

# *My First Ride*

*Feb. 2003*

I went to the Iditarod to spend time with my mother. I didn't know anything about the race. I didn't know anything about mushing dogs. I didn't know what I was getting into. I was just indulging my mother.

Don't get me wrong. I am a dog person. I understand dogs. My two lab mixes are my best friends. We've done obedience. We've done agility. We've done search and rescue training. They go everywhere, and do everything with me. It's just that I didn't know about dog sledding and how it can take over your world.

My mom had been volunteering at the Iditarod for several years, and she was hooked. But it didn't really make an impression on me. I just wasn't that interested. I told her in an offhand way that some year I would go up with her, just to see what it was all about.

"Great!" she said. "You better get your ticket soon, because the prices go up if you wait too long."

"Oh, you mean this year?" I asked.

So I signed up to volunteer, got my tickets to Anchorage, and packed my bags. I expected to answer phones, update reports, and maybe do a little spectating. A nice time with mom, maybe a little boring. Now my mom is not the boring type. Whenever she comes to visit, she just about wears me out - we go hiking, rafting, rock climbing, horseback riding, and shopping all in a two-day period. She can hike me into the ground, and doesn't seem to be afraid of anything. But how exciting is volunteer work, after all? So I expected this trip to be a little dull.

Instead, I found myself hip deep in dogs and having a ball.

My first day volunteering was at the start of the race in downtown Anchorage. It was a zoo. More than a thousand over-stimulated shrieking dogs all lunged and writhed, in an ecstasy to be off. The thousands of spectators were fenced off from the action. But with my special volunteer arm-band, I was in the middle of it all.

My job for the day was to help handle dogs. Sixteen fired up, ultra-fit dogs who are ready to run a 1,200 mile race just don't have any brakes. The handler's job is to grab a dog, hang on, and get dragged to the start line while trying to keep your feet in eight inches of un-solidified, sugary snow trucked in just for the race. All of this is in an effort to keep the teams from bolting out of control through the start and down the streets of Anchorage.

I met lots of mushers, and got dragged around by plenty of dogs. And all of this was just for show. You can't drive a team of dogs out of the Anchorage area anymore. So after twenty miles or so, they stop, load up the dogs and start all over again the next day, out a bit farther where it's a straight shot out into the undeveloped interior.

On Sunday, the real start, I helped handle dogs for a guy named Ray Redington. Later, his family invited us to a barbeque at their place in Knik to watch teams go by. I didn't know who the Redingtons were, but they seemed like nice people and I had a great time.

Raymie Redington and his son, Ryan, hitched up two small teams and took me and my mom out on the sleds. On the way back Ryan even let me stand on the runners for a little while. Someone later told me that getting to mush with the Redingtons was like getting to fly with the Wright Brothers, but at the time I was just going along for the ride. What did I know?

Later that week I did answer phones, update reports, and post results. But now that I knew some of the teams out on the trail, I eagerly awaited each new report. And our host family fed us moose stew, salmon, and other Alaskan treats. Why did I think I was going to be bored?

The next weekend my mom had arranged for us to mush with Mel, a friend of a friend. Now, my mom thinks I can do anything. And it's true, I am pretty tough and physical. I ski, ride horses, rock climb. And I do it all as hard as I can. I had already gotten a chance to drive Ryan's dogs (briefly), and it seemed pretty tame to an adrenaline-junky like me. So when my Mom proudly told Mel that I could handle my own team, and had even mushed with the Redingtons, I just said, "Yeah, I don't think it should be too difficult." I mean, you just hang on and get pulled through the woods, right?

Mel led the way, driving her team with Mom riding in the sled. She planned to let Mom on the runners after the dogs had burned off a little energy. I was supposed to give them a five minute head-start, and then go with my own team of 5 super-fit dogs, hot off the Yukon 250 race.

The dogs were shrieking to go, and this was not the relaxing trip through the woods I had imagined. We screamed onto a narrow trail, twisting through the trees. I had my hands full, figuring out how to balance and steer, locating the brake, and remembering to look where I was going. It was miles down the trail before I realized that trailing black flap was a drag, meant to be stepped on to slow the sled down.

After my first shock, I was feeling pretty good - I already had the hang of things, and it was a lot more exciting than I had thought it would be. The dogs were going full out, and we were really flying along. Somehow I don't think I'm having fun unless I'm scared to death. This was a pretty intense ride, so I was loving it.

I did great for the first couple of miles, and even began to relax and look around. Then my dogs must have decided it was time for some fun. The wheel dogs gave me a goofy leer, and neatly cut the next corner. The sled dragged up and over a large berm, flipping it neatly onto its side

The only instruction Mel had for me at the beginning was, "Whatever happens, DON'T let go!" No problem. I'm strong, and the snow was slick. I knew I could hang on long enough for the dogs to stop.

Except they didn't stop. In fact, they seemed to speed up. "Whoa!" I shouted. "Whoa!" They went faster. I began to realize that they weren't going to stop without some outside influence. I grabbed for the snow hook, which is like a large claw that is supposed to bite into the snow and anchor the sled. I fumbled it, and watched it shoot behind me on its eight foot leash. Still hanging on with one arm, I began to reel the hook in. Pulling a rope up hand over hand, while using only one hand, and while dragging on your face over snow at a high rate of speed is somewhat tricky. Finally, I got a hold of the hook, and began jamming it into the snow. But it wouldn't grab. I banged it, I jammed it, I pressed on it. It just sent up twin rooster tails of ice chips where the teeth furrowed through the snow. I needed more pressure on it, but how could I accomplish that with only one hand? In desperation, I began to bounce my body on top of the hook, praying that it

wouldn't flip over and eviscerate me. And finally, after only 100 yards on my face, the hook grabbed, and the team jerked to a stop.

Carefully I stood up, took a deep breath, and heaved the sled back on its runners. Yippee! The dogs lunged forward, crashing into the traces. Screaming, they slammed again and the hook popped. As the sled tore out of my grasp, I made a reckless dive and managed to cling to the trailing snow hook as it kite-tailed along behind the sled. After several moments of fishtailing through the snow, I clawed hand over hand up the rope, back to the sled. I had the belly-flop method of setting the hook down by this time, and managed to bring the whole contraption to a halt after only 50 yards. This time I stomped that hook good with my foot as soon as I stood up.

I knew Mel had to be far ahead by now, and was probably wondering where the heck we were. So I didn't take too much time. I shook my head, wiped the ice chunks out of my ear, and stood back on the runners. Trying to calm my breathing, I reached down and pulled the hook loose. We were off like a shot, careening around the next corner, the dogs accelerating as we went down hill.

And there was Mel, stopped in the trail waiting for us. Mom was leaning out of the sled, shooting pictures of me flying down the trail, right towards them.

I stomped on the brake. It didn't budge. I looked down and stomped again. That stupid black flap was hanging in the way, and the brake couldn't go down. I was going to have to use that damn hook again, and the only way I knew how was to jump on it with my stomach. I grabbed for the hook and prepared to launch. But I had spent too much time figuring out my options, and I ran out of trail before I could even begin.

Still running full tilt, my leaders split around Mel and her sled, and were jerked up short by the neck-line. Dogs continued to pile up, and then my sled slammed into the back of Mel's. We impacted with a horrific crack.

I was terrified that I might have crushed an entire team of valuable racing dogs or destroyed the expensive sleds. Mel was flattened between the two sleds, and I was sure I must have broken her legs. Mom had been whipped back into the sled, so I was pretty sure she was ok.

I pried my hands from the grip I had on my sled, and began to assess the damage. The sleds appeared to be intact. Somehow, the agile little hooligans had all leaped to either side and not a single dog had so much as a scratch. Mel had a little cut on her thumb, but she was up and moving around. I was working on an adrenaline overdose, but after shaking out all my limbs I knew I had escaped injury, too.

"What's all that blood on your face?" Mom asked, busily snapping photos. "Musta bumped my lip on the handlebars," I mumbled, spitting out some small white chips. I ran my tongue out, and felt a ragged gash in my upper lip.

We got the dogs sorted out and everything reorganized. With blood dripping off my chin, I watched Mom and Mel glide off into the forest. I waited a good five minutes, following Mel's advice to keep a little distance between the sleds from now on. They rounded a bend, out of sight.

And off we went to finish the run, the dogs cheerily panting, the runners whishing along, and nothing but trees, snow and sky for miles around. I had found a new passion, but had no idea how far it would take me.