

Reading

The passage and the poem that follow describe the experience of driving a dogsled team. Read the passage and the poem and then answer the questions that follow.

On Your Mark, Get Set...Mush!

by Sherry Shahan

The Jr. Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is a 150-mile race held every year in Alaska. Teenage mushers (dogsled drivers) train their teams and compete for the honor of winning the race. This passage describes the race, which takes two days to run.

On race day, mushers and their teams of huskies and other Northern dog breeds gather on a frozen lake. A padded harness is slipped over each dog's head and snapped to the line that connects the team and hooks to the sled. Sock-like booties are pulled over the dogs' paws to protect them from ice and debris on the trail.

The ten-dog teams are positioned in the starting chute one at a time. "Good luck!" follows each team as numbered racing bibs vanish into the snowy white wilderness. In deep snow, the dogs look as though they are swimming. On a hard, well-packed stretch, teams sail along at ten to twelve miles per hour.

Some people think sled dogs are reined like a team of horses. Mushers are quick to explain that teams are steered with verbal commands. "Gee" and "haw" translate into right- and left-turn commands. Though rarely used, "mush" comes from the French word *marcher*, which means "to walk." "Whoa!" called out with firm pressure on the drag brake lets the team know it is time to stop.

Wooden stakes wrapped with strips of plastic mark the trail before and after every turn. The halfway point is a remote way station seventy-five miles from the start of the race. The mushers park their teams for the mandatory ten-hour layover. There is a lot to do for the dogs: spread out straw, check their feet, massage their shoulders, and feed them. It takes time to shovel snow into the dog food cooker, wait for it to melt, then heat enough water to thaw the dogs' meals—hearty chunks of lamb, beef, or other meat.

By then, it is dark, and mushers strap on their battery-powered headlamps. Under a narrow beam of light, they check their equipment and make needed repairs. Although weary from cold and fatigue, few mushers get much sleep. Some empty their sleds, then head inside. Others toss their sleeping bags on the straw next to their teams. The dogs radiate warmth as they curl in a ball with their tails over their faces.

All too soon, an alarm signals the first wake-up call. Dog food cookers are fired up for another meal, and sled bags are repacked. Within an hour of rising, the first musher begins to race seventy-five miles down the trail toward the finish line. In 2000, the winning time was thirteen hours and ten minutes. No matter where the mushers finish in the Jr. Iditarod, each competitor has attempted a notable feat that few dare to undertake.

Reading

They Don't Bark, You Know

Shush, shush, shush
Rails slide over frozen trail

Crunch crunch
Crunch crunch

5 Boots break through icy crust

The quiet of mid winter
Broken only by the creak of a sled
Gentle padding of dog feet
Rhythmic roar

10 Of your own breath

White landscape
Stretches to meet the pale sky
Where the sun skips across the horizon
Like a stone on water

15 Sherbet colored clouds
Follow in the sun's wake
Lapping like waves
Against the distant mountains

Ice crystals form in nostrils
20 Cheeks sting in the frozen air

Hold your breath and listen
To the vastness
Of the untamed frontier

—Keri Dearborn

It is true that while sled dogs are mushing, they are silent. Before they set out, they bark, yip, and sing. Those dogs that are not chosen howl when they are left behind. The dogs in the traces grin from ear to ear. As you head across the snow, all you hear is the padding of their feet. There is nothing like it. — K. D.

