iditarod outing after her team caught a virus. Race veteran Tim Osmar will guide her along the trail, giving up any chance for a win of his own.

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