

Race organizer says Iditarod too soft

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One of the organizers of a sled dog race from Fairbanks to Whitehorse in February says one of the theories behind it is that the Iditarod has gotten too comfortable.

While insisting he strongly supports and respects the Iditarod, Shank says more and more it's mushers race from checkpoint to check point, then nap in warm homes and use hot water provided by villagers to prepare dog food.

"We want to put the woodsman's back into a long race," he says. "This is going

to be a pioneer-type race. Take your heavy sleeping bag and the best parka you got and lots of gloves."

Like the Iditarod, which has been run for the past decade from Anchorage to Nome, the Fairbanks-Whitehorse race will stretch more than 1,000 miles across brutal country in the dead of winter.

Mushers will be unable to race from village to village because many of the checkpoints will be too far apart to reach in a single push, Shank says. Thus mushers will find them-

selves bedding down along the banks of the Yukon River instead.

"Just the distance between checkpoints is going to do it," says Shank, who ran in the last two Iditarods. "One of them is over 250 miles. It would be like leaving Skwentna and having to go to McGrath."

The longest distance between checkpoints on the Iditarod is 90 miles.

Other changes from the Iditarod include:

—A 12-dog limit instead of

18.

—A maximum drop of three dogs, with at least five in harness at the finish whereas the Iditarod doesn't limit the number of dogs dropped but also requires five at the finish;

—Mandatory 36-hour lay-over at Dawson instead of 24-hour stop at a location of choice;

—Use of only one sled throughout the race instead of the four typically used by leading Iditarod mushers.

While Iditarod racers can count

on a trail — often groomed by snow machines — for most of the way to Nome, Shank says the way to Whitehorse won't be so clear.

One other significant difference will be the rewards. While the Iditarod's fame has pushed the purse to \$100,000, the Fairbanks-Whitehorse race is offering only half as much.

Mushers will head northeast out of Fairbanks to Circle, then turn down the Yukon through Eagle, Dawson and Carmacks and into Whitehorse.