

Ruby: Just 505 miles to go to Nome

by Susan Braine
for the Tundra Times

CHECKPOINT RUBY — Village kids at the checkpoint in Ruby say Emmitt Peters, "The Yukon Fox," will win the Iditarod.

Earlier, at the Ruby Roadhouse, Libby Riddles speculated about who had the best team and most determination to win. Perhaps being a little wiser at such things, she would not commit to any one team. Of course, Ruby is Peters' home, so why wouldn't the kids from here show their loyalty?

The northern route on the Iditarod Trail first hits the Yukon at Ruby, a beautiful little village built on a hillside overlooking the longest river in Alaska.

A sign outside the teen center serving as the checkpoint says, "505 miles to Nome." Another sign shows an arrow pointing southeast and says, "Anchorage 652 miles that way."

The checkpoint was scheduled to be located at the community hall, but was moved to accommodate the funeral of Andy Williams, who died in a house fire earlier in the week.

The tragedy was deeply felt by outsiders coming into this small community of nearly 175 people, but villagers seemed to take it in stride, making all the visitors feel welcome.

Martha Wright delivered some delicious homemade cinnamon rolls to the checkpoint on her snow machine and continued on up the hill to the community hall to take some of her goodies to the people in mourning. Further Indian hospitality was evidenced by a huge pot of moose stew brought in to the checkpoint by Hope Clay.

Many people from this nearly carless village were stopping by visitors walking offering rides on their snow machines, the most popular mode of transportation besides dog sled in this remote Athabaskan village.

In the evening, the village was preparing for the first musher to arrive. A seven-course meal, with the after-dinner mint a cool \$2,500 in cash sponsored by the Clarion Hotel, awaited that musher. At 2:35 a.m., Susan Butcher pulled in under a beautiful display of Northern Lights, with the temperature around 25 below zero.



Photo by Susan Braine

The village of Elim can be viewed in the background as musher Joe Runyan pulls into the Elim checkpoint.

While she was taking care of her dogs, village people and the ever-present media were being entertained, despite the hour, by Spenard's own Mr. White Keys. Or maybe it should be the other way around.

A group of village girls and boys were challenging Mr. Keys with their own style of songs. "Ghost Busters" became "Dog Musers" and so on, until Butcher entered to partake in Thai Shrimp saute, Veal Lafite and other decadent delicacies, while everyone stood around watching her eat.

After she left, one of the young boys told another, "I wonder why she didn't eat this (white chocolate) cheese cake. Boy, it's sure good!"

Joe Garnie was the first musher to make it into Ruby shortly after noon the next day. He recapitulates his participation in the race so far: "I've been having a rough go, getting started. I didn't have any dog food in Big Lake

or any supplies, so I couldn't leave. Everybody left and I was the last one there."

"I made that time up there in Rohn, and I get there and ain't got no dog food, no straw, no nuthin' there. No change of gloves, no clothes for myself, no food, and I dropped back down to about 35th place again and had to watch everybody leave again."

"I came over a 150 miles with no dog food or nuthin' for myself either. We got a little ragged running across the Burn (Farewell). We just been recuperatin'. I don't know exactly what the deal is, but I just don't like it anyway (not getting needed supplies in time)."

"I mean, there's 70 mushers, and they claim the weather came in, but just from past records they can look and see who the top 20 teams are and make sure them 20 teams' food is gonna be there. You know, there's gonna be guys a week later on in."

"I'm gonna be a week ahead of some of them guys. My food should have preference over theirs, so I don't think there's any excuse. Another thing, when I didn't have my dog food, I didn't have dog boots for my dogs either. Now I'm having problems with cracks in their feet."

Garnie elaborated on why few Native mushers run the Iditarod:

"A lot of it is politics of the race, and just seeking sponsorship period. I mean there are so many mushers and drivers in the business anymore. What businesses there are in-state are pretty sewed up, and the foreign and

abroad. . . We just don't have the contacts, you know. I've written a few (of the regular Iditarod sponsors), but I've never got any response or anything, so haven't pursued it anymore. I just kinda have a bunch of local sponsors, my friends and locals from both Anchorage and Nome."

The only other Native musher to make it to Ruby closer to the front-runners is Sonny Russell from Kotzebue. Russell said his team developed some diarrhea problems early on, and he's had a difficult time catching up.

Chuck Schaeffer, also from Kotzebue, scratched in McGrath reportedly due to his own health problems and not his dogs.

Edna Peters, Emmitt's wife, had some very definite opinions about race sponsorship for Native mushers.

"Our Native corporations need to give Native mushers more support. . . all of them equally. . . not just one or two select ones," she said.

Ken Chase, a veteran musher from Anvik who hasn't run the Iditarod since 1988 added that dog mushing is a cultural tradition for Alaska Natives and agreed that the Native corporations could do more to help preserve the Native culture in this area.

"When we contact anyone for possible sponsorship, some of them want to know if our Native corporation is helping us," Edna Peters said.

Whether it's a valid question for a potential sponsor to ask doesn't really matter. The fact remains that this cultural tradition needs to survive.



Photo by Susan Braine

A nearly full moon shines on a musher near Cripple.