



Siberian huskies are one of the world's most athletic and handsome breeds.

EAGLE CAP EXTREME SLED DOG RACE

by Troy Nave
Photos Courtesy of
Eagle Cap Extreme

Each January Northeastern Oregon stirs from its mid-winter slumber to host the State's most thrilling sporting event, one that features some of the world's best athletes: the Eagle Cap Extreme sled dog race.

Just after Martin Luther King Day, odd-looking trucks laden with wooden crates trickle into town, ambling conspicuously through the streets. Cutout holes in the crates give the trucks a look of a four-wheeled cartoon submarine, toboggan-style sleds acting as the conning atop each vehicle. Only when the trucks come to a stop can the inhabitants of the crates be glimpsed. A tuft of fur, the shadow of a twitching nose, and the occasional whine give it away. The sled dogs are in town.

By Wednesday all the dog teams have arrived. Main Street in Joseph is closed to traffic, so too in Enterprise. The odd trucks park in a row along the closed streets. Soon, school children arrive with their teachers, sated diners stroll out of restaurants, and shop owners hang "Back in 15 Minutes" signs on their doors to join the growing crowd. They have come to meet the stars of the show: the sled dogs and their mushers.

Today is the "Vet Check". One by one, mushers swing open the windowed doors and scoop the dogs out of their crates. After the

dogs are tethered to the truck, onlookers are rewarded with the opportunity to pet the dogs and chat with the mushers. Then it's time for the pre-race check up. Volunteer veterinarians examine every dog that will run the ECX, evaluating overall body condition and looking for signs of injury or illness - all with the mushers in watchful attendance.

Thursday is race day. By mid-morning, the dog teams arrive at the official race start at Ferguson Ridge ski hill, or "Fergi," outside of Joseph. Race fans begin to gather as well, looking on as mushers ready their teams. Dogs are fed and watered, sleds are packed and secured, and mushers slip harnesses over each dog.

Once the harnessed dogs are clipped onto the tug line (the line that connects all the dogs to the sled), the energy really ramps up. It starts with an enthusiastic bark from one dog or another. Others chime in in rapid succession. Soon the entire team is yipping and howling in what seems a preposterous contest to out-bark the others. Eventually the Fergi parking lot reaches a crescendo of canine excitement. Over one hundred dogs and their mushers are ready to hit the trail.

Each winter, the Eagle Cap Extreme sled dog race attracts professional and amateur mushers from across North America to this

rugged corner of the state. The race has gained a reputation as one of the best-organized and most challenging sled dog events in the lower 48 states. Since the race's inception, the 200-mile event has been Oregon's only qualifying race for the two largest mushing events in the world: Alaska's Iditarod, and the Yukon Quest. In fact, the ECX is one of only six qualifying races for the Iditarod and the Quest in the continental United States. Organizers have already begun planning for January 2014, when Wallowa County hosts the 10th running of the ECX.

The ECX consists of three different races, each held simultaneously. All three races start and finish at Fergi, and the course extends southeast into the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The 200-mile race consists of 12-dog teams and passes checkpoints at Salt Creek Summit, Ollokot Campground, and Twin Lakes Campground. The 100-mile race consists of 8-dog teams, and utilizes the same route as far as Ollokot. Both the 100 and 200-mile teams have six-hour mandatory layovers at Ollokot. The 62-mile "pot race" is for 6-dog teams. The teams run two 31-mile races on

successive days, completing a loop at Salt Creek Summit before returning to Fergi.

The trail is not for the faint of heart. Over the course of the next 45 hours or so, the 12-dog teams will cover two hundred miles of some of the most difficult mushing terrain in the Lower 48 States. They will gain and lose over 26,000 feet of elevation, run through snowstorms, cold, and darkness, and face remote stretches of wilderness where assistance is hours away. Mark Stamm, runner up of the 2012 ECX, quipped after the race, "Before I got here I told my friends I was going to run the 'Eagle Cap'. Now I know why it's called the 'Eagle Cap Extreme'. I won't make that mistake again."

Who are mushers, and what draws them to the sport? The answers are more diverse than one would think. Many of the mushers who participate in the ECX have their eye on running the Iditarod and the Quest; others are merely addicted to the mushing lifestyle. Only a very few sled dog enthusiasts become full-time mushers with no supplementary income. They commit fully to

Below Left: Sled dogs fill a unique space in our lives, bridging the realms of world-class athlete and loving companion

Below Right: Karen Ramstead of Alberta, Canada, is cheered by hundreds of spectators at the 2013 ECX race start. A 10-time Iditarod veteran, this was Karen's second visit to the ECX.

Bottom Right: As soon as sled dogs are in their harness, they are overcome with excitement and the desire to pull.





Left: Karen Ramstead drives her team below Salt Creek Summit in 2011.

Below: Richard Todd arrives at Ollokot Checkpoint along the Imnaha River in 2011.

their kennels, some of which contain well over 100 dogs. In addition to sponsorships, they receive income from breeding their dogs and selling them to other mushers, conducting tours of their kennels (visitors love meeting the puppies!), or providing dog sled rides to tourists. More commonly, mushing and sled dog racing is a hobby for folks that derive their incomes elsewhere. Most mushers are simply enamored with dogs and the romance of traveling through winter landscapes with their trusted companions. They are carpenters, electricians, housewives, even doctors and lawyers. They come for the camaraderie, the small town experience, and the outstanding natural beauty of the course.

For the dogs, the "why mushing?" question is simple to answer: they are born for it. Much like cow dog breeds that instinctively try to herd other pets or family members, some northern breeds are naturally drawn to pulling. From the time they are a few months old prospective sled dogs are fitted with a harness to help them adapt to the feeling. Soon thereafter they may run alongside older team members without actually pulling, which introduces them to commands and, importantly, to the dog team pecking order. As aspiring sled dogs approach their first birthday, their frame and muscles are developed enough to begin pulling with the team. Some sled dogs race until they are ten years old, even older.

Although variability exists among sled dogs, they share some key characteristics. Mid and long-distance dogs, like the ones that run the ECX, are surprisingly small: 45 – 55 pounds. They have dense fur that protects them against the elements, combined with efficient heat dissipation through their feet and through panting. Ideal dogs are voracious eaters; they need to be in order to keep up with their caloric demands. Most importantly, they love to run.

During distance races a 50-pound dog may burn 10,000 calories per day. Compare that with a 150-pound human elite marathoner, who burns around 3000 calories during a race. Human and dog athletes both utilize a combination of carbohydrates, protein, and fat to fuel their bodies, but they do so in very different proportions. Fat is the most efficient way to deliver calories to a canine, comprising about half of the caloric intake for a training or racing sled dog. The carbo-loading that humans embark on prior to running or cycling does not work for a dog's digestive system.

The most common mid and long-distance sled dog "breed" is the Alaskan husky, which is technically not a breed at all. At their genetic base the Alaskan is comprised of various northern dog breeds. But Alaskans have been specially bred for generations, mixing with all kinds of breeds that excel in speed, endurance, disposition, and ability to work within a team, resulting in a mutt-like genetic profile. Siberian huskies are also popular with distance mushers, and are known as much for their striking appearance as they are for their ability to pull. Siberians are purebreds with good dispositions toward people, making for excellent pets or show dogs.

Sled dogs are world-class athletes. They require a carefully designed training regimen that begins at an early age. Each year sled





dogs. We carefully watch and examine each dog for any lameness or sickness."

A drastic change in weather thrust dog safety into the spotlight during the 2013 Eagle Cap Extreme. A long stretch of cold, dry weather gave way to warm temperatures and rain, making for rough trails and difficult mushing. ECX officials opted mid-race to shorten the 200-mile event to just over 150 miles. The decision helped avoid injury to the dogs and was well received by the mushers still on the trail. "Shortening the race really benefited the dogs. It is a testament to the officials and the organization that they took the conditions into consideration and made the decision they did," said veteran musher Karen Ramstead.

The thread that binds mushers of all stripes is their profound love for their dogs. The amount of time, money, and commitment required to raise, train, and feed even a modest sized kennel of 15 dogs is mind-boggling. Tack that onto a full-time job, family, and travel to and from races and it becomes clear that for most, mushing is purely a labor of love. The Eagle Cap Extreme demands full dedication from the canine athletes and their mushers. The drama plays out before our eyes each year, giving us a glimpse into the unique relationship dogs and mushers enjoy. For a dog lover, there is no experience like it.

For more information on the Eagle Cap Extreme, visit www.eaglecapextreme.com.

dogs train or race for roughly half the year. Mushers usually begin training their teams in fall after temperatures have fallen. Some, such as four-time Iditarod champion Jeff King, cross-train their dogs during warm summer months by having them swim alongside his canoe. Before the snows fly, teams may pull a wheeled sled or an ATV. The first runs of the season are brief, lengthening as it gets colder and the dogs become more fit. By the time teams arrive for the ECX in late January, they have run nearly 1000 miles.

During these pre-season training runs, mushers evaluate their team to determine which position to run each dog. The smartest, fastest dogs end up in the lead, at the front of the team. Just behind the lead dogs are swing dogs, which are responsible for helping the team make wide turns. The most powerful dogs are wheel dogs, located nearest the sled. All other dogs are called team dogs.

Like their human athlete counterparts, sled dogs have specific nutritional, rest, and injury-prevention requirements. The difficult part, of course, is that dogs rely on their humans to interpret and implement those needs. That responsibility falls largely to the musher. But race organizers also make the dogs' health their highest priority. "The safety and well-being of the dogs is paramount for this sport," explains ECX Race Marshall Terry Hinesly. "The dogs in this race are evaluated by some of the best veterinarians in mushing. If there is any doubt about the health of a dog, we remove it from the race and transport it back to shelter in Joseph." The dogs' welfare is best considered when musher and veterinarian work together. ECX veterinarian Randy Greenshields explains, "at Ollokot checkpoint we talk to the musher and address any concerns that they have with their

Top: Every dog that races must be thoroughly examined by veterinarians. Rene Fleming consults 2013 Champion Laura Daugereau prior to the race.

Bottom: Exhausted and emotionally spent from a grueling duel that resulted in the closest ever ECX finish, 2011 champion Steve Madsen gives lead dog Crow an emotional embrace. After 200 miles, the 3 finishers were separated by a mere 7 minutes.

