



A musher talks to reporters while resting his team.



A dog rests at a checkpoint.



A musher and his team check in.

THE IDITAROD

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The first thing I heard trudging through the snow on my way to the Iditarod checkpoint in McGrath, Alaska was the sound of howling sled dogs. I was excited to witness an iconic race, but concerned about the use of animals for entertainment. While the dogs seemed to clearly enjoy pulling the sleds, are cared for by a team of vet-

erinarians along the way and are dearly loved by their owners, the fact remains they are performing under extreme conditions for a human audience.

I saw no signs of abuse, neglect or injury besides a few sore pads, which were quickly addressed. Veterinarians carefully examined each dog to check for problems and reported their findings to the mushers, who often would remove dogs from their teams to be treated and sent home.

The most exceptional part of the

experience for me as an observer and a photographer were moments with the dogs in a place that defies description. Beautiful, amazing, jaw-dropping and stunning are clumsy words that simply fail to do inner Alaska justice, so I'm not even going to try. And then there are the dogs. If you are lucky enough to lock eyes with one, remember the moment. Trying to describe the feeling would be like trying to describe the first time I saw the sun set over the ocean or snow-capped mountains appear on the

horizon. It is something I hope I never forget.

Like most big sporting events, the Iditarod has problems and is not immune to controversy. A doping scandal last year, loss of sponsors and the deaths of dogs on the trail have left the race in a state of flux and left this observer without answers. But, for a few days in the middle of Alaska, all of that seemed to fade away into the wind-driven snow. And for one brief moment, it's just you and the dogs and the wild.



A musher shares a moment with his dogs before they head back onto the trail.



Sled dogs rest at a checkpoint.



A team arrives at the checkpoint in McGrath.



A musher heads down the trail during the 2018 Iditarod in McGrath, Alaska.