

The Iditarod – Fact, Not Fiction (Answering the Critics)

Dr. John Bramante

1. Assertion: “In Iditarod Kennels many dogs are permanently tethered on chains.”

Tethering, or staking a sled dog out is a time-honored practice not only among mushers, but dog owners in the lower 48. It is utilized by the U.S. Government which maintains a kennel of sled dogs in Denali National Park. No one wants dogs to be tied up and forgotten but, unlike many backyard dogs, sled dogs are freed and given regular attention and exercise.

2. Assertion: “Sled dogs are aggressive dogs.”

These dogs are literally surrounded by hundreds, maybe thousands, of fans & dog lovers during the Iditarod's start & restart. No hiding an aggressive, abused dog here! They're in clear view of fans & television cameras from around the world from the moment they arrive until after they leave. All teams in the race are subject to petting (& pestering) by everyone. There's no room for maladjusted dogs in the Iditarod!

3. Assertion: “A sled dog can easily catch parasitical diseases by stepping in or sniffing his own waste.”

First, how can an animal “catch” something from itself: Dog yards are cleaned on a regular basis and dogs always have plenty of room to “take care of their business”. Sled dogs are vaccinated against just about everything.

4. Assertion: “Dogs have died in the Iditarod from strangulation in towlines, hemorrhaging, etc.”

No one denies that dogs have died or been hurt in the Iditarod, but it goes without saying that no musher wants a dog to die or to be hurt. The musher's life depends upon the dogs' well being and most have raised these animals from puppies and consider them to be members of their family. The Iditarod has extremely strict rules. Very few dogs have died in the Iditarod Race. True, the Iditarod is not a walk in the park. Yet, these dogs are bred for it, trained for it, & love it. The dogs are shiny, healthy and happy at the beginning as well as at the end of the race. Cameras from around the world catch all of this. As four-time Iditarod champion, Jeff King has said, “You can't push a rope and if the dogs decide not to pull, well, that musher isn't going anywhere.”

5. Assertion: “The Iditarod Trail Committee provides inadequate veterinary care during the race.”

The medical care given Iditarod dogs is arguably among the best in the world. In the months before the race, dogs are given two comprehensive blood tests, an electrocardiogram and a thorough physical examination. Dogs are monitored constantly. During the race, veterinary support is superb. The vets are the very best in their profession and are chosen in a highly competitive process from a worldwide pool of volunteers. There are at least three vets at every checkpoint along the race, often more, to ensure that every dog, in every team gets a hands-on physical examination if possible. The acronym the veterinarians use to guide their exams is HAWL. “H” stands for heart and hydration, “A” stands for appetite and attitude, “W” is for weight, in other words is the dog maintaining his weight during the race, and finally “L” is for lungs. Probably the most common reason for dropping a dog is some sort of a limp.

6. Assertion: “Sled Dogs, distantly related to wolves, are forced to run further than a wolf would run in nature.”

The statement that dogs are “forced” to run is fantasy. One of the most prized attributes of these dogs is their independence, even when it brings you to a crushing standstill in the middle of nowhere. The dogs do not run the Iditarod non-stop. The ratio of run to rest is usually equal to, or more in favor of rest. They don't actually “run” the entire time. They trot, or even walk. Whether or not they are related to wolves is another argument, but the bottom line is, if the dogs did not want to run – regardless of their ancestry – there would be no Iditarod, or even anything resembling distance mushing.

Given the intense media attention this race garners, it is impossible to hide anything about the dogs.

Consider reading: [Jeff King: The Man & His Dogs](#), or [Mrs. Morgan's Iditarod Adventure](#)

There are no secrets. This wonderful world of mushing is open for all to see and experience. Don't rely on the experience of others. Come, visit Alaska. Go to the Iditarod Race, meet the dogs and the mushers.

See the wonderful world of Alaska for yourself.