

The boys of Gilman Class 3A recently checked in with Iditarod Rookie musher Monica Zappa to see how her fall training was coming along. Here is the interview.

3A Boys: Are all of your dogs healthy?

Monica: Yes, they are getting in good shape. We are running 10 miles now and really wanting some snow! We have been lucky so far to not have any major injuries. The only thing that has been a little issue has been some rubs on the dogs' feet due to gravel and rocks. The hard surface is abrasive compared to the snow which the dogs are more used to running on.

3A Boys: How long does it take you every day to train the dogs?

Monica: The daily dog chores are a full time job for Tim and me both. It takes about one hour and ten minutes for the actual run, but it takes another thirty minutes for the hook up and thirty minutes for the unhooking. It takes about 30-45 minutes for two people to scoop the lot (two times that if there is only one person scooping). When we cook our own food it takes 4-5 hours, not counting the time it takes to gather the fish, firewood and start the cooker. It takes about 30 minutes for two people to feed the dogs, which we do twice a day. Then add in other dog lot maintenance, and regular life, not to mention it is an hour drive (one way) to town to get groceries. We hardly have time for anything else!

3A Boys: How many dogs are you actively training who might run the Iditarod?

Monica: We are training 36 dogs at the moment. That equates to three, 12 dogs teams.

Of those:

14 are yearlings

5 are 2 year olds

9 are 3 year olds

and 8 are from 6 to 9 years

so it will just depend on who is the strongest and toughest come mid-February. Those will be the dogs to go on the race. At the moment I think all of them know something big is about to happen and they are giving their best to make the team!

3A Boys: Is Tim [Osmar, Monica's kennel partner] helping you with training?

Monica: YES! Tim is an amazing help getting me ready for Iditarod, since he has done it 23 times! He has a great grasp of where we need to be in terms of training goals. This month our goal is 100 miles on each dog. That really means 300 miles for us, with one 4-wheeler (since the other one is in the shop at the moment). We both share the responsibilities of the dog yard chores, cooking food, and training. I will be running Iditarod this year, but Tim also plans to do some races this season. His main races to focus on will be the Kuskokwim 300 and the Kobuk 440. These races will be just as competitive as Iditarod and the dogs must be ready to race for both of us.

3A Boys: Are you using a sled for training yet? Or are you still using a cart?

Monica: Unfortunately we have not gotten our sleds out yet this year. We have been training on four wheelers since August. We have had unseasonably warm weather this month with daytime temps in the 50s and nighttime temps in the 40s. Normally for this time of year we are in the 20s and 30s at night. So we are really hoping for some cooler weather to get the real show on the road! Sled training is way more fun for the musher and the dogs than wheeler training is (why? See question 7).

3A Boys: What is the daily routine on days you train?

Monica: Well, it all depends on the weather. Often we run right away in the am, before it gets too warm (we try to run in the 40's). Then we feed the morning snack to the dogs, scoop the yard, and then start the cooker for the dinner feeding. Sometimes we do a night run, if the daytime weather is too warm. So it all depends, no day is the same but we always have to make sure we get all the dog chores done!

3A Boys: What is the hardest part of training?

Monica: Right now, the hardest part is all the mud and muck. Since it is not frozen up yet the dog lot is soupy and the trails are icky! We can't wait for winter when the turds are frozen, the trails are white and hard, and I stay clean and dry! Right now we (the dogs and ourselves) end up covered in mud after every run (check out the video for the puddles and you will know what I am talking about!)

3A Boys: Have you gotten any sponsors lately?

Monica: No big ones. But I have just reached my ½ way mark for meeting my \$20,000 fundraising goal. I went back to my hometown in WI this month where friends and family were very supportive; I gained \$2,000 just from that trip! But I still have a long way to go and hope to get some cooperate sponsors before Iditarod.