



It is all about the dogs

Dogs, dogs, and more dogs. This year my husband, Patrick, and I were responsible for the dogs my brother, John Baker, and French musher, Benoit Gerard, 'dropped' from their Iditarod Sled Dog Race teams. At each of the 20 checkpoints along the Iditarod trail, the mushers are allowed to drop dogs when they are sick, tired, or unable to continue the race. Temperatures during this year's race were at about 40 degrees above zero, making it harder for the dogs of my brother's and Benoit's teams since they had trained all winter in the arctic where the temperatures are typically 20 or 30 degrees below zero. With the weather conditions unfavorable for them, the dogs ran slower and tended to overheat more quickly than the other dogs. So Baker and Gerard found themselves needing to drop more dogs than usual and our suburbia Anchorage yard was a temporary home for nearly a full team of visiting Alaskan Huskies. We were very grateful for the acceptance of our neighbors to the unique howling of first two, then five, then eight, and finally thirteen huskies!

While we still watched the 'last great race' with interest and tracked the dog teams via the internet, we settled in to taking care of those dogs which would not finish this year's race.

Focusing on the dogs is a vital part of dog mushing and especially sled dog racing. Each musher has his or her own preference about what it takes to



build a strong sled dog racing team but basically it begins with breeding, care and feeding, training, and finally racing experience. Watch a veteran dog driver and you'll notice how keenly aware they are of each dog's abilities and idiosyncrasies. Perhaps less noticeable to the average spectator of the sport, is how the mushers watch ever so carefully as the dogs eat and poop. Not being a dog musher, or owning a kennel of dogs, I never truly understood this until we cared for the dropped dogs this year.

How a dog eats the food placed in front of them and laps the water can tell plenty about their health and even more telling is what it looks like when the food has been processed through the body. Before this month, if you had told me that I would be studying dog poop, I would have considered you to be nuts! However, during this year's Iditarod Sled Dog Race, I busily cooked meals based on the dog's health and attentively waited to see what it looked like when it came out of them. People who visited our house were greeted by the aroma of a sheefish and rice stew as it simmered on the kitchen stove – not for my family's meal but for the dogs. We tried to keep the bag loads of poop out of sight (and smell) but I'm sure our guests noticed that too.

Each morning I awoke to impatient barks and howls. I was the first shift and would take the dogs out of the dog box and give them water. Then I would sip my coffee while observing their behavior (and bowel movements).



"These are tough dogs; you don't need to baby them so much." Says my husband as he observes how much attention I'm giving the dogs. I ignore his comment and methodically place the males as far away as possible from Kona and Ozzie, the two females who are in heat. As I move each dog, I'm amazed how quickly I've learned to use what little strength I have to control these powerful dogs. Hoisting them into the dog box proved to be much easier than I had anticipated. Patrick and I were able to split up the dog chores more evenly once I felt more confident about my own abilities and strength.



Later, I watch Patrick as he soaks the front paws of three of the dogs, Andes, Nex, and Spy. A soak in Epsom Salt and water brings a contented look to the dog's faces. The soft, sticky snow on the trail can cause moisture to build up in the booties the dogs wear to protect their paws so rubbing against the damp bootie can make the pads sore. Mushers have to change the booties constantly under these conditions.



After a few days of inactivity we were concerned about the dogs getting restless as these are extreme athletes. We decide to take them for a walk. These are not your typical pets that you take for a leisure walk, these canines are born to pull and run. I watched as they eagerly sniffed the air and yanked at the line and wondered what to do if they took off dragging my husband. No worries, they responded very well to commands and after a quick trot in the vacant parking lot, we put them back in their individual boxes in the dog truck. From inside her box, one of the older, veteran dogs, Ozzie, let out a lonely howl and rested her head on her front paws as she gazed off into the horizon, perhaps dreaming about being back on the Iditarod trail and racing for the finish line.



On the day we put the dogs on an airplane to take them home to Kotzebue, we felt suddenly alone. We had focused on the dogs needs, gotten to know them all, and could even describe their personalities. Now, they were heading home. We looked at each other and a questioning look passed between us, "Should we get a dog team?" A slight pause, still in silence, we both shake our heads, "Nah." We know that my brother's kennel has over sixty dogs that we can visit any time we want to!