

Teaching from the Trail

COVID-19 delayed the chance for **Jim Deprez '02** to be part of the Iditarod Trail Sled Race this year, but he's more than ready to head to Alaska in 2022.





Chugiak, Alaska, is a long way from the third-grade classroom at Ridgewood Elementary School in Hilliard, Ohio, where Jim Deprez '02, spends most school days teaching, but in March 2020 Deprez found himself at the Chugiak Dog Musher's Club in Chugiak, meeting competitors and officials from the legendary Iditarod Trail Dog Sled Race. Deprez had been invited to Alaska by Iditarod race organizers to interview for the job of 2021 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail, an honor that gives one teacher in the United States the chance to travel the race route during the event and send news updates to classrooms around the country. Deprez's 2020 interview trip included stops in Anchorage, Wasilla, and Willow, and Deprez got a close-up view of the race he had talked about and watched with his young students for years. Then, that

day in Chugiak, Deprez got to briefly lead a dog sled on his own. More than a year later, Deprez still smiles widely when he remembers the moment. "I got to do a little bit of mushing, which was," he said, pausing for effect, "amazing." Deprez's experience in Alaska in 2020 got even more amazing when he was chosen from among the finalists to be the 2021 Teacher on the Trail. For months afterward, he talked to former Iditarod teacher ambassadors and learned about the gear he would need and schedule he might follow as he slept in small Alaskan villages and blogged about the race. Even before Deprez returned from that initial trip to Alaska, the world began quarantining as COVID-19 spread quickly. That a global health crisis would jeopardize the Iditarod race was almost unbearably ironic, too, con-



← Dallas Seavey, the 2021 Iditarod champion.



← Deprez at the Chugiak Dog Musher's Club in Chugiak, Alaska.

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sidering the event was inspired by the story of 20 mushers and teams of dogs who bravely traveled 674 miles in 127 hours to deliver diphtheria antitoxin serum to sick patients in Nome in 1925. But Iditarod race organizers didn't want to risk contributing to the spread of COVID-19, especially to isolated places along the trail where sled teams, veterinarians, volunteers, and others would ordinarily camp out and gather during the race. By December 2020, Deprez and race organizers decided not to have an in-person Teacher on the Trail in 2021. Deprez would write about the race for the Iditarod blog, but he would not go to Alaska. His disappointment didn't last long, though, because race organizers asked him to return in 2022. This year's race still went on, with some changes. The ceremonial start of the race in

Anchorage, an event that usually has a lot of hubbub and spectators, was canceled. And the race did not finish at the traditional ending point of Nome. Still, 47 mushers registered to compete. Deprez, monitoring events from Ohio, kept up with every detail of the race and included his third-grade students in daily video updates that were posted to YouTube. Deprez's blog posts gave elementary-age-appropriate discussions of all the elements of the race: how many veterinarians care for the dogs, where and how the dogs and mushers sleep, the Northern Lights that are visible from the Iditarod Trail, and, of course, which dog team is winning. Students got to watch as Dallas Seavey finished first, completing the 852-mile course in seven days and 14 hours. Teacher on the Trail is the culmination of a lot of interests in Deprez's life, including

working with kids, travel, and the outdoors. He majored in political science at Wooster and had a special interest in forestry and public policy. He studied abroad twice and his senior Independent Study focused on sustainable forestry in Vancouver, B.C., with research from a summer spent studying there. Originally from Massachusetts, Deprez stayed in Ohio after graduation and moved to Columbus with plans to work in government or politics. When his political job prospects didn't pan out, he remembered the satisfaction he got working summers as a camp counselor. He pivoted to teaching and earned a master's degree in education from The Ohio State University.

Not long after starting a long-term substitute teaching job at an elementary school outside Columbus, Ohio, Deprez was let in on a secret tool he had never learned in his education courses. The legendary Iditarod Trail Sled Race is a great way to teach history, science, geography, and other subjects to elementary students. "At that age kids love competition; they love dogs, and it's a great blend of the two," Deprez said. He enjoyed seeing how excited students were when it was time to track the race and talk about events in Alaska. He has added more to his lesson plans over time and Iditarod has been part of his school year 12 of his 15 years of teaching. Being in Alaska for the race is a dream come true for Deprez.

In his approach toward teaching, he also draws from his interdisciplinary education at Wooster. "The liberal arts education I received from Wooster allowed me to look at things from many angles. Creating a huge interdisciplinary unit to teach and captivate nine-year-olds is no easy task, but my advisors always encouraged me to take a variety of courses to help determine a course of study that was just right for me." Deprez is especially grateful for the guidance he had as a student from Mark Wilson, Lewis M. and Marian Senter

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Nixon Professor of Natural Sciences, and Matthew Krain, professor of political science. "At the time, Wooster did not have the environmental majors it offers now, so I pieced together as many classes from as many different fields as I could. This helped me to gain a perspective I might not have otherwise received." The Iditarod has also given Deprez a chance to engage the teacher/mentor model he benefited from at Wooster. "I am still a teacher for all of my students and those who I have the opportunity to present to, but I also get to act as a mentor to other teachers out there who are interested in incor-

↑ A pair of veterinarians check on sled dogs.

TOP: Deprez under the Iditarod starting line.

porating this incredible teaching tool into their classrooms."

The 2022 Iditarod will be the 50th time the race has been run and organizers are planning a big celebration. Deprez is excited just thinking about the six or seven checkpoints he will visit on the way and the experience of traveling along the route. "It's pretty common to sleep on the floor of a school," he said, giving a sense of the accommodations. He's looking forward to adding to the memories he has from 2020. "It was truly an experience of a lifetime and getting to go back to do the same thing next year and more, I can't begin to describe how excited I am."

Ready to race in 2022 after teaching it from the sideline

THE IDITAROD TRAIL Sled Race, with its inspiring origin story of the 20 teams of dogs and their mushers who ran a relay over 674 miles in 1925 to deliver diphtheria antitoxin serum to sick patients in Nome, seems to be as popular with teachers as it is with those who enjoy dog-sledding events. In the elementary grades especially, the Iditarod has it all: lessons on geography, weather patterns, native populations of America's 49th state, history, animal welfare discussion points, and, of course, dogs.

Jim Deprez '02 has looked forward to the race's traditional start in early March each year and has included the Iditarod in lessons every year in 12 of his 15 years as an elementary-

school teacher. As the 2022 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail, he will soon be able to deliver those lessons from the perspective of someone who has been there.

Deprez was originally supposed to be in Alaska this year, after being chosen to be 2021 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail. COVID-19 cut short his travel plans and Deprez had to follow the events from Ohio, but race organizers offered him the chance to be part of the event in 2022. The opportunity is a dream come true for Deprez, who, like many, is excited to look ahead after more than a year of cancellations and deferred plans. And when he returns to Alaska for the race in 2022, he will be part of the 50th running of the race. "It goes from a gray cloud this year to a celebratory year next year."

Read more about how Deprez incorporates the interdisciplinary education he received at Wooster into his teaching inside on page 19.

