

Aliy Zirkle 2016 Iditarod Sled Dog Race

INCOMING!!! The shout rings out. It is 5:30AM and twenty degrees below zero. The watcher on the river bluff spots a light in the darkness, miles away yet. He sends a companion to warn us. We probably have 10-15 minutes to prepare.

The Galena Iditarod Check Station springs into action. Coffee hot? Check. Sled ready with the musher's pre-mailed supplies? Check. Someone volunteer to take it down to the lot? Check. Straw for the dogs to bed down on? Check. Box with 12 bottles of Heet fuel? Check. Bucket of hot water? Check. (Maybe that is why they call it a check station!)

It seems the entire village is on hand to welcome Aliy Zirkle as the first musher of 2016 to reach Galena. Children swarm around the huge piles of snow shoved back from the parking lot. Elders drink coffee and chat inside the Community Tribal Hall turned Iditarod Central. And the rest of us wait, bundled for the cold, jiggling in anticipation.

Suddenly, surprising me even though I am anticipating it, searching for it, --a headlight appears. The winter quiet is broken by barking village dogs, cheering and clapping spectators lining the road, and cries of "Hike! Gee! Gee! Haw!" as the team fairly flies up the river bank. Dogs' eyes reflect a green spark as they swing along the road and into the flood-light lit parking lot. "Whoa!" They pull to a stop at the bale of straw where the official checker records the musher's name, the arrival time, the number of dogs (information which I will later enter on a large wall chart, and Radio Comms people send back and ahead to the other checkpoints). The dogs are still excited, biting the ice and scratching and rolling in the snow. "Aliy! Welcome to Galena! How is the trail? Will you be staying? Do you want to declare an 8 or 24?" (Required hours of rest time mandated by Iditarod rules, which may be taken within certain bounds at the musher's discretion.)

"Follow that person in the orange vest. He will lead you to a place to park your team down that small hill onto Alexander Lake. Your supplies are already there. There is a bucket of hot water and more available from a hose in the entryway. Is there anything else you need?"

As the dog team rushes down the hill, children tumble and follow along, we volunteers and onlookers closing in behind. Following the headlight of the guide, Aliy pulls her team parallel into her assigned spot and stomps in the snowhook to secure her sled. She stretches out the dogline, sinks another hook into the far end to keep the dogs from tangling or wrangling. Loosening the necklines, she gives each pair of dogs a large flake of straw which they immediately paw into a snug bed, curl up, and stick their noses under their tails. Rummaging through the sled bag, ripping open the supply bags, Aliy produces food and water dishes, snacks, and takes the time to pet and thank each dog, remove their booties (those who haven't removed their own!), appraise their condition, provide blankets, and prepare them for a much needed rest. Quickly she sets up an alcohol stove, fueled with the bottles of Heet, fetches another bucket of hot water from the building, and prepares a warm meal of kibble, meat and fish. The dogs greet this with excitement and eat eagerly, then look to see if there is any left in another bowl within stretching distance. Patience, there will be more!

Each of the dogs is checked out by veterinarians who volunteer for the race, some traveling from checkpoint to checkpoint just ahead of the teams. They massage sore muscles, wrap wrists and legs for warmth and support, take temperatures and body samples, apply ointment and administer medications. Each musher carries a book detailing the dogs health. Are the dogs eating good, hydrated, eyes bright, alert and eager? Fit to continue the race?

Only after the all-important dogs have been cared for, does Aliy return to the community hall, to take care of her own personal needs and greet us, her friends and admirers. Tired as she is from the long run from Ruby, and the three days before that from the official race start on Willow Lake north of Anchorage, she is always smiling and cordial and especially interactive with the children. Hot drinks and plentiful food await her...not only the food sent out by the Iditarod Trail Committee and cooked by

volunteers, but also crockpot after crockpot of village food. There are another 60 some mushers behind Aliy, who will be arriving over the next three or four days. Some will stay for a while, some will grab their supplies and run on through, all will be welcomed and well-fed.

Finally, Aliy can take advantage of the curtained off section of the hall and seek rest for herself. Sleep is not easy in the bright, noisy, people-filled hall but exhaustion soon claims her.

The sun rises, bathing the scene with golden light, catching the tops of the birch trees rimmed in frost. There is not much heat to the sun this early in the day; it might warm up to 10 below later in the afternoon. This is perfect weather for sled dog racing. The snow is squeaky, crisp and firm, the trail fast. The dogs can run without over heating. Should it get warmer, the snow get punchy and sticky, many mushers will choose to spend the daylight hours resting, letting the sleeping dogs enjoy the warmth, and wait until after sunset to join the race again. Since it is less than half-way through the race, and cool, Aliy elects to spend only 8 hours in Galena. She will take the longer break farther down the Yukon River, before leaving it for the coast and the long run to the finish line in Nome. After a few hours of rest, she is up and feeding her dogs, preparing them to run again. All are healthy and happy; none need to be dropped and returned to Anchorage. People are milling about the dog lot, petting the dogs that are friendly, taking pictures, talking with the mushers. Back inside, Aliy takes time for a leisurely breakfast with us, chatting with friends. But soon she is pulling on her winter gear and parka. Time to clean up and repack the sled. Replace a worn runner. Stow whatever might be needed; some extra straw, snacks for dog and human. The rest goes in a drop bag or a return bag, to be sorted by the volunteers later. Check and tighten lines. Booties on the dogs. Bred to be sled dogs, they catch her excitement and are clearly more than ready to go whenever she is.

One last check with the race officials, noting time of departure and number of dogs out, and she is ready. The dogs are jumping and barking and howling, pulling on their lines, trading places and tangling themselves. Patiently Aliy sorts them out, pulls the snow hook. "HIKE!" She guides the eager team through the lot (which now contains a number of other teams who have arrived while she was sleeping) and back onto the Iditarod Trail. As she clears the incline on the opposite side of the lot, we seize our rakes and shovels to clean up the used straw and whatever the dogs have left behind—ready for the next Iditarod musher into Galena.

Good-bye Aliy. Safe travels. See you in Nome.

(Aliy Zirkle finished Iditarod 2016 in 3rd place, in spite of being attacked by a drunken snowmobiler en route to Nulato.)