



# Go, Dog, Go!

*The tradition and sport of dog sled racing.*

*By Dave Carty*

**I**t starts off as background noise: the soft crunch of booted paws on packed snow, the whispering grate of harnesses and sleds being removed from the backs of trucks, a nervous yip. Then it grows: a few scattered barks, increasing in tempo and urgency as the sled dogs sense what's coming. Five minutes from the start of the first leg of the 2011 Race to the Sky, near Butte, the canine cacophony drowns out the howling wind, trucks roaring by on nearby I-15, and the voices of several hundred spectators crowded around the starting line. As each of the dozen 12-dog teams is led to the starting line, the animals are in full cry, wild with excitement, straining to break free and sprint down the trail. For each team, staggered at three-minute intervals, the crowd counts down: "Ten, nine, eight..." As a race official releases the team from its tether, dogs and sled launch into the cold early February air

like arrows from a Herculean bow. The dogs press their shoulders into the harnesses, giving voice to their sheer, uncontainable passion for running.

Eager dogs have been pulling sleds across Montana since the 1940s and perhaps long before that. Though no records exist of American Indians using sled dogs here before European settlement, it likely was commonplace. Native people used dogs to transport items throughout Canada when explorers arrived in the late 1700s. An 1833 watercolor shows Indians at the Mandan Village in North Dakota using sled dogs in winter.

Dog sledding as a sport became popular in Alaska, Canada, and some northern states at the turn of the 20th century (the Disney movie *Iron Will* was based on a 1917 race from Winnipeg to St. Paul, Minnesota). But it was not until publication of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* in 1903 that sled dog lore became part of popular culture.

Montana became the epicenter of American dog sledding in the early 1940s, when the U.S. Army established the Camp Rimini War Dog Training Center, about 10 miles west of the state capital in what is now the Helena National Forest. In *Soldiers and Sled Dogs: A History of Military Dog Mushing*, Charles L. Dean writes that the Dogs for Defense Program was formed to train sled dogs to help with a United States invasion of northern Europe during World War II. Expert mushers from Minnesota, New England, and Canada were recruited to train dogs and military personnel at Camp Rimini. Though plans for the dog-led invasion were scrapped, mushing teams from the center were sent to Newfoundland, Greenland, Baffin Island, and Alaska on search-and-rescue operations.

The sport of sprint dog sled racing in Montana began in the 1960s. Distance events are more recent. Of the several races



**CANINE CHAOS** A seemingly undisciplined tangle of tethers and dogs at the start of a race quickly transforms into a carefully planned arrangement of lead dogs, swing and team dogs, and wheelers, each with a role based on the animal's skills and temperament.



held in western Montana each year, one of the oldest and largest is the Race to the Sky, which began in 1986. Paying homage to the state's dog mushing heritage, the Race to the Sky ends or starts a leg of the race each year at Camp Rimini.

Grand marshal of the 2009 event was Dave Armstrong, who ran his first dog sled team in the 1930s and trained at Camp Rimini in 1943. Now 90 years old and retired from the sport, the Helena musher says his love of dog sledding stems from his love of sled dogs, dating to the first malamute he bought as a teenager.

Other mushers express similar sentiments. Though they also enjoy the tradition, the solitude, and the thrill of racing, they do it mainly for the dogs. There's something about harnessing a sometimes motley assortment of Nordic canines together, tethering them to a sled by a single rope, and rocketing out into the winter wilds. Mushers say it's thrilling to be linked to a team of dogs doing something that generations of their ancestors have been bred, born, and trained to do.

Many breeds work as sled dogs. The most

common are Alaskan huskies, Alaskan malamutes, and pointer crosses, though any dog with running stamina will work.

A competitor in this year's Race to the Sky, Laura Daugereau, 28, of Washington, ticks off on gloved fingers the reasons she's in the sport. "It's love of the outdoors, love of the animals, and never knowing what's going to turn up around the next corner,"



**DOGS OF WAR** Human and canine soldiers at the Camp Rimini training center, 1943.

she says. Daugereau, who races her dogs across the western United States, Canada, and Alaska, adds that mushing requires far more work than most people think. "It's not just standing on the runners and watching the beautiful scenery," she says. "You're watching your dogs and helping them up the hills and maintaining the proper speed."

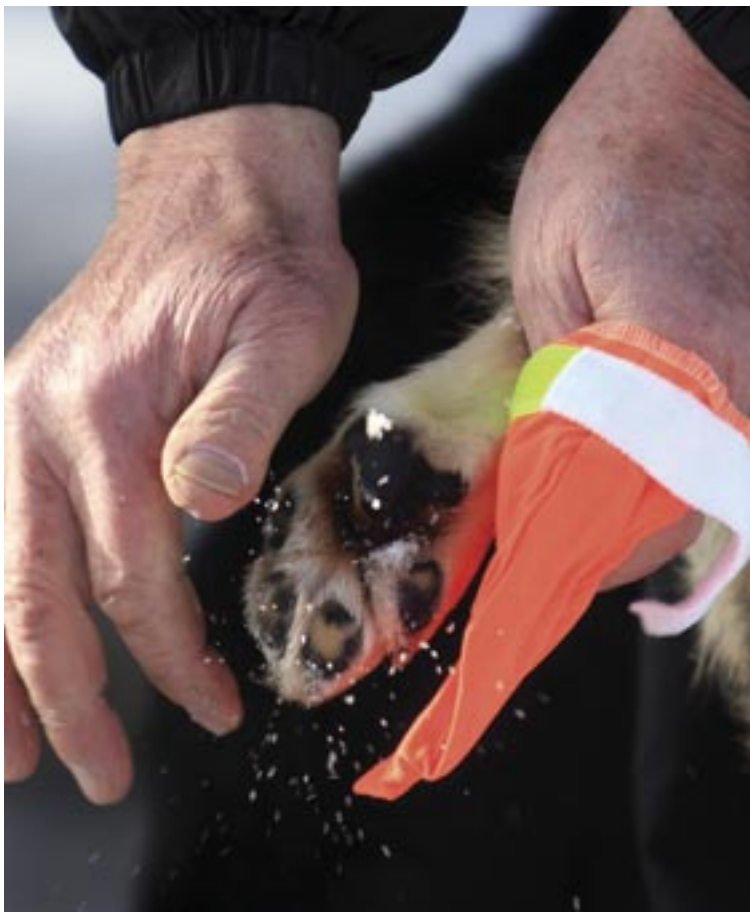
### Serious mushers

Forty-five minutes before the race starts, Steve Riggs, a mechanic from Olney, Montana, is fitting bright orange booties on the paws of his impatient huskies. They squirm and twist, anxious to run, booties or not. Riggs, 55, explains that a dog without booties can get icy snowballs between its toes, causing discomfort and abrasions.

Like Daugereau, Riggs is a serious musher who enters six or so races each year. He's guardedly optimistic about today's event, his first Race to the Sky. "It's about 350 miles, so this is the longest race we've ever done. I'm hoping to finish and be somewhere in the middle of the pack," he says. He notes that simply completing a race of

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NELSON KENTNER; PHIL FARNES; MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOGRAPH ARCHIVES





**CAREGIVERS** Mushers use booties to keep painful ice balls from building up between their dogs' toes during a race. Love and respect go both ways.

this length, which lasts four or five days, often in Montana's worst weather, is an accomplishment. "I won't be any threat to the front runners," he adds.

Montana has its share of front runners. The state's mushing superstar is four-time Iditarod winner and Lincoln resident Doug Swingley, who isn't participating today. An up-and-coming musher is 15-year-old Jenny Greger of Bozeman (who later this year will take fifth in Alaska's Junior Iditarod, the highest finish of any rookie racer). Greger, who ran her first dog sled race at age nine, comes from a mushing family. Her parents own Anduril Kennels and her father began dog sled racing in 1991. Jenny says she can't remember when life didn't revolve around a dog sled team. "I was born into the world of mushing," she says. "I started out working some of my dad's retired dogs, but I was never totally into racing until I got my own dogs and raised them from pups."

A common misconception about sled dogs is that the training is too hard on the animals. For instance, during the off-season

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Greger harnesses her dogs to an ATV and rides behind the team as it pulls against the moving vehicle with varying degrees of resistance. The interval training exercise builds endurance as well as strength, thus reducing injuries. It goes back to the days

**“A leader is a smart dog, good at finding the trail, that enjoys the responsibility of leading.”**

when sporting dogs—bird hunting breeds in particular—were harnessed to horses for the same purpose. "Some people think the dogs don't enjoy the workout, that we force them to do it," Greger says. "But that's not true at all. I can't force them to go down the trail. If they don't want to go, we don't go."

Another mistaken belief is that sled dogs would be happier living indoors. But Greger points out that Siberian huskies commonly spend nights outdoors when it's minus

20 degrees Fahrenheit, to no ill effect. She raises her puppies indoors, however, and regularly brings the adults inside. "They're all house trained and they get to hang out with me," she says. The family's old sled dogs—those past their prime as racers—are allowed to retire as dignified senior citizens. "They're our personal kids," Greger says.

Responsibility is an unwritten rule for those in the sled dog fraternity. Even a small kennel houses upward of two dozen dogs, requiring owners to pay constant attention to the animals. Caring, feeding, training, doctoring, and exercising the dogs is an all-consuming commitment.

To ensure the dogs' welfare during races, the International Sled Dog Veterinary Association checks the animals' health during races. Race to the Sky veterinarian Sue Geske of Bozeman says the dogs she sees at the mandatory canine check stations are fit and well conditioned. "They're competitive dogs, so they're lean and not carrying extra fat," she says. "But they all need enough fat to sustain them if the weather conditions get worse. A musher knows that if the dogs don't have enough fat, they won't have the reserves to keep going when it starts snowing

## 90-year-old musher the last of a breed

Dave Armstrong, of Helena, competed in the Race to the Sky 14 times before retiring from the sport at age 85. Though he never won the state's premiere dog sled event, he can claim something no other participant can. Armstrong was a young World War II soldier at the War Dog Training Center at Camp Rimini in 1943, where roughly 850 sled dogs were trained for what was to be a military mission, later aborted, in Norway.

Armstrong, who grew up in Massachusetts, bought his first sled dog as a teenager in 1936. He then went to work for a kennel in New Hampshire that supplied dogs for Admiral Byrd's Antarctic ex-

peditions. After enlisting in the Army, he and two other trainers were shipped with 40 dogs to Montana. "It was nice to be working in the Army on something that I knew something about," Armstrong says. The next year he was sent to Newfoundland with sled and pack dogs to set up a search-and-rescue station to recover downed aircraft.

In the 1960s, Armstrong returned to Helena, where he had met his wife during the war, and raced over the years with other members of the Montana Mountain Mushers dog sledding club. After retiring as administrator for the Montana Veteran Affairs Division in 1982, he continued racing before finally retiring in 2006. "The dogs and I were getting too old," he says.

Armstrong says he knows of no other original Camp Rimini soldiers still alive other than his "kid brother" Phil, age 86, who lives in Pennsylvania.

At his house on the outskirts of Helena, Armstrong still cares for a half-dozen sled dogs. In dog years, the animals are as old as he is. "They're all old croakers," he says. "I buried one yesterday that was thirteen and a half years old. They did well by me over the years, and now I want to do well by them."

—Tom Dickson



**MONTANA'S SENIOR MUSER** Above left: Armstrong visits with a fellow sled dog enthusiast at the 2008 Race to the Sky. Above right: As a 22-year-old soldier, Armstrong drives a team at Camp Rimini in 1943.

in the middle of a race and drops to 20 below. "These dogs do very well in cold weather," Geske adds, "Even when we think it's freezing, you can watch the dogs and they're out there happily cruising around in the cold."

### Different dogs, different jobs

Randy Camper maintains a kennel of 17 sled dogs in Bozeman. The animals live outdoors in a large fenced enclosure or open-air kennel and are tethered to wooden dog houses stuffed with straw. Camper says the dogs are comfortable, and they seem so despite the chilly temperature. He explains that one reason his dogs live outside is because it's too expensive to build a structure to house them indoors. Another is the dogs like being outdoors. "They'd hate being inside an indoor kennel on a day like today," Camper says, waving his arms in the frosty, 40-degree air.

Camper, who gave up formal racing two decades ago, says he still exercises his team four or five days each week during all but the hottest months of summer. He and many mushers use wheeled sleds in the off-season to run their dogs on low-key races known as "fun runs." Some make a little money on the side taking winter tourists on half-day dog

sledding trips, usually in association with a lodge or resort.

Camper starts training his pups at four months, pairing a new dog with an experienced team, figuring out where it will fit in the pack. Lead dogs, in front, steer the team. Next is the swing dog, whose job is to guide the team around corners. Team dogs, in the middle, provide most of the power. Wheelers are last and run just ahead of the sled, which they help guide around corners and pull out when it gets stuck in snow.

Each position requires a certain temperament and personality, explains Camper. "I didn't think this guy in the middle, Pepe, would do well," he says, pointing at a dog. "I had my worries. Last year, though, he started acting like he wanted to lead. And this year he's my single leader."

Cara Greger, Jenny's mother and a veterinary technician, says that leaders are the team "thinkers." She says that contrary to Jack London's Yukon Territory novels, sled dogs don't fight for the front spot in the team. "A leader is a smart dog, good at finding the trail, that enjoys the responsibility of leading," she says.

One of the many things London did get

right is that sled dogs have spirit and drive. And that their owners are dedicated to the dogs. I saw that firsthand at the Race to the Sky as mushers spent their last few moments before the race hugging their animals and whispering final words of encouragement before heading out from the starting line in Butte. That night, the dogs and mushers arrived in Camp Rimini, 70 miles to the north. By the middle of the week, after covering a total of 350 miles, the teams crossed the finish line in Lincoln. The winner was Curt Perano, a New Zealander who trains his dogs in northern Minnesota. Daugereau, the Washington musher, was second and only five minutes back. As he had predicted, Riggs finished in the middle of the pack at eighth in the field of 12 teams. And Jenny Greger won the 100-mile Junior Race to the Sky, 16 minutes ahead of runner-up Aiyana Ferraro of Victor.

Making it to a dog sled race finish, or even reaching the starting line, requires enormous dedication. But ask them why they go to all the bother and most mushers will give you the same answer: "For me it's all about being with the dogs," says Jenny Greger. "They enjoy racing, and I enjoy doing it with them." 🐾