

Up Here Magazine

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HEAD: Two Tales of One City

DECK: Dawson City has a split personality when the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race swirls through each February. Downtown, it's party time: casinos and music and bars. In a campground across the Yukon River, mushers and their dogs rest. They are quiet and tense. The race isn't over yet.

BYLINE: By Bruce Masterman

A biting northwest wind relentlessly pushes its way down the Yukon River, blasting into Dawson City with a flesh-freezing intensity that has long since sent most people scurrying for the warmth of shelter. It is 1 a.m. on February 15, 2003. The stars and moon and Northern Lights steadily vanish behind the clouds encroaching upon the ink-black Arctic sky.

An ice bridge spans the river at Dawson. Every February, it serves as a frozen link between two distinct and contrasting communities. On the river's west bank lies the campground where huskies howl and tired mushers dream of winning the Yukon Quest, one of the jewels of the international sled dog race circuit. Here, at a spot that overflows with travellers and seasonal workers in the summer, the teams rest and prepare for the second half of the race during a mandatory 36-hour layover.

On the eastern end of the ice bridge is the legendary town at the heart of the Klondike Gold Rush. Each year it rouses from its usual winter hibernation to celebrate with Mardi Gras-like revelry as the Quest passes through in a whirlwind of mushers, dogs, officials, media and fans.

As the site of this long layover, Dawson is a focal point of the 1600-kilometre race between Whitehorse and Fairbanks, Alaska, a gruelling course that leads competitors across four mountain ranges and takes most teams from 11 to 15 days to finish. It's the only checkpoint at which family members and support teams are allowed to help, exercising and feeding the dogs and repairing damaged gear. Dawson, whose winter population sits at just over 2000, attracts visitors and fans of sled dog races as well as mushers' helpers. The fact the town shakes the snow off and opens the doors to its renowned Gold Rush-era gambling halls and bars creates a festive atmosphere in which many cheerfully indulge.

The Yukon Quest bills itself as the toughest dog team race in the world, and with good reason. Mushers and their teams of Alaskan and Siberian huskies pull hundreds of kilometres over the mountains and through rough wilderness between Fairbanks, Alaska, and Whitehorse. (The start line has alternated between the two cities each year for the 20

years the race has been run.) The teams encounter eight official checkpoints along the trail, with the long layover in Dawson City being the only time where competitors can really take a break and regroup. And -- if they have the energy -- party.

Frank Turner, who lives not far from Whitehorse, is the only musher who has raced in all 20 Quests. He calls the Dawson stop the pivotal point. "You must take care of a million and one things for yourself, your sled and particularly the dogs," he says.

The 1995 winner – at 10 days, 16 hours and 20 minutes, his time still holds the record of fastest finish -- recruited several volunteers to help him last year during the Dawson layover. One repaired a broken plastic sled runner while others fed, walked, massaged and otherwise tended to his dogs. Joking he'd be breaking out the WD-40 to soothe his own aching joints, Turner, 55 years old at the time, focused on taking care of himself, eating well, resting and psyching himself up.

The veteran Quest racer knows well what comes after this break. Three mountain passes with an elevation gain of more than 1900 metres. Overflow, the water that lies over frozen rivers and lakes. A trail so wild and remote it is accessible only by air, snowmobile and dog teams. The strong possibility of mind-numbingly low temperatures. Rest snatched where it can be: a few hours in a log cabin or stretched out on the sled, covered with a sleeping bag.

While mushers use the long Dawson layover to catch up on rest in downtown hotel rooms or in stove-heated tents in the campground, their helpers, race officials, media and hundreds of fans and others are there to party.

As usual during the Quest, Diamond Tooth Gerties, a gambling hall dating back a half-century, is full of modern-day fortune seekers, gamblers trying to hit elusive blackjacks and royal flushes or sitting robot-like in front of slot machines. On the stage at the front of the hall, a band of middle-aged local firefighters called Cabin Fever belts out a distinctive rendition of the Beatles' Day Tripper and other marginally recognizable rock'n'roll tunes from the 1960s and '70s. A heavy set of dusty moose horns hangs on the wall beside the stage. A few couples dance, but most people seem content to guzzle beer, talk and play games of chance.

At the bar, a Dutch bartender aptly named Tundra – "Yes, that's my real name, like the Arctic" – dispenses Yukon Gold and other libations. The second floor is empty except for dark-suited Bill Holmes, a Gerties' manager. He scans the crowd below him and smiles. "The layover is a great source of excitement and energy," he says. "It's a true indicator of the coming spring." Outside, where exposed flesh freezes within seconds, spring seems distant to the casual observer.

At the Eldorado Hotel, which houses many race officials and mushers, things are hopping in the Sluice Box lounge and Bonanza dining room. A veterinarian hangs a pair of soggy wool socks to dry off the end of the table while dining with fellow vets. An excited buzz erupts in the lobby with the arrival of a surprisingly fresh-looking Frank Turner, regarded

as the Quest's unofficial ambassador for his good-natured eagerness to talk to media and fans alike. Jim Crabbe, who for 19 years manned the remote checkpoint at Central, Alaska, 1287 kilometres from Whitehorse, greets Turner with a bear hug and a black T-shirt commemorating the latter's 20 Quests. "Frank's always been our guy," Crabbe declares while clasping Turner's hand in a ham-like fist.

There's action, too, at the Sourdough Saloon in the Downtown Hotel. A visitor from Vancouver nervously prepares to taste his first Sour Toe cocktail, a potent brew featuring a very real, well-pickled amputated human toe. He'd chosen it from among the five toes - - a veritable foot's worth -- of differing sizes and shapes. Thousands of people have proven their Northern mettle since the Sour Toe cocktail made its debut in 1973.

To qualify for a certificate authenticating the, er, feat, the visitor must allow the toe to touch his lips. Carefully sipping the drink without making contact doesn't cut it. Gagging isn't encouraged and, although it's been done, swallowing the toe is strictly taboo. The visitor smiles and swigs his drink, allowing the shriveled and rather greenish appendage to linger against his lips for a few seconds. Several onlookers groan with exaggerated disgust. "That was great," the visitor announces. His expression suggests otherwise.

The Quest layover is a boon to the town, an economic shot in the arm at a time of year when tourists - one of its revenue staples -- don't exactly overrun Dawson. Across the street from the Eldorado Hotel, a salesclerk named Betty Neal is busy in the Wild and Woolly Unique Boutique, a clothing and souvenir shop that stays open year round. She's serving a customer buying a hand-made gold nugget necklace and flannel nightshirts decorated with pictures of moose, caribou and snowshoes. Neal loves how Dawson comes alive during the Quest.

"I like to watch the dogs come in from the trail, and I really like having the tourists here," says Neal, who also works as head housekeeper at the Aurora Inn hotel. Like many Dawsonites, she came from somewhere else. She was managing a recreational vehicle park in southern Ontario nine years ago when her partner persuaded her to join him after he came to the Yukon to prospect for gold, following a dream that still lures people to the Klondike. Now the couple has 13 gold claims.

When the 2003 Quest came through Dawson, controversy was still raging over a Grinch-like, pre-Christmas announcement by Fisheries and Oceans Canada to clamp down on - and even phase out -- placer mines to protect fish habitat. The decision prompted protests and unrest in Dawson, where gold drives the local economy. The territorial government has vowed to fight the decision. Like many locals, Neal considers it an assault on both her livelihood and the Yukon way of life. "This country needs gold," she says. "Who else is going to get it out of the ground?"

Despite the freshness of the shock, mushers and dogs, not gold, dominate discussion in one of the town's busiest hotspots: the visitor reception building-turned-Quest checkpoint on Front Street. People drop in at all times of the day and night, asking when mushers are

due to arrive or depart, who's leading and by how much, and how the weather looks down the trail in Alaska.

All the mushers are either resting or already back on the trail shortly after noon on February 15 when word spreads that the last, long-overdue team is mere minutes away from arriving. Paul Geoffrion had experienced dog trouble at Scroggie Creek, just before the Dawson checkpoint, and was running almost two days behind. It's rumoured the Whitehorse dentist plans to quit the race.

On the sidewalk in front of the checkpoint, his family has erected a display of red balloons and a sign wishing him happy birthday. Today's his 48th. Finally, at 1:22 p.m., Geoffrion and his team of 11 dogs arrive. Frost coats his mustache and the dogs' whiskers, courtesy of the minus-30°C air. Reporters jostle for position, peppering him with questions, demanding to know his intentions.

"I'm going on," he says, his voice exhausted yet firm.

"How are you going to celebrate your birthday?" a reporter asks.

"I'm going to sleep," Geoffrion replies.

Everyone laughs. Except him.

(It would be another nine days before Geoffrion arrived in Fairbanks, a full four days and four hours behind winner Hans Gatt. Although he earned the not-so-coveted Red Lantern Award for coming in dead last, at least he had the satisfaction of crossing the finish line. Five mushers had had to scratch.)

Geoffrion hops back onto his sled and drives his team across the frozen Yukon River, leaving the hoopla of town for the quiet world on the other side.

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After the ice goes out in May and before the river refreezes in October or November, the most common way to cross the Yukon River to Dawson's west side is aboard a ferry called the *George Black*. In 2002, almost 177,000 people in cars, trucks and buses took the free ferry ride.

Some river crossers are locals. Fifty-six Dawson residents live on the river's west side, including a reclusive character called Caveman Bill who lives in a multi-roomed cavern dug into the river bank. Others are tourists, heading for the Top of the World Highway to Alaska or to the Yukon River Campground, a 98-site forested area adjacent to the river.

For a few days each February, the campground is known by another name: Dog Camp.

Several teams are in camp on one such afternoon, and the place buzzes with a different, quieter kind of energy than that in downtown Dawson. Those here to soak up the Quest experience stroll down the snow-covered road, snapping photographs of the mushers' camps, most of which feature a canvas outfitter's tent with wood smoke curling from a

stovepipe. Some campsites are quiet and inactive. In others, mushers and their helpers tend to various tasks. Dogs sleep on straw beds under large plastic tarpaulins hanging over heavy ropes.

A young woman in a green parka strides into the camp of a Dawson musher named Peter Ledwidge. Robyn Schmidt, a veterinary assistant from Duluth, Minnesota, is on an important mission. She's carrying a long willow switch forked at the far end. A plastic cup nestles in the fork.

"I'm here for a sample, Peter," she says.

"Help yourself," Ledwidge replies, smiling.

Schmidt nonchalantly follows one of Ledwidge's huskies as a handler leads it on a walk. The dog stops beside a snow bank and lifts a hind leg. Schmidt doesn't hesitate. In one smooth motion, she stoops and positions the cup to catch the steaming stream.

"Success!" she beams.

Random urine samples are a competition fact of life. Just as with two-legged athletes, testing is undertaken to discourage the use of banned performance-enhancing drugs.

Ledwidge, a British-born geologist and heavy equipment operator, sits in his tent organizing gear before returning to his home in Dawson to sleep. He's scheduled to depart shortly after 3 a.m. the next day. As he works, his huskies rest under their tarp shelter. This layover is the time to carefully balance the dogs' diet, rest and exercise, and to get them veterinary care if needed.

"This is when dogs come back," Ledwidge says. "It's like a car battery. If you let their strength go below 50 percent, they won't charge back up."

One week later, his team was down to nine dogs when it arrived in Fairbanks. (Competitors may start with up to 14 dogs; they can't finish with less than six.) His run of 12 days, two hours and 23 minutes earned Ledwidge a ninth place finish and \$3,700 US in prize money.

While mushers and their campsites come and go in Dog Camp, one camp remains intact until after the last team has left. The Dawson headquarters of the Quest veterinary team is a wooden picnic shelter, with its windows and doors sealed in plastic to retain heat from the woodstove. A cot stands on the floor. Chocolate, doughnuts and other snacks cover one picnic table, while another table holds bandages, pill containers and other canine medicinal needs.

Dr. Warren Webber is on shift. He cares for racehorses and other equines at his practice in the foothills town of Okotoks in southwestern Alberta, but for six Quests since 1991 he's tended to huskies, transferring his expertise in spotting lameness in horses to making

the same diagnosis with dogs. He's one of 10 vets and three veterinary assistants who travel from checkpoint to checkpoint, examining dogs, treating the sick and injured, and ordering the withdrawal of any they deem unfit to continue.

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

After sorting through medicine bottles in the makeshift office, he drives through Dog Camp, stopping periodically to chat to officials, mushers and their support teams. He speaks enthusiastically about the Quest being a dream assignment because he gets to interact with some of the toughest women and men on the continent, and to travel through spectacular terrain.

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It is almost 2 a.m. on February 15. The freezing north wind bends the towering spruce trees in Dog Camp. Lights from bobbing headlamps pierce the darkness as handlers walk leashed dogs or travel to outhouses. Boots squeak on the snow. A husky howls mournfully. Two men bundled in parkas and toques replace a broken plastic sled runner in the middle of the road. They work quickly, daring to remove their mittens for only a few seconds at a time.

"I could use a good sauna right now," one man mutters.

"In your dreams," his partner chides.

A few hundred metres further along the trail, lanterns and headlamps illuminate a camp. Alaskan musher Andy Elsberg is preparing to end his layover as snow begins to fall. Six helpers work quietly, each performing a task in practiced precision. The crew chief is Elsberg's wife, Shannon Brockman, an accomplished musher who finished 10th in the previous Quest and was named rookie of the year.

"Don't expect us to talk to you," Brockman says curtly. "We're pretty focused on what we need to do. We can't be distracted."

The preparation is a solemn ceremony. There is little talking as the crew goes about its routine. Each one knows that just one mistake – a forgotten food bundle or piece of equipment, a dog bootie tied too loose – could mean the difference between finishing or withdrawing, perhaps even life or death in the wilderness.

Clad in blue insulated overpants, Elsberg kneels on the snow to mix hot drinks in two silver Thermos flasks. His dogs wait patiently, whining occasionally. They sense the tension. As the helpers go about their chores – sorting traces, folding tarps, loading equipment, checking tasks off the list – a few take time to give the dogs a friendly pat and encouraging word.

Finally, the sled is loaded. The huskies are wearing their diamond-shaped cloth harnesses attached to a nylon gangline running from the front of the sled. Elsberg climbs on the rear runners. The huskies tug and whine anxiously. Brockman gives her husband a final hug.

Somebody asks, "Ready, Andy?"

"Let's go," he replies.

Elsberg yanks the steel anchor-like brake from the packed snow and the team takes off like four-legged dragsters. To a shouted chorus of "good luck" and "safe journey," he guides his huskies toward the Yukon River and the 900 kilometres to Fairbanks.

His headlamp casts a bright narrow beam on the empty road ahead. Presently, the sound of sled runners whisking over the hard-packed snow gets softer and softer. In less than a minute, the darkness absorbs the musher and team.

A frozen silence descends once again on Dog Camp. Across the river, the band plays on.