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Gone with the dogs

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You can't blame Van Dyne's Don Smidt and his 16 "kids" if they called it quits, at the 35th annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in the south-central Alaskan Wilderness.

Smidt and his team of American Kennel Club registered Siberian Huskies have more than enough reasons to give up their quest for a finish.

Twenty mushers have already scratched, including 14 between Finger Lake and Rainy Pass, in a forsaken land dubbed "the burn." It is the highest point of the race, rising to 3,160 feet, strewn with steep cliffs, scorched tree stumps and brush.



Don Smidt, 39, of Van Dyne, left, with Stephanie Michaels in the sled and an unidentified rider, right, drives his dog team through downtown Anchorage, Alaska on March 3 during the ceremonial start of the 1,122-mile Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. The Associated Press photo

Four-time champion Doug Swingley broke his ribs there and Wisconsin's Ben Stamm of Argyle and Bryan Mills of Marengo (Ashland) both suffered major leg injuries. Stamm scratched, but Mills' leg was wrapped and Monday night he was 45th going into Grayling, Alaska.

Smidt has avoided injuries and checked into the old mining city of Iditarod, now a national park and ghost town. It is the halfway point of his 1,122-mile journey that began in Anchorage and ends in Nome, Alaska.

Only three of five Wisconsinites remain in the race, including Smidt (61st), Mills (45th) and Matt Rossi of Herbster (53rd). Rossi suffered a setback after sunset on Thursday, when his dogs ran off as he was trying to untangle them 21 miles outside of Nikolai. He got a lift from a fellow musher and his dogs were located four miles away sleeping, according to a report in the Anchorage Daily News.

Smidt, who started 81st with his all-AKC registered team of Siberians, was the second-to-last musher to arrive in the race namesake of Iditarod on Monday afternoon.

By no means is Smidt a straggler, the brutal weather conditions have pelted mushers with snow and ice and temperatures less than minus-40.

Iditarod is a less than accommodating stop on the route. Mushers stay in an old trapper's cabin, though race officials say many lay under the night sky, in the straw, with their dogs.

Denise Cwiok, Smidt's business partner at Howl'n Wind Siberians, said she knows Smidt will continue.

"The general consensus of the Iditarod mushers: they will go through anything to finish," Cwiok said. "It's the most important part of the race — finishing."

Cwiok said her dogs are undoubtedly enjoying the nice weather — Siberians generally love the cold, and she said they actually go faster the colder it gets. Three-quarters of Smidt's team are titled champions.

Unlike Smidt, who is covered head-to-toe in an

extreme weather suit, the Siberians that lead him are covered in a natural suit of armor. Siberian Huskies are double-coated, while the Canadian Kennel Club Alaskan Huskies have one coat of fur.

Siberians have a fluffy inner layer and insulating outer coat that carries the dogs color.

"We don't have to put coats on our dogs," Cwiok said. "The outer coat doesn't melt the snow. The coats are absolutely magnificent."

Smidt bought his warmth. His extreme suit cost \$400 and the covering parka was \$300. He wears about a \$100 pair of white bunny boots and his hat, mittens/gloves and neck gaters were about \$600.

The race has cost Cwiok and Smidt more than \$10,000, including a more than \$3,000 handmade wood sled. The dogs are also fitted with custom harnesses that cost \$60 each.

Some of the costs were picked up by small sponsors who have gotten dogs from Howl'n Wind or wanted a memento of the Iditarod. Each sponsor will receive the piece they paid for after the race.

Cwiok, who refers to her dogs as her "kids," is anxiously awaiting their arrival in Nome. That will culminate a 10-year racing affair that began as a hobby for Smidt, an old-fashioned Wisconsin dairy farmer.

Smidt racing over Lake Winnebago on a sled purchased at Fleet Farm and moved on to sprint events. It was his idea to train for the Iditarod.

He had to qualify with a 200- and 300-mile qualifying race and used a 1,038-mile event in Newfoundland as practice, two years ago.

They started with 30 dogs and narrowed it down to 24 and finally the 18 that are now in Alaska — two are alternates.

"It's an athletic thing that is going on all year long," said Cwiok of the training. "You're only as fast as your slowest dog."

Smidt's background has little to do with dog-sledding. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in Dairy. He's managed large farms, but it's been his dream to race in the Iditarod.

He's learned to handle the dogs, along with his 5-year old son Christopher, who sent him a card before the race that Smidt is carrying with him for luck during the race.

Smidt went to Alaska in January to find snow to train his team. Since the race started on March 3, he has had no contact with the outside world. The only people he sees are fans in the small towns he passes through and race officials.

That has made Cwiok a little nervous, as she methodically browses race Web sites to track their progress.

Cwiok has trained Siberians in confirmation and obedience for more than 30 years and said she couldn't live life without her dogs.

"They are my kids," Cwiok said of the dogs. "They are spoiled just like any other child is spoiled."

Smidt has made it to every checkpoint with his entire team and has no reported injuries. Cwiok said he has plenty of experience.

"You're out there and you're all by yourself and can't freeze," Cwiok said. "You need to know what to pack and what to do."

His experience and the advice of mushers like Mills has helped him drive his team towards the finish.

Cwiok said he'll await a warm welcome from plenty of friends that have made the trip possible.

"These are all people that had a little money in their pocket, or liked my dogs," Cwiok said. "We tried to get a large sponsor who would buy the sled, but unfortunately it was too last minute. I am looking for more sponsors."

If all goes well, race leaders will finish about Wednesday, while Smidt is expected to finish before Friday.

"Don's attitude of this whole thing is cross the finish line with all 16 of the kids," Cwiok said. "That's his goal. He's not in it to win. He's in it to do it because it's there."

"He's seeing things that you and I have never seen. Even in a helicopter you can see it or smell it. I'm excited. This is bringing me to a whole new level."