

## Checkpoint Routine

For the musher, finding a way to get as much rest as possible is one of the most important things you can do. Being very efficient at checkpoints means extra time off your feet, and I have my routine down to a science. Each time the team stops for a break, I kick in to high gear. The routine is pretty much the same no matter where we stop, with slight variations depending on the amenities of the checkpoint; hot water ready to go, or microwaves inside the community center can make the routine a little bit easier.

Once I pull in to a checkpoint and sign in, I make careful note of the time. The checkers guide us to a parking spot and tell us where we can find essentials like drop bags, straw, and water if it is available. Immediately upon reaching the designated parking spot, I pull out my vet book and set it on top of the sled where the veterinarians will be able to spot it right off. I grab my leader hook and a bag of snacks, and head to the front of the team. I hook out my leaders to keep the team lined out and headed where they belong. On my way back, I toss each dog a chunk of meat from the snack bag.

Getting hot water to feed the dogs is the chore that takes the longest, so I don't do anything else until I get the cooker going and get that water started. About half the checkpoints have cold water, often from a hole in the river ice. About half have the luxury of hot water, usually from a large barrel heated over a wood fire and kept going round the clock by volunteers in the village. A few checkpoints, and all of the spots we camp between checkpoints, have no water - here we must melt snow. This takes considerably more time and fuel.

Once the cooker is firing well and the cook pot is filled with water or snow, I kick off my big boots and slide into camp booties. It makes walking around to do chores much easier, and those little slippers are toasty and warm even at 30 below or more. I go grab my drop bags, drag them back to the sled, and cut them all open at once. I fish out a trash bag and head up the line, removing booties and checking in with the dogs. All the used booties get tossed in the bag to be sent home later.

Next comes straw. The Iditarod provides luscious golden straw at each checkpoint. If we are camping between checkpoints I can take some with me, lashed to the top of my sled. To save work, I haul the bale to the middle of the team before I cut the strings off - that will make it easier to distribute a nice thick flake to each pair of dogs.

There is a reason I do everything in the order that I do; cooker first so the water can be heating while I do other chores; booties before straw so I don't have to disturb the dogs and haul them up out of the straw to take their booties off. Each trip up the line of dogs is paired with a chore I can do on my return trip - I try not to waste any time just walking.

While the dogs are busy celebrating the arrival of straw and rearranging it to suit their tastes, I check on the cooker, then grab a heavy plastic compactor bag and line my feed bucket with it. Then I pour meat, fat, and kibble into the bucket, just waiting for nice hot water to make a tasty soup. During this time the vets are usually checking over the entire team, so I will take a few minutes to confer with them and sign off on the vet book.

As I wait for the water to get good and hot, I dump out my drop bags and get organized. One empty drop bag becomes a trash sack, which I usually clip to my handlebars to keep it from blowing away. I generate an amazing amount of trash both at the checkpoints and while traveling down the trail. While we are running, I stuff all my food wrappers, dog snack bags, and other garbage into the cooler bag I sit on, which makes it quick to retrieve and dispose of when we camp.

I have one 'Return' bag that I fill with items I want sent back home - my trash sack full of used (but probably still useable) booties, wet gloves and socks, spare hand warmers, and any other gear that I don't need any more.

The dog snacks and booties I will need for the next run get piled out of the way in the 'foot well' of my sled (between the handlebar and the rear seat area). I put a dry pair of gloves and a fresh set of trail snacks for me in the 'glove compartment', a small bag that hangs off the crosspiece just under the handlebar. At some point I find my personal food, and dump a couple of packages into the cooker to thaw. Hopefully at least one of the selections I sent is appetizing (click for more on [Food for the Musher](#)).

I repack and reorganize my sled, and by then the water should be hot and ready to go in the bucket. While that soaks and the meat thaws out, I head down the line to distribute food bowls. If any dogs need a wrist wrap, massage, medication, or other care, I get it on my way back down the line.

I grab my ladle and full bucket and give each dog a nice bowl of dinner. Some dogs will eat everything I put in front of them immediately, some dogs will wait until later - they almost seem to prefer it frozen. They get as much food as they want (except for a few crazy eaters like Fly, Razor, or Flip, who would eat until they exploded).

With the dogs comfortable and fed, chores are almost done unless I have to repair my sled, change runner plastic, or sign a dog over to the veterinarians to go home. I grab a few items to take inside; my personal meals (now thawed out), my headlamp and fresh batteries, my lemonade powder and drink cooler, my toothbrush, a few more personal meals to thaw out for later, my big boots (which need drying out).

If I am very efficient, all of my arrival chores are accomplished in about an hour - less if there is hot water available, more if I have extra chores or need to melt snow.

After I get up to the checkpoint building I get my outer layers and big boots hung up to dry, change my headlamp batteries, then try to eat the thawed out meals I have stuffed inside my bibs to keep warm. Some checkpoints will have food on hand to feed the mushers, which is always wonderful. But I never count on it. Some checkpoints will have running water or even a bathroom to clean up in. But I never count on that either. Cleanliness is not much of a priority on the trail, although the occasional tooth brushing feels absolutely incredible!

Now I have to do some math, which is always hard when you are short on sleep. I will need to decide when I want to leave, usually based on how long it took us on the last run. If our rest is going to be less than 6 hours (almost always), I will need to get up an hour and a half before departure. That will give me 30 minutes or so to get functional, try to eat a little something, put the liners back into my boots, get dressed, fill my drink cooler with hot water, collect all my gear, and get outside. Then I have an hour to do a few last minute chores and get the dogs ready to go. So on a four hour break I will spend 1 hour getting the dogs taken care of, and 1 1/2 hours getting back on the trail. This leaves me about 1 1/2 hours to eat, go to the bathroom, and grab a nap before I need to be up and moving again. We do this over and over and over and over again, around the clock for ten to twelve days.

If we are stopping for six hours or more, the dogs will need a second meal. I don't really get any more rest on a six hour break, because I need to get up 2 1/2 hours early to feed the dogs. I will usually make their second meal ahead of time and let it soak while I rest. This means another 20 minutes or so up front while I make yet another bucket of hot water. Making food ahead of time only works if there is somewhere inside where the bucket won't freeze. Otherwise I will have to get up even earlier to make the food. On these longer breaks, the goal is to get the dogs fed two hours before we are scheduled to leave.

Once I have figured out my schedule, I usually have to state my departure time and my wake up time out loud several times to try to make sure I remember it. Often as not, my brain slips a cog and I have to refigure it anyway. It helps if I can ask someone nearby to remind me what I just said. Clock math is hard, especially around noon or midnight. Sometimes it works best to take my gloves off and use my fingers to count.

As odd as it sounds, given the extreme lack of sleep we are working under, it can be really hard to fall asleep after all that rushing around. Other times, I can sleep in the middle of a crowded barroom floor with people stepping over me, bright lights flashing, and loud music playing. You never know. Even if I can't sleep, I try to make myself lay down and rest as much as possible until it is time to get going again.

Even though I set my alarm every time I lay down, I have some sort of weird internal clock that wakes me up 5 minutes before my alarm almost every time. I can think of about three instances on races where I didn't. Don't know how that works.

A two hour rest will leave me feeling refreshed and ready to go. Still tired, but generally alert and functional. If I sleep more than two hours, it is going to hurt when I wake up. I will be fuzzy, groggy, and barely mobile. All my sore muscles and my brain will stiffen up. Don't know how that works either.

Once I get my hour or two of sleep, I give myself half an hour to put my boots back together, get completely dressed, grab one of my meals (that hopefully thawed while I slept, or maybe there is a pot of water or microwave inside the checkpoint), and get outside. I normally wake up and get functional almost instantly, but the middle of Iditarod can hardly be called normal.

To give the dogs as much rest as possible, I take care of everything else before I disturb them. I pack up my sled and close the flaps. I seal up my return bag, trash bag, and any spare food I didn't use, and deposit them in the designated piles. I make sure I have my parka, dry gloves, and everything else laid out and ready.

Once I am completely ready to go, then I begin to rearrange the team. I like to switch leaders frequently to keep them fresh and happy up front. I also like to switch wheel dogs for every run. Especially on the rougher sections of trail, these dogs work the hardest to keep the sled pointing in the correct direction. I also may need to switch out partners that aren't working well together, or bring a dog farther back in the team for closer observation.

Getting the dogs up and moving them around signals the team that we are getting ready to go. I grab the bags of booties, and go down the line tossing the correct sized footwear next to each dog. On my way back down the line, I get each dog up and put their booties on. Bootying takes about 20 minutes, regardless of how many dogs in the team. Early in the race I have more dogs to take care of, but I am also moving much more efficiently. Later in the race there are fewer dogs, but it takes me longer to get things done as I become more and more exhausted.

The last step is to pull my leader hook out and stow it in the sled. By this point the dogs are usually up and jumping around and making a racket. Often a checker will come help guide the team out of the dog lot and back to the trail. Especially early in the race, they will also help by standing on the brake to make sure the team doesn't bolt while I am finishing up. As soon as I step on the runners, we head back on to the trail for the next leg of the race.

Taking care of a team during a race is lots of work! Most of it very physical - hauling full buckets of water or food, lugging around heavy drop bags, carrying bales of straw. A lot of times I get more rest, if not sleep, while running down the trail. For every leg of the race, when I talk about chores, or getting the dogs settled for rest, or ready to go, now you will know exactly what I am talking about.