

Iditarod/*from A5*

THE TEAM

Like every dog on Redington's team, Wildfire is an athlete, chosen for specific reasons.

"We put on over 2,000 miles training the dogs from October to March," he said, "I look for appetite and attitude — dogs that love their job. I don't always look for the fastest. I look for a nice, smooth effortless trot."

Redington looks with a trained eye. He first climbed aboard and began racing a sled when he was about 5 years old, guided by his father who was himself racing the Iditarod.

The dogs he and other mushers race with today don't look like the Siberian huskies or Alaska malamutes one sees in a dog show — though those breeds definitely are part of their makeup.

"They're mixed breeds for sure," Redington said. "But they are a northern breed with a double coat. A combination of 11 or 12 of the dogs on our team actually go back to my father's bloodlines that I grew up racing with. We blended in a little bit of another musher's dogs to get the dogs we race with today."

Wildfire now begins races in the middle of the team, where his energy and enthusiasm help drive the dogs ahead and behind him.

That's where he was, doing his thing, when Redington crossed the starting line headed toward history.

ON THE TRAIL

Calling the path they traverse from Anchorage to Alaska a "trail" is a bit of an overstatement. It's more of a general course the racers follow across unroomed snow, ice and rivers.

"The scenery every day is so beautiful and the village people we meet, the volunteers, are so special," Redington said. "The challenges are the cold weather, the wind, the trail conditions. I broke my sled this year and had to race about 180 miles with a broken sled. At checkpoints, you have a few hours to feed the dogs, make repairs and get some rest."

Redington figures he got about an hour of sleep per day, except for during the mandatory 24-hour layover midway through the race and the two mandatory eight-hour stops.

Fatigue is an ever-present danger. "This year a musher fell asleep — sleep deprivation is one of the biggest challenges — and his team went on for 30 miles without him. He had to walk until two other mushers picked him up," Redington said.

That's not all. Dog teams have been attacked by moose. The trail is home to wolves, bears and all manner of other wildlife so, like some other mushers, Redington keeps a gun handy to protect his team.

"You have to be smart and be patient and use the right rest schedule for the dogs," Redington said. "You can't get to Nome in one day. You have to be smart and mush at the right speed. The dogs want to run fast but you have to hold them back for endurance."

And while the 25-below-zero temperatures are a challenge, warm weather is equally dangerous. The dogs are built to run in the cold and can overheat during the sunniest, warmest part of the day.

"We're going across glaciers and rivers and switchbacks and down hills. Sometimes it's all you can do to hang on and try to slow down the dogs. This year, we got really strong winds on the last day of the race. We had ground blizzards where you can't see the lead dogs on your team because the snow is blowing so much. I had to anchor the team and walk looking for trail markers. It's not an easy race."

By the time he reached Nome, Redington was down to six of his original 14 dogs. Wildfire early in the race stepped in a hole and came up a little lame. He was fine by the next day, but by then Redington had moved on, leaving him in the care of vets and volunteers.

THE FINAL SPRINT

There's no alone so alone as being in the middle of a glacier in remotest Alaska. Mushers depend on their dogs to survive, and vice versa.

The isolation leaves Redington a lot of time to think — about his father, who ran the Iditarod 14 times without winning, his brother and uncle who also raced it, and about the mushers who came before them.

Redington is Inupiat, an indigenous people who, like Wisconsin's Ojibwe, are trying to keep alive traditions — traditions like mushing.

"I think about that so much — how dogsledding has meant so much to my people and how much it has helped them," Redington said. "To mush on those same trails that my people have used for centuries is epically cool. My grandpa on my mom's side was one of the last people to be hired by the Postal Service to deliver mail by dogsled to some of the remote towns out here. I am so proud to be an Eskimo, an Alaska-native musher. All three of the top finishers were Alaska-native mushers

which is so cool."

The villages in which the race checkpoints are located, with names like Skwentna and Takotna, Unalakleet and Koyuk, are mostly Inuit, with populations in some cases of just a few dozen hardy souls.

"People are so excited when we come into a checkpoint and they want to pet the dogs and ask questions," Redington said. "It's their big event for the year. They've been waiting for this race all year. It's a real economic boost for them and it's very special for me to be able to come into town as an Eskimo and help them."

The last of those stops before the finish line 22 miles away was in the town of Safety. Redington was pushing hard — he rested for just three minutes after racing from the previous checkpoint in eight hours and four minutes.

He was about an hour and a half ahead of his nearest challenger. But on the trail, that lead could be eaten up in a heartbeat if something went wrong, so he pushed on.

When he crossed the finish line, he crossed it for all of his family members and all of the Indigenous people who were carried by dogs before him. And then he was handed something particularly meaningful.

"The winner gets a bronze statue of my grandpa," he said. "I am so proud to have that for the people who have supported the Redingtons. My dad was there, too. He isn't in good health, so it was really cool that he could finally see a Redington win."

One other person was there, too: Hadley, the surgeon who patched up Wildfire's leg and became a fan of the team in the process. She and her husband flew to Nome to join the celebration, where she got a big, wet, sloppy kiss from Wildfire.

"That was the best part of the trip for us. He's our buddy and we miss him," she said. "We sure do love him."

Through the races and watching Wildfire recover to run again, Hadley said she learned something important. While some animal-rights activists have condemned sled dog racing, she came to admire the dogs as elite athletes and their handlers as their partners.

"One thing I can say after being on the inside of this team: These mushers really provide incredible care to their teams," she said. "They care so much for their dogs. Ryan wanted to do right by Wildfire. He wanted to give him a chance to run again. These dogs love to race and the mushers are there to support them."

Redington already is working on another team of mushers who will carry on that tradition. His kids, Eve and T.J., are racing and could one day be the fourth generation of Redingtons to train in Brule and finish the Iditarod — perhaps behind one of Wildfire's puppies.

"I hope so," Redington said. "I'll support them if that's what they want to do. To run 1,000 miles with your 14 best friends is really, really special. I'd love for them to experience it."



Hadley and her clinic made the plates she removed from Wildfire's leg into good luck charms for Redington and Keefer. Both were aboard Redington's sled when he crossed the finish line.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY DAVE POYZER, @DAVEPOYZER ON FB AND IG

Redington started the race with 14 dogs and finished with six. Eight dogs were left at checkpoints as they grew fatigued or, in Wildfire's case, twisted an ankle by placing a foot wrong.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Wildfire rests in a kennel awaiting surgery to repair a leg that was broken in three places when he was run down by a snowmobiler near Iron River.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY DAVE POYZER, @DAVEPOYZER ON FB AND IG

Redington with lead dogs Sven and Ghost. Lead dogs are as important as the musher, guiding the team and alerting the musher to dangers on the trail ahead.

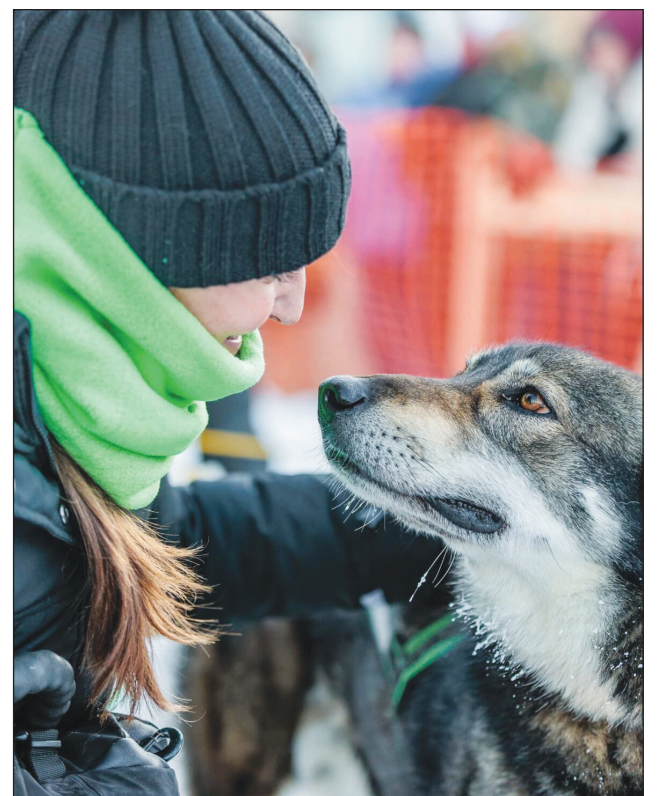


PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY HEATHER HADLEY

Board-certified veterinary surgeon Heather Hadley rebuilt Wildfire's leg after the snowmobile crash, took him into her home for months of rehab, and then traveled to care for him during his first race.