

'Iditarod burn out' is consequence of race craze

by Steve Kakaruk

Tundra Times

The historic Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race may be forced to detour around certain host communities in years to come. After last year's race, Anchorage daily newspapers reported the finding of the Iditarod Trail Committee that "some villages traditionally serving as checkpoints along the trail are tired of the race and should be bypassed next year."

In the early days of the Iditarod, when the coastal route was proposed,

many of the neighboring communities wrote to the Committee in support of the idea: As a result of the lobbying, the communities got their trail and the race.

The race is a grueling 1049 miles and the racers almost always have a place to stay once they reach the coast.

The people of Unalakleet support the race, though some of its residents have been reported as suffering from "Iditarod burn-out." There is always a big crowd when the first mushers arrive in Unalakleet. The excitement

generated in the community by the race keeps the crowd together until the last one pulls out.

Joe Redington Sr., often called the "father of the Iditarod" talked with the *Tundra Times* about Unalakleet.

"It's almost my second home. I've spent a lot of time there, and I know the people. They have always been very much Iditarod. I feel that there might be one or two that feel we step on their toes but not the whole community."

Redington remembers when the first

races tied many of the villages together. "In the early days in 1973 and 1974, in Unalakleet there was some different people who didn't even speak to one another that was down on the bank talking about the Iditarod." What brought them together, says Redington, is the race.

The Iditarod is a blessing to many along its path. The long winter's night is broken by its brilliance. Mushers, who have been camping out for several nights, welcome the hospitality of the people of Unalakleet. There are some mushers, however, that mentally tire along the trail and become short tempered.

Redington admits that there may be times when the hospitality of a village is unappreciated.

"They say things, have taken it in and may (be) feeling grouchy. These mushers say it and you can't blame the village for feeling that certain individuals have been insulted or offend-

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ed by a musher. But I feel that they (villagers) get over it because they realize the majority of the mushers are not that way."

Redington feels that many of the problems may be worked out during the meetings that mushers attend before the race. It's during those meetings that sportsmanship, and rules for competing in the Iditarod, are discussed.

Redington is actively involved with the rookie race and a permanent board member of the Iditarod. He also attends many of the other committee meetings. "I'll make it a point this year to make it very clear that the



Susan Butcher received a welcome into Unalakleet. An "Iditarod Watch" announces the arrival of mushers into coastal communities. Some residents and mushers are feeling the burn-out problems associated with the Iditarod race that has gone through coastal communities for 15 years.

Tundra Times photo

mushers are going through these villages... they (mushers) sometimes expect too much from the checkers and volunteers."

For 15 years the Iditarod has grown and seen both national and international recognition as the last great race on earth. Redington sees more growth in the future and believes the race can keep pace with the changing times. The historic trail began when the need for serum was needed along the coastal communities during a breakout of diphtheria.

"We have got a great thing here and it's going to get bigger and better. We'll get more mushers, I'm sure, and they're going to have to behave in a civil manner. It's tough when you're out there and haven't had any sleep and you're tired, and having dog trouble, and different things. But the way to make the Iditarod is to be happy about it. Even if you're having problems, try to take care of it and be in a good mood. If you're not, you've got trouble..."

Re-routing the Iditarod trail outside of the communities of Unalakleet and

Shaktoolik would hurt the race, says Redington. "I hope that it never happens! We appreciate what they do for the race and we need it. And I hope that we don't go around and I think it never will. That's not the spirit of the Iditarod! We want to be a happy bunch and be glad to come into the villages..."

Redington says it may be necessary

Will next years race be any different? Redington thinks so. "I don't want to see these things happen. I think that it's a couple of misunderstandings with certain individuals. I had dinner with the Mayor in Shaktoolik just before I left for Nome and he seemed happy with everything."

Shaktoolik is the checkpoint before the mushers go out onto the unforgiv-

day the Iditarod is bigger, more mushers race, and the Iditarod committee has almost forgotten who the supporters are in the villages, according to Asicksik.

"People don't realize how big the race is. At one time I counted as many as 10 super-cubs waiting outside of the village. They (each support group) would wait and drink two-pots of coffee, and leave. The support crews would want everything and not give back anything and act like kings — it gets to be too much!"

The mayor guessed that as many as five other newspapers have called him and he has heard that the Iditarod committee would come out to the community. He has yet to see anyone.

"I this year did something: I take in a racer every year, and I took in a Rookie to see what it would be like. It's a big difference!" said Mayor Asicksik.

Redington agrees that experienced mushers seem to handle themselves in a more appreciative fashion. Often an experienced musher would leave the grounds clean and leave surplus dog

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to have a crew follow in the wake of the mushers to assist with clean up. "Because we leave straw and dog droppings, it sticks to the ice. In the last couple years, I've seen a great improvement in the cleanliness of the trail, and picking up after ourselves in the villages and it's going to get even better yet."

ing ice. Storms and winds have in the past held up the race and as many as 23 mushers at a time, each with a large contingent of hungry dogs.

Eugene Asicksik, Mayor of Shaktoolik, believes his community is behind the Iditarod; he also believes there are some good reasons for some of the people to feel the Iditarod burn



At right, Joe Redington, Sr., "Father of the Iditarod," says he would like to meet with residents of coastal communities to try and mend last year's "Iditarod burn-out."

photo by Douglas E. Van Reeth, courtesy of the Anchorage Times

out.

"One of the bigger problems is to find protection for the dogs to wait out the storm." Last year the weather was very cooperative. But the year before Libby Riddles took a chance to go out into the storm while as many as 20 teams waited for the storm to subside.

"It makes a lot of difference," says Asicksik. "The race got so big (with mushers) trying to reach the \$200,000.00, they forgot who the people were in the community."

In the past years checkers and volunteers used to get a ticket to the Iditarod banquet and a ride into Nome for their time. People felt fairly compensated for all their hard work. To-

food as a gesture before the final sprint into Nome.

Often the Media, as well as the mushers with their support crews, are held in a three day storm, adding to the burden of the village.

"The news people, I can remember when we used to beg them to come out there. If they see something that's not right they pick up on it. But they get the message out to the people and has helped make the Iditarod what it is," said Redington.

Joe Redington Sr. came to Alaska in 1948 with seven dogs and has been mushing ever since. Redington will be 70 years old when he races the next Iditarod.