

King wins fourth Iditarod sled dog race

BY JEANNETTE J. LEE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NOME, Alaska

Salem curled up beneath Nome's burlled spruce arch, a ring of yellow roses around his neck.

Then, in the bright lights of the Iditarod winner's circle, the star sled dog fell asleep.

"He is one of the most incredible dogs I've ever had the privilege of knowing," said musher Jeff King, whose headlamp was the first to pierce the darkness in the old gold-rush town early Wednesday, giving him his fourth Iditarod championship.

To hear King tell the story, Salem's naptime was well-earned.

Last week, while King was jockeying for first with four-time champ Doug Swingley, his team hit a snow drift.

The bump sent King tumbling and unhooked one of his dogs. While King ran after it, the rest of his team disappeared down the Iditarod Trail, somewhere between the Yukon River village of Kaltag and the town of Unalakleet on the Bering Sea coast, hundreds of miles from Nome.

King said he was ready to cry as he trudged onward, calling through the wind for Salem. Sled dogs are enthusiastic runners, known for abandoning fallen mushers in their eagerness to push ahead.

But King said Salem helped stop the runaway team, which he spotted a few minutes later in the blowing snow.

The musher arrived at the finish line of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog



Jeff King of Denali, Alaska, holds his lead dogs Salem, left, and Bronte at the finish line of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in Nome, Alaska, after winning his fourth Iditarod championship Wednesday.

Race under a full moon and in first place. Hundreds of bundled-up spectators sent puffs of breath into the chill air as they cheered King along Nome's main street.

King won his fourth Iditarod with what he called his best-ever sled dog team, completing the

annual 1,100-mile race from Anchorage to Nome in nine days, 11 hours and 11 minutes.

"They're young, but they're veterans, and they're real well matched," said King, who arrived at 1:11 a.m. in the finish chute. "It's a wonderful feeling to have

them come in this strong."

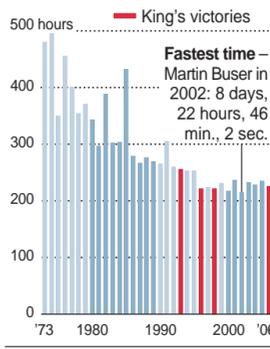
King, competing in his 17th Iditarod, pulled into Nome more than three hours ahead of runner-up Swingley, of Lincoln, Mont.

King, of Denali, joined Swingley, Martin Buser and Susan Butcher as four-time winners.

IDITAROD XXXIV
King makes it No. 4

Jeff King joins an elite group of mushers who have won the Iditarod at least four times. King finished with a winning time of 9 days, 11 hours, 11 minutes and 36 seconds.

MUSHER	YEARS	WINS
Rick Swenson	'77, '79, '81-82, '91	5
Martin Buser	'92, '94, '97, '02	4
Susan Butcher	'86-88, '90	4
Jeff King	'93, '96, '98, '06	4
Doug Swingley	'95, '99-01	4



At 50, King is the oldest musher to win the world's longest sled dog race. He previously won the race in 1993, '96 and '98.

"It seemed like I was due. It's really good to be here again," King said.

For winning the Iditarod, King received \$69,000 and a new truck. The top 30 finishers split a pot of \$795,000. Another \$40,000 will be divided between remaining arrivals to Nome.

King and Swingley traded the lead a few times during the third quarter of the Iditarod, but Swingley's team faded on Sunday as the two veteran mushers left the wind-whipped town of Unalakleet, the first race stop on the Bering Sea coast.

Swingley's bold push to catch King on the Yukon River likely sapped the energy of his team. King said he suspected Swingley's dogs might be slowing down as the teams came off the Yukon River at Kaltag, about 350 miles from Nome.

The Iditarod passes through 24 checkpoints in villages and wilderness cabins strung along the trail, which meanders over two steep mountain ranges; the wide, windy Yukon River; and a final stretch up the iced-in Bering Sea coast.

Deep, soft snow covered much of this year's trail, which has been bare ground in many spots in recent years.

Windblown snow on the Yukon nearly obscured the trail in some places, discouraging even the snowmobile drivers who break trail ahead of the dog teams.

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