

Caring for Dogs of the Iditarod

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Caring for the Iditarod dogs is as thorough and professional as care for human athletes. High school, college, and professional athletes undergo regular physical examinations to ascertain their health and physical condition. So do the Iditarod dogs. The veterinarians and mushers associated with these dogs demonstrate their concern for the dogs' wellbeing by participating in health and performance studies, feeding the dogs nutritious diets, and evaluating each dog's health before the Iditarod begins.

About a month before the Iditarod begins, mushers take their dogs to their own vet or to veterinary technicians around the state of Alaska for screening lab work and an ECG (electrocardiogram) diagnostic test. Used for the past 15 years, the ECG measures heart rhythm and activity. The CBC and basic blood panels lab work check, among other things, red and white blood cells and platelets to determine if all is normal in the blood. To identify the dog, its microchip is scanned or if a microchip needs to be placed, the technician does so. The microchip number is particular to that dog and is used to identify it at the next exam for the race as well as in the future.

Physical exams on every dog considered for racing in the upcoming Iditarod are done within 14 days of the race start. Volunteer vets from the United States and other countries use the HAW/L acronym for this exam. H stands for heart and hydration, A for appetite and attitude, W for weight, and L stands for lungs. Every dog's legs, paws, and temperature are checked, too.

At checkpoints during the race, dogs are examined again by the vets who hopscotch down the trail in bush planes to care for the dogs, performing about 10,000 routine exams. Vets use the musher's vet book, a diary of vets' notes from previous checkpoint exams, to follow each dog's condition during the race. Another team of volunteers handles urine specimen collection for drug testing purposes, another example of concern for the dogs' wellbeing.

Dr. Michael Davis of Oklahoma State University Center for Veterinary Health Services School researches performance and health concerns for the Iditarod dogs, including ulcer studies and prevention of ulcers during the race. Dr. Stu Nelson, chief veterinarian for the Iditarod, is most encouraged by the ulcer prevention protocol, a daily dose of medicine during race time and training.

During the race, mushers check their dogs' paws, applying ointment and booties, massage their legs and shoulders, and feed them high calorie snacks, caring for them as athletic trainers tape their human athletes' legs, massage or whirlpool them after games, and monitor their game day diets. And when dogs fly to Anchorage or Nome ahead of their teammates, vets check them there again using the HAW/L acronym. George, a Talkeetna, Alaska vet, examined one of these dogs thoroughly at the Millennium Hotel during the race while explaining to onlookers the HAW/L acronym he was following.

With the physical exams and information Dr. Nelson provides to vets and mushers regarding optimal health care and symptoms to observe, the four-legged athletes of the Iditarod are definitely on the receiving end of a high level of concern for their wellbeing.

For more veterinary information, go to <http://iditarod.com/learn/vetcenter.html>

Permission is given for teachers to use the pictures in their classrooms.

Primary Grades Lesson Plan—Write a picture book showing the sequence of the vet exam.

Other Lesson and Activity Ideas:

Paper cube—Use this link for the cube template.

http://atozteacherstuff.com/pdf.htm?cube_outline.pdf

Print the pictures to glue to each side of the cube. Number each picture in its correct sequence of the vet exam. Then, play a game with the cube. Roll the cube and move a playing piece along a trail map of the Iditarod from checkpoint to checkpoint.

Upper elementary/middle school—Write the story of the vet exam from the dog's point of view.

Upper middle school/secondary— Use this article as a springboard for a research project. Research physical exams for people and dogs. Compare and contrast these exams in a formal paper. Cite sources in MLA format. Create a power point presentation.