

Kusko 300 links river communities

by Patti Harper
for the Tundra Times

This year's Kuskokwim 300-mile sled dog race had an impressive field of professional mushers such as Sonny Lindner, Susan Butcher, and Herbie Nayokpuk among others. As the

prestige of the race from Bethel to Aniak and back grows, the number of professionals may also grow.

But, the Kuskokwim 300 isn't likely to become just a race of the top-runners for some time to come. It remains a winter event which links and bonds the people of communities along

its route, and they contribute not only critical support, but also the eager contestants who help to keep this a community race.

This year, one-quarter of the 36 contestants came from a cluster of three Kuskokwim River villages: Akiachak, Akiak, and Tuluksak. This village contingent included two former Rookies of the Year and the youngest musher in the race. Five mushers signed up from Akiak alone, more than from any other single community, including the pivot points of Bethel and Aniak.

A small crowd of people breath electric excitement, hunch their shoulders, stamp their sorrels and hide their hands from a cold which bites off noses as they wait for the first dog-team to make it into the second checkpoint of the Kuskokwim 300 sled dog race, the village of Akiak. Small children snuggle in warm laps.

As villagers wait, stories are swapped and pronouncements given. Elder Tim Williams Sr. reflects on running dog teams over the distant low-lying Kilbuck Mountains for trapping near Nushagak. He says those dogs were strong and fast. "Take this race, every one of them, the old dogs would," he says.

A snowmachine lookout reports a team a few miles out. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," comes the answer.

Eyes strain and squint in the bright sun, trying to see past the poplars and beyond that small bend in the trail where a musher will push up the bank of the river and into Akiak.

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Everybody helped out at the Tuluksak checkpoint.

photo by Patti Harper

Kusko 300

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Suddenly the teams, still close together about 20 miles into the race, flood the narrow trail. A sea of well-wishers closes in and then quickly parts again as each musher comes through.

The educated guesses begin about what will happen in the miles beyond. Newcomer Sonny Lindner and the popular "Shishmaref Cannonball," Herbie Nayokpuk have already set a fast pace. Lindner started far back in the pack of 36 mushers, but in a short three hours he has passed 24 of them to be the fourth into Akiak.

As the front-runners come and go, the hearts and minds of the on-lookers search the trail or the checkers record sheet for the progress of friends and relatives. Many wait for 31-year-old Mike Williams, who captured the Rookie of the Year award when he first competed in the Kusko several years ago.

Martin Ivan watches for his brother Robert, who at age 52 is one of the oldest mushers in the race. Martin isn't overly concerned with seeing one of the local contestants win. "I just hope they all make it," he says quietly. "It's easy to watch, but it's rough out

next few days.

As a gold-red sun set, the first mushers were already in and out of the Tuluksak checkpoint, 50 miles into the race, headed on the long open stretch to Kalskag. Joe Demantle Sr., who was given a Volunteer of the Year award for his many years of keeping things together in Tuluksak for the mushers, knew it would be a fast race. The front-runners were usually in an hour or two later.

As mushers checked in and then led their teams to resting spots, young boys jump on the runners and the brake to help keep the excited dogs, still fresh in the race, from running on.

As the stars and the cooking fires began to shine, the lines and circles of dog shadows could be seen, quietly preparing for the long haul before them.

Mushers gathered water for the pullers from a hole in the river ice, and cooked up fish for the dogs. A few passed through a porch, with drying caribou, bear and seal hides, to feed and warm themselves in Lucy and Joe Demantle's home. Over the years, the Demantles have provided great spreads of fish and meats, sandwiches, akutaq (Eskimo ice cream), and coffee — always lots of coffee — to keep the mushers going.

Daughter Sharon brings in a huge bowl of salmonberry akutaq and runs out to get more chicken. When they're not re-stocking the supplies, the Demantles are checking mushers in or

Now, with a new house it's a little easier. Sometimes they can even catch a short nap between mushers during the longer nights.

On the first evening of the race this year, Joe is so busy, he doesn't notice when his son's team (Joe Jr.) straggles into his dog-yard and lies down quietly; the dogs who were left behind bark and strain at the chains which tie them to their houses. The team dogs are sick, and Joe Junior is forced to

built, with everyone wondering who was behind him and what the lead was.

After a short time, Joe Demantle Senior, an expert at these things, calmly sipped his coffee, looked at his watch and predicted "he'll be here in five minutes," and everyone headed back again into the cold to wait in the early morning hours for that first headlamp.

Once it arrived, eyes searched for a second. But Susan Butcher was more



Checker Katherine Williams reviews who's come through the Akiak checkpoint. photo by Patti Harper

scratch; he will leave the race at the next checkpoint, Kalskag. It's a great disappointment for last year's Rookie of the Year.

Another local team, trapper Eddie Peter's dogs get a good rest. And Eddie gets a lot of advice from his gathering of friends, some of whom helped him train. Tom says they are rooting for Eddie to get Rookie of the Year. "If the dogs do it."

By 10 p.m. all the mushers are out on the trail to travel 200 miles to Kalskag, Aniak, Whitefish Lake, and back to Kalskag, before reaching Tuluksak again on the return rush for the finish line 50 miles downriver in Bethel.

In communities along the river come hours and hours of waiting; pauses in conversation to turn up the radio and catch the hourly progress reports.

KYUK in Bethel stayed on the air 24 hours a day during the race. For those behind, the waiting was sometimes anxious. Moses Fredericks' wife Mary waited in Akiachak. Moses is a well known sprint racer, but this is his first long distance run.

"The first night, I stayed up all night, only three hours sleep...I couldn't sit still," she said. The hardest part was when Moses' name wasn't on the list of mushers who had checked in at the next community. "That's when I got worried," she said.

Finally, more than a day later, Bethel musher and lawyer Myron Angstman was spotted three miles out from Tuluksak, and the excitement

than a half-hour behind him, and Angstman exuded the cautious excitement of a victory close at hand.

Angstman would go on to win this year's Kuskokwim 300 in record time, shaving a full hour-and-a-half off the previous dramatic record set by Rick Swenson. Angstman's time for the 300-mile run: 44 hours, 24 minutes and 32 seconds — less than two days. Susan Butcher nearly tied the previous record, but that only gave her second place. Her sights are set on the Iditarod. Sonny Lindner came in third followed by strong mushers Harry Sutherland, Herbie Nayokpuk, Blunka Wassillie, Raymie Redington and Charlie Fitka.

For some, the K-300 buckle given for finishing the race is prize enough — first time around anyway. That's the way Moses Fredericks felt. "I was coming from Kalskag to Tuluksak, I was planning to scratch in Tuluksak; but Mike (Williams, of Akiak) was there. I told him I was going to give up and he encouraged me to finish this race, and I was proud," he said.

Rookie Eddie Peter had the best showing of the 6 local village mushers who completed the race coming in a solid 18th and winning \$700. But being in the middle or even the back of the pack doesn't daunt the village mushers. They are setting the stage for the future, a future, they hope, of winning. "The Williams Kennel is going to keep on coming until we get number one!" Williams announced to enthusiastic clapping at the annual awards banquet.



A big crowd waited at Akiak to cheer mushers on. photo by Patti Harper

there."

Last year was particularly rough, with several mushers missing the trail at one point, plunging into open water on the Kuskokwim River in the dark of night.

But this year would be different, with a well-marked trail, and perfect weather, clear and cold with little wind, and a bright moon. There would be no tragedies, but there would be disappointments and victories over the

helping them find water or the food for their dogs. And they always have a warm smile for their guests. The Demantle house has become something of an institution in Kusko 300 annals.

Relaxing in a kitchen chair of his new house, Joe reflects, "It was harder in the old days." Lucy remembers a time when 56 people seeking warmth and trail gossip were packed into their small living quarters.



Diana Guy and friends rush to the first checkpoint at Kwethluk to cheer the mushers on. photo by Patti Harper