

Warren Webber: Yukon Quest
Western Wheel
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WHITEHORSE, YUKON – Dr. Warren Webber specializes in ministering to sick and injured horses in his veterinary practice at Okotoks.

But for almost one month a year, his life literally goes to the dogs – sled dogs competing in the grueling 1,600-kilometre Yukon Quest race between Whitehorse and Fairbanks, Alaska.

For the 56-year-old former Vulcan-area farm kid, the six years he's worked on the Quest's veterinary team since 1991 couldn't be sweeter.

"It's like a dream come true," he says.

The Quest allows Webber to live out his deep passion for the Far North, a rugged and remote land where trapping is a way of life and gold claims continue to be worked just as they were in the Klondike Gold Rush in the late 1890's.

As a boy, Webber trapped weasels, coyotes and badgers on the family farm. He imagined his trapline was far away, in the North Country romanticized by popular writers Jack London and Robert Service.

When he finally made it to the Quest for the first time in 1991, Webber found himself immersed in the life he'd fantasized about while growing up. Many mushers – dog team drivers – race officials and locals he encountered had traplines and shared secrets of how they set for different animals.

For Webber, the Yukon Territory's lack of people is another major draw.

It covers 483,450 square kilometres and has 32,000 people – about three times the population of Okotoks – with about two-thirds living in the capital city of Whitehorse. The rest are scattered in small towns, villages, settlements and lonely cabins in the bush.

In Whitehorse, where the 20th anniversary Quest started on February 9th, Webber and nine other vets conducted pre-race examinations on more than 300 dogs to ensure they were fit enough to race over some of the world's toughest terrain. Over the next 10 to 14 days of the race, vets checked each dog at least 10 times.

Webber talks quietly to each sled dog, gently patting their heads before placing a frosty stethoscope on their chests. He times their heartbeats, and checks for signs of frostbite, lameness or other ailments that would cause them to be pulled from the race.

"We treat them like athletes, because that's what they are," says Webber. "They can't do this if they're not in top shape."

Head vet Dr. Margaret Terhar, from Green Bay, Wisconsin, says Webber is a particularly valuable member of her team because he uses his 32 years of experience spotting lameness in ranch and race horses to quickly diagnose the same problem in sled dogs.

"He can pick up subtle little signs (of lameness) that the rest of us aren't as attuned to," Terhar says.

Most Quest dogs are Alaskan huskies, a mixed breed built for speed and stamina. Ranging from 37 to 70 pounds, their lineage includes Siberian huskies, border collies,

pointers, greyhounds, Labrador retrievers and other breeds. Sled dogs wear nylon booties on their paws to protect them from cold and ice.

The Quest start line alternates each year between Whitehorse and Fairbanks. But no matter where it begins, mushers know they must conquer three mountain passes and travel roller coaster-like trails that sometimes pass dangerously close to open patches of water on rivers and lakes.

This year's winner, Austrian-born Hans Gatt of Atlin, British Columbia, finished in 10 days, 18 hours and 36 minutes. En route to his second-straight Quest victory and \$30,000 (US), Gatt and his team rested for just four days and four hours.

He started with a team of 14 dogs, and finished with 10. The rest were removed from the team because of injury, fatigue or illness.

Race veterinarians travel by snowmobile, truck and airplane. They man several checkpoints, including many that can be reached only by planes equipped with skis.

Their only major break happens at the halfway mark at Dawson City, where mushers are required to rest themselves and their dogs for 36 hours. During that time, the veterinarians get little rest because they are too busy tending dogs.

It's an exhausting schedule, but Webber wouldn't want it any other way.

"This is as close as I'll ever get to living my boyhood dream," he says.