

John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon

by Bob Schmidt

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(Thank you to Bob Schmidt for providing this "Program Summary".)

The Annual John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon ran for its 15th time this past January. I am one of 45 amateur radio operators providing communication for health and safety matters during this race. Hams are positioned at each road crossing and check point along the 400-mile route to insure that teams safely complete the competition.

The trail starts in Duluth and winds its way along the north shore of Lake Superior to Grande Marais where it turns up the Gunflint Trail. The thirty marathon teams encounter a variety of conditions during their average 38 hours on the trail. The race starts on Sunday and usually concludes on Wednesday or early Thursday. Conditions encountered this year were from mid 20 degrees with a blue sky and sunny conditions to a high temperature of 37 with rain and icing down to a minus 26 degree Fahrenheit. In addition to the marathon there is a mid-distance race with 50 teams that cover approximately 200 miles. Sled dog racing is like NASCAR in that individuals have to earn points to be able to go on to a bigger competition. The Iditarod is no different requiring entrants to demonstrate that they can run along a trail in all types of conditions.

The race and the mushers are commemorating the history of John Beargrease, who was a Native American responsible for bringing mail and news from Two Harbors to Grand Portage in all seasons. In the summertime he used a row boat, while in the winter he used dog sleds. In memory of this, all sleds contain a replica of the type of mail pouch that John Beargrease used, food for the dogs and the driver for one day, and safety equipment. There are five check points along the route, where each dog is examined by veterinarians for signs of dehydration, injury and exhaustion. Typically, these dogs show very little of these symptoms. They have been bred and are enthusiastic about pulling a dog sled.

The beauty and athletic ability of these dogs, as well as the stamina and resiliency of the mushers, make any hardships that volunteers go through seem minuscule. Whenever a team goes through a road crossing or a check point, they always tell us thank you. This is one of those times where you clearly get more from the experience than you actually put in.



Bob Schmidt