

Race: The 200-mile ultramarathon is a 48-hour endurance test

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marathons in a row. The trail rises from the ski area of Ferguson Ridge — known locally as “Fergie” — then it plunges into the Wallowa Mountains. It twists, drops, climbs again, losing and regaining a net total of almost 26,000 feet in elevation.

“We are aptly named,” said Eagle Cap Extreme president and local veterinarian Randy Greenshields. “We get a lot of mushers who come here and after they run the race they are like, ‘Now we know why you call it the extreme!’”

The 200-mile race is so challenging that it is one of the few qualifiers for Alaska’s famous Iditarod.



Morgan Anderson and her sled dogs share a special bond.

OPB Photo/Ian McCluskey

From sidelines to hometown hero

The start of the Eagle Cap Extreme is one of the most anticipated field trips of the year for elementary school students from across Wallowa County. Most hold hand-drawn signs with the names of their favorite mushers. Several have the name of hometown hero Morgan Anderson.

It wasn’t that many years ago that Anderson, now a college student, was one of the local kids cheering her favorite mushers from the sidelines. Growing up in nearby Enterprise, her parents brought her to the races. At the awards banquet each year she asked the mushers to sign a T-shirt.

When Anderson was in eighth grade, one of the mushers had an extra team and suggested she race his dogs. Anderson didn’t have any experience at the time and didn’t think she could simply step onto a sled and go, but a seed was planted.

“I don’t think I ever thought I could race,” Anderson says. “It was something that happened here, but I didn’t think that this was something I could ever do.”

The following year, a musher who’d talked to Anderson’s parents once messaged her on Facebook and offered to give her a sled dog for free.

From there, with borrowed dogs, and eventually her own, Anderson built her team.

“We got a lot of books and we’re like, ‘Well we don’t know what it takes to own a sled dog.’ But now I’m glad this is what I do,” she says.

Scrappy and lovable Alaskan huskies

As Anderson hitches her team of huskies, she talks to each one, “There you go Cy-Cy ... there you go Gale.” Mushers will often name their sled team after a theme; Anderson’s team is fierce weather: Cyclone, Gale, Tornado, Hurricane.

Her dogs are Alaskan huskies. They do not look like their cousins, the iconic Siberian huskies.

Siberians are what most folks think of when they hear the word “huskies.” Siberian huskies are the charismatic mega-models of the canine world — grey, black and white with glacier-blue eyes. Elegant and wolf-like, they could be on a wildlife magazine cover or star in a Disney movie.

Alaskans huskies, by comparison, are scrappy and skinny for the most part. Some are long-legged and sleek like a greyhound, some are dark on their long muzzles and pointed ear tips like a German shepherd, and some are shaggy brown like a coyote. Some look like a mix of so many breeds you’d just call them mutts.

Anderson’s dogs are descendants of the mish-mash brought to Alaska during the Gold Rush. Those who could survive the subzero temperatures at night, eat the frozen and often sparse food and who could hold up to trotting hundreds of miles across frozen landscapes became what we now call the Alaskan husky.

The individual dogs that could pull a sled longer and

faster were bred with dogs of similar ability, generation after generation, creating the “ultra-marathoners” of the canine world.

As the crowd of elementary students gather around Anderson, one dog leaps up onto a little boy. He squeals with delight. “This one likes me!”

Anderson’s lead dog, Gale, stands on her hind legs, her paws on the back of Anderson’s jacket. “This is why I have no clean clothes,” she joked.

Alaskan huskies have the dedication of working dogs but the disposition of pets. Anderson’s first dog is no longer on her competitive team. “He prefers to stay on the couch,” she said with a chuckle, “and get loved on.”

Running with the sled dogs

Competitive sled dog racing is categorized by distance but not gender or age. Anderson, 20, often races beside mushers the age of her parents or grandparents. The older mushers have welcomed her, excited to see a new generation coming up in the sport.

Getting into competitive mushing involves a steep learning curve, as any seasoned musher will say, though they’re quick to point out that what matters most is the bond between musher and dog.

“It’s not a human bond, not like ‘sit in a coffeeshop and talk,’” Anderson said, “But if the going gets rough, they are there for you and sometimes cheer you up with a look like ‘you’re crazy!’”

When it comes to con-

trolling a sled you might think mushers have reins like a team of horses. But they don’t actually have any control over the dogs in their hands.

“It’s all voice,” Anderson said. “The only thing that keeps them turning is words, and your brakes, and that’s about it.”

The mushers stand at the back of the sled, balanced on two narrow runners. “If you fall off, you better hope you’re getting your team back,” explained Spencer Brugge-man, last year’s 200-mile winner. “They don’t know the musher fell off, they just think the sled got lighter.”

No sleep at the outpost

The Eagle Cap Extreme is a competitive sporting event but it has a unique down-home feel. It’s a nonprofit supported by more than 200 volunteers.

The complexity and spirit of the event can be seen at a remote checkpoint called Ollokot, 50 miles from the starting line.

A small outpost of canvas wall tents has sprung up, reminiscent (fittingly) of a mining camp during the Gold Rush. There is a bustle of activity and a buzz of energy. Folks with snowmobiles shuttle supplies. Amateur radio operators send dispatches over a network of satellite uplinks. Chefs cook all day and night, ladling up a nonstop supply of steaming soup and chili. And an extensive team of veterinarians donate their skills, inspecting the dogs through the day and night to ensure each one is healthy and fit to compete.

By the time the first mushers reach the Ollokot checkpoint it is pitch black — a darkness that can only be found when you are more than 50 miles from any town, deep into the mountains. The air is crisp. People’s breath scatters as they talk and the backs of the dogs steam.

All night racers appear from the darkness. A team of volunteers checks them in, making sure the mushers are carrying the mandatory gear — essentials, such as a sleeping bag and camp stove — to survive a night in the snow, if needed.

During the mandatory six-hour layover the racers feed and water their dogs and bed them in the hay. Some even curl up next to their favorite lead dogs, while a chorus of yipping and yapping announces dogs coming and leaving, all night. A few of the wall tents are dark for sleeping — one for the vets and one for the mushers — but one glows. Above the door, a banner reads, “Ollokot Hilton.”

Inside, a wood stove crackles. Mushers pack in, dishing up stew and slices of sourdough. Mushing is a solitary sport but for this moment, they gather together. Many haven’t seen each other since the last Eagle Cap Extreme. It is a small tribe, in the middle of the forest, in the middle of doing what they love most.

A sisterhood formed with sled dogs

Last year, Anderson found a mentor in accomplished long-distance musher Gabe Dunham. Dunham, originally from Alaska, now lives in Darby, Montana. Anderson spends her school year in Bozeman attending Montana State University. On the winter weekends, Anderson heads to Dunham’s house.

Dunham lent her dogs from her kennel to train and has been teaching her distance techniques.

Dunham, 35, competed last year in the Eagle Cap Extreme 200-mile race, earning fourth place. From there, she raced in the 300-mile long “Idaho Sled Dog Challenge.” Then she took second in Montana’s 300-mile “Race to the Sky.” She was the only woman to finish all three races, known in the mushing world as the “triple crown.”

The triple-crown events are all sanctioned Iditarod qualifiers. Not just anyone can

enter Alaska’s famous race; they must to prove they have the skills and commitment to handle the 1,100 miles. Growing up in Alaska and getting her start in mushing at age 18, Dunham has dreamed of running the most famous dog sled race in the world.

As Dunham prepares to take on that life goal, she has enough dogs currently in training to make up two teams. She encouraged Anderson to borrow her dogs and enter the 200-mile Eagle Cap Extreme race this year.

“Why not?” Anderson says casually — though this will be her greatest challenge yet, by several measures. Anderson has raced at Eagle Cap the past two years in the 31-mile, two-day race. Compared to the ultramarathon 200-mile option, the 31-mile races are sprints. The race time for the 31-mile race is usually three to four hours each day, and the mushers get to sleep in warm beds in town. The 200-miler can often be a 48-hour test of endurance with a restless few hours of sleep on the snow at Ollokot.

Anderson and Dunham train together in Montana during the school year, making short runs of 15-30 miles, then working up to 60 miles.

“As miles go up, so does the dog care,” Anderson says.

She loves getting out with her dogs. On the longer runs, she loves the silence. The only sounds are the clinking of the harness, the patter of the dog’s feet and the sled’s runners skidding over snow.

“It’s great,” she said, “You take in the scenery with eight (to) 12 of your best friends.”

She’s been training so much that over Christmas break Anderson estimates that she’s spent more time with dogs than humans.

“When you put on that many miles you form special bonds,” she said.

Now she feels ready for the biggest challenge of her young mushing career: the Eagle Cap Extreme.

“And it’s cool because I grew up watching this race and now I get to compete in it,” she said.

If she completes the 200-mile race, it will also be her first Iditarod qualifier.

“I’m not planning on entering the Iditarod,” she said with a chuckle. “But this will be my first step along the way if decide to become crazier.”

First responders: Fire and ambulance agencies hoping to merge

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for the Helix fire district, acknowledges the increase is a bit more of a leap for taxpayers in the city of less than 200. They pay about 40 cents per \$1,000 assessed value for fire services now, and 1\$ for ambulance services since 2017. Those within the East Umatilla fire district already pay \$1 for fire services.

“I hope they’ll be receptive, because as a larger unit we’ll be able to provide a better service,” Case said.

Case also sits on the intergovernmental agency board for the four smaller districts.

“With the amount of money that we have, it’s hard to provide the equipment and the turnouts,” he said. “It’s also hard for a part-time chief to make the time commitment needed to make sure the district runs smoothly.”

Baty said that the move

wouldn’t affect any of the agencies’ ability to provide mutual aid in Umatilla, Morrow and Gilliam counties as part of a tri-county agreement.

“We get some really good leadership from that,” he said.

He added that because Milton-Freewater’s emergency services are private, they aren’t eligible to forge formal mutual agreements with the public agencies in east Umatilla County or become a part of the potential district. Milton-Freewater voted to re-apportion their ambulance tax district in November.

“They’re a private, for-profit agency. It’s illegal for us to have a mutual aid agreement with them,” he said. “When they need help, which the last couple of weeks they have, we will go out. We are firefighters and responders helping firefighters and responders.”

Baty hopes a merged tax

district could pave the way to a renovated Weston fire station, which is the largest in its area. The current station, the site of a former city jail, lacks a kitchen, crew quarters and formal storage to help protect firefighting gear against carcinogens caused by the engines.

“We have some plans to go to the state and ask for some help. But that’s about six or seven dominoes away,” he said. “This is the first domino.”

The organizations hope to compile a list of frequently asked questions through the process of 10 different town halls between Tuesday evening and May 11.

“We don’t have nearly as much as we think we need and we’re doing well with what we have,” he said. “That’s what we want to show folks. If you give us a dollar, not only will we stretch it into three dollars, we’ll make it three smart dollars.”



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Chief Dave Baty, who oversees Helix and East Umatilla rural fire protection districts, demonstrates a set of makeshift lockers that have been assembled to keep carcinogens from the diesel brush trucks from spewing onto turnout gear stored at the East Umatilla County Rural Fire Protection District station in Weston on Tuesday morning.

Robbery: ‘The element of surprise was on our side at that point’

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their investigation and keeping their minds open to other suspects.

Boedigheimer addressed members of the public who were concerned about the recent crime at a Jan. 13 city council meeting in Milton-Freewater, and the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin reported that chief said evidence was beginning to

support the theory that the robberies are connected and people were working together to commit them.

However, Boedigheimer didn’t mention that a suspect in one of the robberies had been arrested, which he said was to allow the sheriff’s office to finish the last steps linking Metcalfe to the crime without him or others knowing.

“To his knowledge, he

was arrested on a probation violation warrant,” Milton-Freewater Police Chief Doug Boedigheimer wrote in an email. “The element of surprise was on our side at that point.”

Boedigheimer confirmed he was aware that Metcalfe was connected and in custody, but said mentioning it at the council meeting would have put the investigation at risk as the sheriff’s office

tried to tilt the scale from “reasonable suspicion” to “probable cause.”

“Had I talked about Metcalfe at the council meeting, and had the media printed that or a citizen posted the information to Facebook, then there would have been a probability that Metcalfe would have found he was being looked at for the robbery,” Boedigheimer wrote in an email. “He is allowed

phone calls in jail, and many of the criminal element follow Facebook or read news articles dealing with what they or their friends do in the criminal realm.”

As it was, the sheriff’s office finished linking Metcalfe to the robbery just days after the council meeting and now have one suspect formally charged and in custody.

“We’ve still got some additional work we have to

do,” Rowan said. “Hopefully, we can continue to collaborate and work effectively like we have.”

Metcalfe is being held at the Umatilla County Jail with a bail of \$300,000.

As Measure 11 crimes, first-degree robbery carries a mandatory minimum sentence of seven years and six months, while second-degree kidnapping carries a sentence of five years and 10 months.