

Junior Iditarod first-timer happy with experience

By Mike Modrzynski
for the Tundra Times

Nikolai's Shirley Petruska ran into trouble less than a dozen miles from the finish line in this year's Junior Iditarod and had to settle for 10th place. "My dogs are used to running on snow, and this ice just made them very nervous." Her dogs balked and tangled, forcing her to stop constantly. Was she disappointed? "I finished the race and showed them that I could do it. I'll be back."

Shirley left the starting gate wearing bib number two on the first day of the two-day run from Settlers Bay to Yentna Station Lodge and back. She finished the first 65 miles nearly an hour behind the early leader Susan Doub-
rava from Skwentna, but still with the same smile she had left the starting line with earlier.

Her strategy was to run a slow pace the first day to get a good look at the rest of the

competition and then surprise them and catch up the second day using only her best dogs. The plan nearly worked.

The weather for the return leg was perfect and her dogs had closed the gap and were just minutes behind fourth-place finisher Jeff Pralle when her problems began. But the wind-polished lake and shore ice did her in, and her dogs were unable or unwilling to keep up the momentum they had gained. Five mushers passed her as Shirley attempted to help her dogs regain their composure.

Race coordinator Rich Pralle made this comment after she had finally crossed the finish line. "We were prepared to send out an aircraft to look for her. She had been running so well that when she was so late in getting in we all began to worry." It turned out to be a real concern for her dogs that kept her from finishing quicker, not being lost.

PHOTO by J. SCHULTZ



Family and friends cheer Shirley Petruska at the starting line in the Junior Iditarod.

All in all it was a respectable finish for this junior musher from Nikolai. Shirley had never raced any distance prior to the 130 miles of the Junior Iditarod, and except for a few short races in her vil-

lage she says she had no other experience at all.

Her dogs came from the dropped Iditarod teams of years past so they were no strangers to this length of trail. Her strategy was perfect but

the ice of Knik Lake and then wind-blown shore ice of Knik Arm foiled her plans.

This sixteen-year-old musher from Nikolai still smiled as she crossed the finish line and remarked, "wait till next year."