Home Country

'Seven Dog Slim' hits the trail

This Saturday, I'll dig around in the closet and pull out an especially large, puffy, gold-colored down parka. It's stained here and there, and the zipper hasn't worked since 1985, but the toggles and loops still hold it together. It was made for me by a special lady back in 1972, when a bunch of half-frozen idiots got together to plan a very long, cold camping trip known as the Iditarod Sled Dog Race across a thousand miles of Alaska.

Hopefully, it'll be cold enough here for

me to wear the parka once again. because my thoughts will be thousands of miles away in Anchorage with men and women and sleds and dogs and pickup trucks with dog boxes on the back. On the first Saturday in March, since the first one in 1973, the longest race of its kind will begin once again, and part of me will be there, just as it has been for nearly 40 years now.

Oh, I didn't do too well in that first race, back in '73. For one thing, I was known as a "recreational

musher." And I was. Our cabin was more than 12 miles from the nearest road, so we used dogs to get back and forth to the village half the year. We couldn't afford to feed 75 dogs year round in order to field a race team of 16.

So I got one dog out

of the pound and borrowed someone's house pet and added them to my own five and put together a team of seven (the minimum at that time), which gave me the moniker "Seven Dog Slim" for many years.

I crushed an ankle 300 miles into that first race and the dogs took me another 20 miles to a trapper's cabin where I was picked up by an Army helicopter. Oh, I made it to Nome that first vear, but it was by air. and as a pool reporter. In following years I flew the trail as a minor race official and reporter. My wife, Pam, ran race headquarters.

On Saturday morning, I'll be feeling the slamming cold wind of the Susitna River Valley blowing headon into my team as



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they wind sinuously up the frozen Yentna River toward Rainy Pass. On Saturday night, I'll be looking at the dogs staked out once again in my mind as the fire thaws snow for them to drink. I'll see the Northern Lights dance above the Alaska Range, even though I'm in a house with electricity, and I'll be so thankful

I once had the chance to do that. And the mushers and the dogs and the volunteer pilots will all be in my prayers, because it's cold on that trail ... and it's a very long way to Nome.

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