

*The HSUS is concerned that sled-dog racing is gaining popularity and support. The society is committed to protecting the interests of animals and improving the quality of their lives, and sled-dog racing is an unnecessary and dangerous activity for people as well as animals.*

*In March David K. Wills, HSUS vice president for investigations, went to Alaska to observe the Iditarod sled-dog race. The HSUS views the Iditarod, in theory and in practice, with increasing concern. We believe that unless the organizers of such spectacles eliminate the elements of risk to the animals, the events should be prohibited in their entirety. The challenge is to determine how such reforms or prohibitions are to be achieved.*

In many ways, the Iditarod is Alaska; it embraces and typifies much of what Alaskans value in their state. The challenges, the adventure, and the frontier mentality are all part of the allure for those drawn to live and work there.

The Iditarod, which is billed as "the last great race on Earth," is a manifestation of the urges and drives that compel human beings to face nature at her harshest and most unpredictable. Since 1973 an average of seventy-five mushers, each with a team of 18 to 20 dogs, have gathered in Anchorage to attempt to conquer a 1,000-plus-mile trail to Nome.

For eleven to fifteen days (depending on the weather) they face mountains, valleys, frozen rivers, and a coastal winterway that deliver subzero temperatures, blizzards of driving snow, and shearing winds.

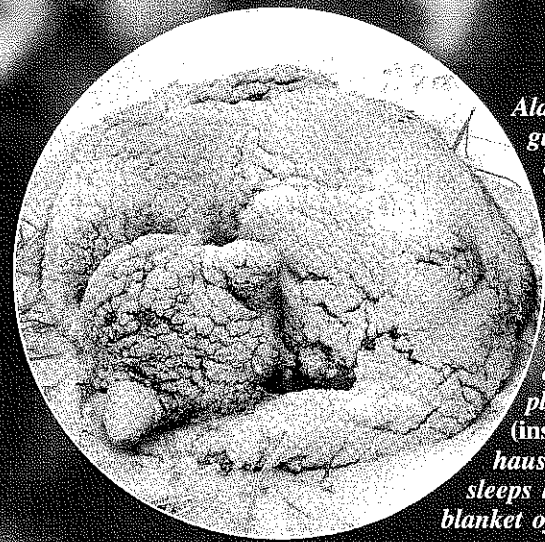
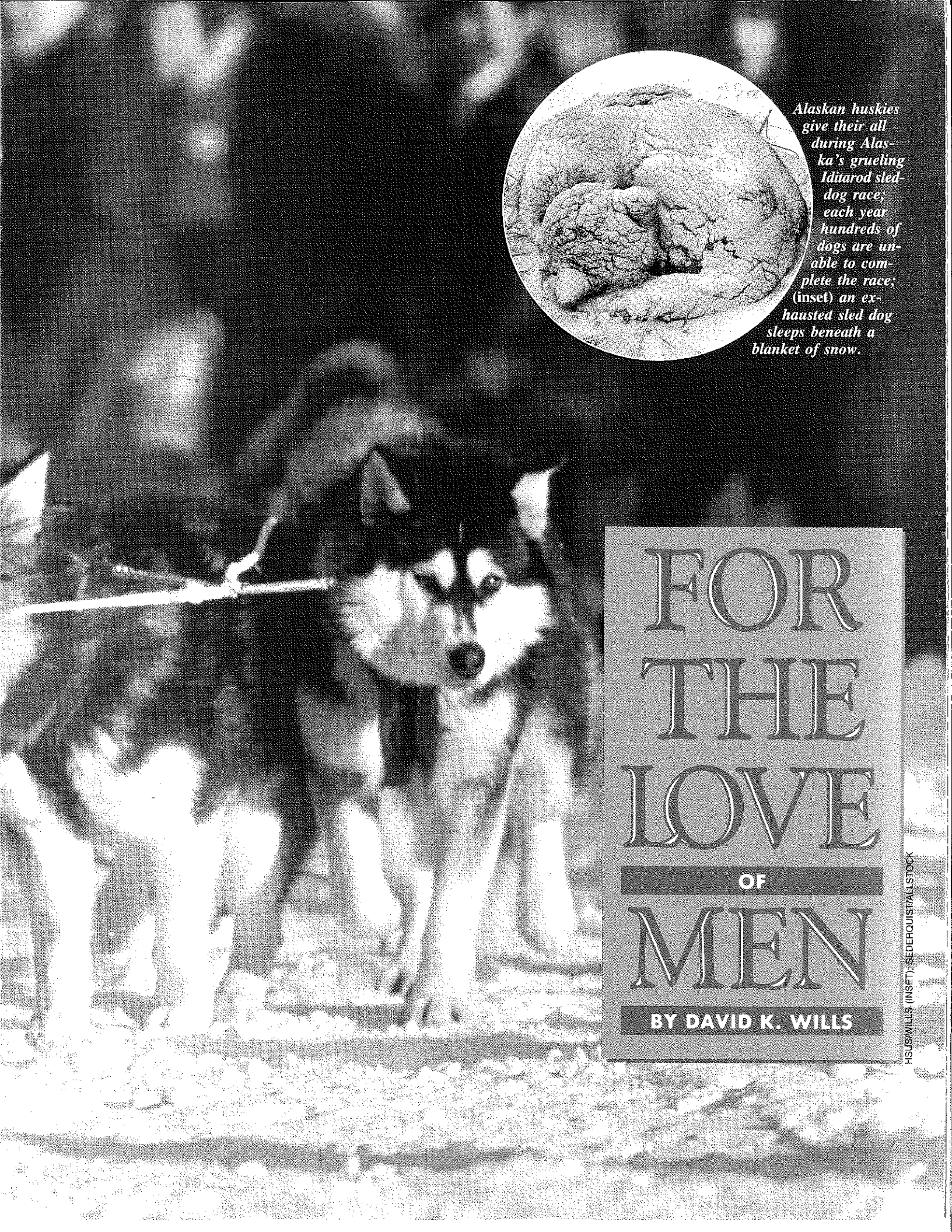
Between 1,350 and 1,500 dogs are in harness as a race begins. In an average year nearly one-third of the dogs become injured or exhausted and cannot finish the race. Each year several dogs die in accidents (such as an encounter with a moose or a snowmobile) or from "sudden death syndrome," in which dogs simply drop dead in their harnesses.

The one constant at the Iditarod is the cold. At first contact it bites, stings, and burns. Eventually it no longer seems sharp and bitter to the human participants but becomes a numbing presence that is always there.

The dogs give the lie to the mushers' assertions that Alaskan huskies are different from other breeds in that they don't feel the cold. They shiver constantly, their muscles tremble, their faces grow strained, and their eyes close into slits. Alaskan huskies feel the cold as surely as any other breed. They simply endure it in silence.

Nothing about the Iditarod is as straightforward or as reliable as the cold. Although the media present a romantic image of the race to the public, a close look at the animals yields a different image. That two images exist leads to the question





*Alaskan huskies give their all during Alaska's grueling Iditarod sled-dog race; each year hundreds of dogs are unable to complete the race; (inset) an exhausted sled dog sleeps beneath a blanket of snow.*

FOR  
THE  
LOVE  
OF  
MEN

BY DAVID K. WILLS

"What's wrong with the Iditarod?"

At the Clarion Hotel in Anchorage, which served as race headquarters this year, Weymouth Bowles, executive director of the Iditarod trail committee, spoke of the mushers' concern for the dogs' safety. "Sure, everyone wants to win, but not if it means jeopardizing their dogs," he explained. "The people love their dogs, and the dogs love to run," he added. "They love to run for their masters. These dogs are happiest when they are out on the trail with the mushers."

Dr. Jack Morris, chief veterinarian for the race, said that veterinarians at checkpoints along the way scrutinize each dog. "If a dog is too tired or sick or hurt, we pull the dog, and that dog is picked up at the checkpoint and taken back to Anchorage and sent home. We don't condone or allow mistreatment of animals," he stated emphatically. "Our goal is not to lose a single dog," he added.

Pat Danley and her husband, Bill, alternate as the driver of their team each year. This year it was Ms. Danley's turn to be musher. Mr. Danley pulled out his lead dog, Cuff, a beautiful black husky with piercing blue eyes. "I love this dog," he said, hugging Cuff. "There ain't nothing he wouldn't do for me, and I'd shoot someone that was cruel to any of my animals."

On the morning the 1991 race began, the excitement was high. Dogs and mushers arrived in the streets of Anchorage before daylight. Around 8:00 a.m. a crowd assembled to watch the start of "the last great race on Earth." ABC's "Wide World of Sports" was there to cover the event.

As the teams were brought to the starting line one by one, the excitement became a frenzy. Fourteen hundred barking dogs and several thousand people made for a spectacular auditory and visual experience. The dogs appeared to be in top shape. Almost all the mushers hugged the members of their teams—especially the lead dogs. As the gun sounded, each team headed off and its time of departure was marked. Two hours later, at approximately noon, the last team left the starting point, and the 1991 Iditarod was under way.

The race is impressive—people and animals working together to face nature's obstacles. ABC loves it; it's good TV.

\* Joe Reddington, Sr., the father of the Iditarod, is said to have had to mortgage his home to guarantee the total purse of \$50,000 the first year of the race. This year the Timberland Company alone provided over \$200,000 as a corporate sponsor. Dodge Trucks, Iams Dog Food, and Stephan Fine Arts each contributed \$100,000; Alascom, Alaska Airways, and the National Bank of Alaska, \$50,000. Seven more companies provided \$25,000 apiece. The \$5,000-plus sponsors were too numerous to list. The future looks even more promising financially.

The first major checkpoint is Sweenta, a spot on the trail about 120 miles out of Anchorage. The picture was different after twenty-four hours of racing. When the teams reached the checkpoint, the dogs dropped to the ground, anxious to rest. Many of the animals had sore or bleeding feet despite the presence of protective booties held on by Velcro straps. Some dogs had a listless look in their eyes and others still looked alert, but none of the dogs seemed to be enjoying the race. Apparently they just wanted to eat and, more important, sleep.

About 250 miles into the race, many of the finely conditioned animals present at the start were not to be seen. Dogs had begun to be pulled from the race. Teams that had begun with 20 dogs were down to 15. (A musher must complete the race with at least 7 dogs to finish officially.)

It generally takes between eleven and twelve days for the top teams to finish the Iditarod. In Nome, eleven days and over 1,000 miles from the starting point, Anchorage, the weather was bitter beyond comprehension. A temperature of -25 degrees Fahrenheit and winds of 40-plus miles per hour created a windchill factor of -100 degrees. To make things worse, it was snowing so hard that the flakes cut like broken glass. The word came in that several mushers and their teams had left White Mountain, 60 miles away, but the weather had forced them to turn back.

More news came in as the twelfth day began: Rick Swenson and Martin Buser had pushed through the blizzard and were 22 miles away in the village of Safety, the last checkpoint.

Finally, twelve days, sixteen hours, thirty-four minutes, and thirty-nine seconds from the time he started, Rick Swenson finished first in the 1991 Iditarod, earning \$50,000 and a new Dodge truck.\* He thanked his dogs and hugged them all. Although they looked tired, they were standing, and they watched every move Mr. Swenson made as he patted their heads. He had left Anchorage with 19 dogs; he finished with 10. The others had been deemed unable to complete the race.

In the next several hours eight of the top teams came in. Martin Buser finished second and had 11 of his 20 dogs left. Susan Butcher was third and had 10 of her dogs. In all, 350 dogs were so tired, sick, or badly injured that they had been unable to finish the race. This year "only" 5 dogs died. According to race officials, it was a good year; last year 8 dogs died. No one was seen being intentionally cruel to animals, but one musher was disqualified for dragging his dogs into a standing position in an effort to

get them to continue the race. (They didn't.) Interestingly, he had leased the team from another musher for the event. (The Iditarod allows mushers to lease dogs to fill spots on a team or even lease a whole team.)

The site where the dogs waited to be shipped home presented a disturbing scene. Away from the crowd, the media, and the hype, they lay tied to three-foot chains and exposed to the elements. The muscles of the dogs that finished the race twitched spasmodically as they slept; the strain of the effort showed in their faces. When they stood, their muscles appeared stiff and sore. They let a visitor scratch their ears and rub their backs; they whined to compete for his attention.

Much is made of the romantic image of sled-dog racing conveyed by Jack London in his classic novel *The Call of the Wild*. In the chapter "For the Love of a Man," London writes,

*For Thornton, however, his [the dog Buck's] love seemed to grow and grow. He, alone among men, could put a pack upon Buck's back in the summer traveling. . . . One day . . . the men and dogs were sitting on the crest of a cliff which fell away, straight down, to naked bedrock three hundred feet below. John Thornton was sitting near the edge, Buck at his shoulder. A thoughtless whim seized Thornton, and he drew the attention of Hans and Pete to the experiment he had in mind. "Jump, Buck!" he commanded, sweeping his arm out and over the chasm. The next instant he was grappling with Buck on the extreme edge, while Hans and Pete were dragging them back into safety.*

"It's uncanny," Pete said, after it was over and they had caught their speech.

Thornton shook his head. "No, it is splendid, and it is terrible, too. Do you know, it sometimes makes me afraid."

It is bad that 5 dogs died in the 1991 Iditarod and that hundreds had to be pulled from the race because they were unable to continue, but what is more disturbing is that we humans would ask those animals to suffer for our entertainment.

The love dogs give to their masters carries with it a responsibility on our part to recognize that they will pay a high price to win our approval.

A grueling sled-dog race in the dead of the Alaskan winter is an example of what dogs will endure for the love of men. Beyond the length of the race, the lives the dogs must lead when not racing, the brutality of the weather, and other concerns, the real problem with the Iditarod may be what it says about us. ■

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