

Iditarod/*from A1*

It was the Iditarod, the most storied, most grueling sled dog race in the world.

Redington, 40, who spends half his year living in Brule training his dog teams, won the race March 17 in what has been the most tumultuous 14 months of his racing career.

The year began on the lowest of notes, when his team was run down in January of 2022 by a snowmobile on the Tri County Corridor near Iron River and one of his key dogs, Wildfire, was left with a shattered leg.

It ended March 17 when he finished ahead of 28 other finishers in a race of particular significance to Redington. His grandfather Joe Redington Sr. co-founded the race in 1973 and between Joe Sr. and Ryan's brother, uncle and father Raymie, relatives have raced the course scores of times without a win.

And in the most unlikely of recoveries, Redington started the race with Wildfire — whose leg nearly had to be amputated after the snowmobile crash — back in harness and running his heart out.

THE 'LAST GREAT RACE'

The Iditarod runs across trails from Anchorage to Nome and has taken as long as 20 days to complete. Racers are allowed to start with as many as 14 dogs pulling their sleds, and must finish with at least five.

The teams travel from checkpoint to checkpoint across the wilds of Alaska, usually from one small, remote Native village to the next. Before the race begins, they send caches of supplies — mostly food, because each dog burns about 10,000 calories a day while running for hours at about 8 mph — ahead of each checkpoint.

Along the way, veterinarians are at every stop, and they examine every dog. Mushers routinely leave dogs that are weary or injured, and they are cared for by volunteers until the race is over.

"We can take dogs out of the team but we can't add or replace them," Redington said in a phone interview from Alaska. "Some dogs



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY DAVE POYZER, @DAVEPOYZER ON FB AND IG
Iditarod champion Ryan Redington with his lead dogs Sven and Ghost. Redington, a third-generation musher whose grandfather helped create the race, rebounded to win the race after his dog team was run down near Iron River while training in early 2022.

get sent home if they come into heat or if they are hurt — you're only as fast as your slowest dog. So we will take a dog out and leave it with a vet at a checkpoint. No outside help is allowed except the vets. No one can even pet the dogs. Mushers can help each other but no one else can help."

Part of the race's lore, which earned it the title of The Last Great Race, is a 1925 sled dog relay from Anchorage to Nome, when mushers delivered a supply of diphtheria serum when no other mode of transportation was available. But its popularity in the media and popular culture took off in 1985, when Libby Riddles of Madison became the first woman to win the race.

This year's race began with 33 mushers who traveled over two mountain ranges, the frozen Yukon River and across the Bering Sea ice. Eight days, 21 hours, 12 minutes and 58 seconds later, Redington crossed the finish line — but only after overcoming challenges that

began near Iron River.

THE CRASH

Redington and Wildfire made headlines in Ashland and throughout the mushing community in January of 2022. Redington and partner Sarah Keefer were training their teams after dark — their harnesses bearing reflective tape, dog collars embedded with flashing lights and racers wearing headlamps — when a snowmobile came screaming down the trail.

Redington remembers seeing its headlight coming toward him, then veering directly at him and his dogs — in fact he still has nightmares about it. He tried to dodge off the trail, but the snowmobile never slowed. It hit his dogs and then disappeared into the darkness,

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never to be identified.

Wildfire, a critical team member who occupied the "wheel" position directly in front of the sled, bore the brunt of the collision. His left, rear leg was broken in three places.

"Sarah said, 'We'll find a vet who can fix him up,' and she was right," Redington said. "Dr. Hadley was able to do emergency surgeries to save his leg."

Dr. Hadley is Twin Cities veterinary surgeon Heather Hadley, who grew up in Duluth and had attended some races but never had operated on a sled dog.

"Wildfire had severe soft tissue injuries — his muscles were very swollen — and fractures to three bones in his hind leg, the femur, tibia and fibula. Very serious fractures," Hadley said.

Hadley wasn't sure the leg could be saved, and no one was even contemplating Wildfire racing again. She suggested to Redington and Keefer that amputation might be necessary.

"That would have been a very reasonable decision for a lot of owners," Hadley said. "But we were up to the challenge. To save the leg, we placed three different stainless steel plates and 26 screws to reconstruct the bone and give it a chance to heal. We did it over two surgeries."

The operations couldn't have come at a worse time. Redington and Keefer were gearing up for race season and had to leave for Alaska just as Wildfire was beginning his rehab.

And Wildfire would be a difficult patient. Redington describes him as the

cheerleader of the team — his most vocal, highest-energy dog who inspires the dogs around him with his enthusiasm for running and pulling.

"We needed someone devoted to the recovery process," Hadley said. "The energy that Wildfire in particular has to be around his teammates, and not being able to race, would have been really detrimental to his recovery. So I was able to take him home to my family to recover. I had just lost a dog on Christmas Day and we were able to open our hearts and home to Wildfire. It all happened for a reason."

But no one was sure it would work. Wildfire, like his teammates, never had lived indoors. He had never been a pet, never had to live without running, wasn't even housebroken. And he had a long rehabilitation ahead, strengthening his bones and muscles.

"We had to tell him, 'No, you can't run. You have to sit and heal.' He quickly learned. He had only one accident inside and by the end he was trying to get up on the couch and snuggle with my daughters. But his attitude, his adaptability, is incredible. He had to want this, and he wanted to do the work. He would learn to anticipate the alarm at our house and would pop up as if to say, 'Let's go. I'm ready to work.'"

The work paid off. Within a year, Wildfire was back in harness helping Redington take second in the 100-mile Gunflint Mail Run and was on Keefer's team when she finished third in the 300-mile John Beargrease Marathon, both in Minnesota.

HADLEY'S BLOG

To read veterinary surgeon Heather Hadley's blog about Wildfire's recovery, visit missionah.org/post/wildfire.

ABOUT THE IDITAROD

To learn more about the race, visit <https://iditarod.com/>

FOLLOW REDINGTON

To follow Redington or buy a "Spread love like Wildfire" shirt or sticker, visit <https://www.redingtonmushing.com/>

And Hadley was there at every checkpoint, massaging Wildfire and making sure he was sound.

"The Gunflint was Wildfire's debut and return to racing," she said. "It was so powerful to be there when he not only finished but took second place, and at the finish line he was smiling and ready to go for more."

In September, Hadley operated on Wildfire again, this time to remove two of the steel plates from his leg. She made them into good luck charms for Redington and Keefer, each adorned with pendants bearing the likeness of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals.

Both charms hung from Redington's sled through the Iditarod.

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