

RACE

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Brett will carry the family flag this year.

According to Suzette, the whole mushing experience began when Spencer realized he wasn't going to be able to follow his older brothers Brandon and Chase as an athlete on the high school football team.

"Our two older boys are big strapping football players," Suzette said. And the family really enjoyed going to their games.

But Spencer was born with a defect in his left leg and wasn't able to play football like his brothers.

"That was very painful to him," Suzette recalled. "Then one day he was reading Jack London's 'Call of the Wild,' and he came up and said, 'Wouldn't it be so cool to have sled dogs?'"

Spencer's dad, Brett, had been reading a book about the Yukon gold rush the same week and also remarked to Suzette, "Wouldn't a team of sled dogs be the coolest?"

"I accused Spencer of having been talking to his dad," Suzette said. "But it just worked out that way."

So, the family sat down and discussed the idea.

It was a huge undertaking: dozens of dogs (it's now 50 dogs), \$1,500 a month in dog food, specialized equipment, weekends all booked for years to come, danger to life and limb ... the undertaking definitely required a family vote.

And they were all in.

"As a mom, the last thing I want is 50 dogs in my back yard," Suzette said. "But it's taught my sons to work like men. They do all the care-taking, the feeding, they don't race but they do all the support for their brother."

Turns out all the Bruggeman men love dogs.

Suzette likes dogs, but she's really more of a cat lover, a music lover, a lover of community theater, and a



Courtesy photo

Musher Brett Bruggeman of Great Falls, Montana and Gyfr enjoy a bonding moment.

novelist.

"But I love that they do this," she said.

And mushing was a perfect fit for the family

"Within just a few years our guys started winning," Suzette said. "It's an accomplishment that they built up such skill in such a short time."

Spencer just took second place in the eight-dog, adult division of the Rodeo Run in West Yellowstone on Dec. 19-20.

His dad, Brett, running a 12-dog team, also took second place in his division.

Brett's every bit the musher his son is.

"Usually my son is with me," he said. "But when you're running your team, you are in your own world. Then, when you set up camp you're together."

What Brett likes most about mushing is the highs and lows.

"It's an emotional roller coaster," he said. "When you're in a race you're sleep deprived and it always seems your best run follows your

worst run. I love seeing the team come together. We start off in late fall and to see them all come together is really rewarding."

Teamwork is a beautiful thing. So, no surprise, the big reason he loves ECX is

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Notes of interest

THE DOGS

The Bruggemans race Alaskan Huskies, a mixed breed of dogs descended from the dogs of the Yukon Gold Rush. The important "pedigree" each dog possesses is his or her love of the work.

BRUGGEMAN LEAD DOGS

"I have probably five dogs that will trade off leading," Bruggeman said. "Pluggie is the main dog, he's a large white dog; he'll be my main lead dog.

He's the best dog in the kennel, the best I've owned. After the 200-mile race last year he was still jumping and barking and hitting his harness to go more.

"Skynyr, another white dog, is a new dog and came from one of our first litters. He still hasn't figured out how to camp. He's still standing up and howling when he should be laying down."

THE SCARIEST RUN BRETT'S EVER DONE?

"My first race, I did the 350-mile Race

to the Sky in Montana. I got in over my head and had the flu and about the second day in I was the last person in the race.

Everybody else finished about 12 hours ahead of me.

I was out there by myself, down to six dogs, got to one of the passes and sat down to take a break and got hypothermia. ... When we finished the race I had one dog in the sled bag and five on the line.

My oldest son was helping me on that race and when we drove home I didn't recognize our house.

It taught me to be better prepared and that you have to take care of yourself or you'll get in a dangerous situation."

THE SCARIEST POSSIBILITY ON A RUN?

"Losing my team (having them take off with the sled after a wreck). That worries me the most because it's happened before.

It was a long 11-mile walk back to the truck once, and I found them all curled up under the truck."

because of the teamwork for which the event is justly famous.

"When I came back last year it was like coming back to a family reunion," Brett

said. "More than any other race, there's a real sense of community."

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