



Robert Ivan prepares to unhitch his dogs.

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

Portrait of a dog musher from Akiak

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times

It is midafternoon in Akiak; very quiet, very still. The temperature rests at a few degrees below zero and the bare branches of many birch trees create a pattern of dark lace across the face of the falling sun.

Somewhere out on the edge of the village, a single dog suddenly lets out with a shrill yelp; another takes the cue and adds his voice. Then just about every dog in Akiak joins in and the stillness, the quietness, is completely gone, replaced instead by the yelping, barking and howling recognized by the Alaskan ear as a symphony.

All at once, the few Akiak dogs who are not barking appear on one of the trails which cut through the Yupic community, running fast. Behind them glides a sled, and the musher on it shoots past in a blur.

This is Robert Ivan, and he is doing what many Alaskans, both famous and unknown, are doing this time of year; getting a team of dogs ready to race. Although the leader of this team is an eight-year-old bitch called Orange, who has run many races, the rest are young dogs who have yet to face their first competition.

"The best thing for me is to start my dogs when they are a year old," Ivan says after unhitching his dogs and chaining them back to their posts. "Then they won't get broke. They won't get sore foot. Start them too young,

they get sore foot."

Ivan has a total of nearly 40 dogs. "The first run will be less than a mile," Ivan says of the break-in process. "The next day, a little more. Then I let them get rested out, sometimes a day. Then I'll run them a mile. Then, after they're stretched, maybe a mile and a half. I keep building them till they reach 5 miles, then 15; then I'll go back to 10. Back and forth. Pretty soon they've got muscles. They're strong. Then I'll take them further. I never count exactly, but I take them to the hills, where they can climb up and down."

Ivan feeds his dogs whitefish, salmon, lush and other fish, most of which he catches himself.

Ivan, who is not quite 50, is a veteran of many races. He has competed in every Anchorage Fur Rendezvous since 1973 except for one. He always runs in the Akiak races, and tries to take in a few other sprint races as well. Ivan has run the Iditarod twice, including the first race ever back in 1973.

He has come in 16th, for prize money of \$750. Although he is not planning to race in any upcoming Iditarods, he would consider it if he had a sponsor. "1973 was the roughest," Ivan says of the Iditarod. "You can ask Joe Reddington or any of those guys. They'll tell you the same story. The Iditarod Trail had never been used in a long time. We had to break trail all the

way. Sometimes with snowshoes.

"Right now, the trail is pretty good. You don't have to break it new all the way. It is really good."

Like many racers, Ivan first learned to handle dogs when he was a young boy working traplines with his father. They would take 50-mile trips into the mountain by dog team and stay for three to four weeks at a time. Ivan used to watch the sled dog races and finally decided to try it out himself.

"I like racing. Because there's money in it. It's lots of fun to race, to try and beat the other guy. I run my dogs just about every day. It keeps you healthy to work all the time. It keeps you younger, more in shape. You never get tired."

Ivan enjoys his dogs. "I talk to my pups. I give them names. I take good care of them; water them and cook for them. They never fight. I never hit them. They become so that they understand the language when I talk to them." Earlier, the bitch had taken a snap at one of the younger dogs when he tried to step out of his harness too soon. "She wasn't fighting. She was just teaching him," Ivan explains.

Still, not all the dogs which he acquires can count on having a permanent home with Ivan. "I keep the ones that want to run, to work hard. I don't like to keep the lazy dogs."

Ivan is careful about which

dogs he breeds, and he is careful about who his dogs go to when he is ready to let them go. "I don't want to sell my dogs when somebody may not take good care of them. I'll give a dog to someone who I

know is going to take care of it, but I won't sell to someone who won't."

Ivan has several nephews, some of whom show interest in running dogs themselves. (Continued on Page Twelve)



Ivan after making a run into the countryside near Akiak.

Photos by Bill Hess

Akiak musher is happy

(Continued from Page Three)

"It makes me happy, because they're going to race after me, maybe when I'm old. They'll take over. . . . You know that fellow, David Ivan? He looks like he's going to be a

good dog musher. I'd like to help him race someday. I'd learn him what I know.

"Of course," Ivan adds with a laugh, "he might think he's smarter than me, but I'll tell him off!"