

Musher Howard Albert dies

By Bill Hess
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There was mourning in Alaska's dog-racing community this week after Howard Albert, a popular Iditarod musher, was found dead in his Ruby home Sunday morning. Albert, who was 25 years old, had competed in the world's longest and toughest sled-dog race four times, always finishing in the money.

As a rookie in 1977, the 19-year-old Albert placed 16th in the race; in 1978 and '79 he came in seventh, and in this year's race, Albert scored 16th. According to Constable Mike Stickler of the Alaska State Troopers office in Galena, Albert died of an apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound at about 1:30 a.m. Sunday morning.

Stickler said Albert's brother, Harvey, found the body at about 11:30 a.m. that same day. No foul play is suspected, the trooper said. "He was found inside a locked residence with the weapon (a handgun) in his hand," Stickler said. There was no note, and no apparent depression, Stickler added.

Stickler said that Albert had apparently been drinking the night of the shooting. As this

issue went to press, the body was at the Fairbanks morgue pending an autopsy, and the funeral arrangements had not yet been made.

Diane Benson of Anchorage, a close friend of Albert, said that he had been despondent lately due to the deaths of three close relatives. Jan Masek, a musher who has also competed in the Iditarod four times, said that Albert had also lost some of his dogs in a recent rafting accident on the Yukon River and that incident had upset him greatly.

Masek, who noted Albert's widely-known devotion to his dogs, also said that he and a number of other mushers have already talked of establishing a special memorial Iditarod purse in Albert's name.

"Howard always was a guy who supported other guys," Masek explained. "He was against pushing dogs too hard just for the money. We want to put up this prize just for him." The purse would go to a musher who was chosen by an independent group of judges to have shown the most care and concern for his or her dogs, said Masek.

"I run dogs because I like dogs, not just to win," Albert told the Tundra Times during

a February visit to his trapping cabin 50 miles up the Yukon River from Ruby. "I want my dogs to be happy," he explained.

Albert, who was soft-spoken and of gentle disposition, did not use a whip with his dogs as some mushers do, and had a policy not to kick or beat them although he was firm with them in letting them know what he expected from them. Only those dogs which showed themselves willing to give 100 percent stayed in his team.

Albert's sister, Rose, made Iditarod history herself in 1982 when she became the first Native woman to complete the approximately 1,300 mile race. She ran with Albert's dogs.

Although the Tundra Times was unable to reach her, her mother, Justine Prado of Anchorage said that Rose had decided to keep her brother's dogs. "She is going to race," Prado said. "She had other plans made, but I think she is going to go back to the dogs. We don't want it to die out in our family."

Besides his mother and Rose, Albert leaves behind his father, Phillip Albert, Sr., four brothers; George, Phillip Jr., Harvey, and James; and three additional sisters; Barbara, Louise, and Linda.