

Knik 200 hits the trail

IDITAROD QUALIFIER: Race takes mushers to Skwentna and back.

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KNIK -- Race organizer Kit Braden, dressed in a blaze-orange snowsuit and thus affectionately called "Carrot" by her husband, stood atop a ladder Saturday stringing a plywood sign across the starting line of the Knik 200.

It didn't matter that the race would begin in less than an hour and the dog teams and spectators were already waiting. This is a laid-back community that doesn't need loudspeakers and lots of glitz to put on a sled-dog race.

Fifteen mushers passed under that plywood sign at race time, and the rush is on to see who can drive their team 200 miles to Skwentna and back to earn the \$2,000 winner's prize.

Among the contenders are 17-year-old Dallas Seavey, son of 2004 Iditarod winner Mitch Seavey; Talkeetna musher and Iditarod veteran Jerome Longo; Rick Casillo, a 2004 Iditarod veteran running Dallas Seavey's second team; and John Hessert, signed up as a rookie in this year's Iditarod and working with four-time Iditarod champ Martin Buser.

Seavey, who is entering the Iditarod as a rookie, turns 18 the day before the race begins, making him the youngest person to ever run the 1,100-mile race to Nome. Iditarod rules ban mushers younger than 18.

Seavey is just a week off his last race, the Kuskokwim 300, in which he finished sixth and earned the Alaska Airlines' Eddie Hoffman Humanitarian award.

As Seavey put booties on his dogs before the start of Saturday's Knik 200, he said he wasn't putting any pressure on himself or his dogs.

"We're not trying to be competitive," he said. "We've got some 2-year-olds, and we're going to do some camping. I think almost everybody is out here just for training."

Casillo, running the other half of Seavey's team, was equally relaxed.

"This will just be a good, positive experience for us," he said.



Karen Ramstead approaches the Burma Road crossing about 10 miles into the Knik 200 sled dog race on Saturday. (Photo by Stephen Nowers / Anchorage Daily News)



Carlos Da Silva tries to untangle his team near the Burma Road crossing on Saturday. (Photo by Stephen Nowers / Anchorage Daily News)

However, with a smaller field of less-competitive mushers, the Seavey-Casillo tandem may be competitive, despite their plans.

Two Rivers musher Aliy Zirkle, last year's runner-up, withdrew earlier. So did Ray Redington Jr., grandson to the late-Joe Redington Sr., in whose memory the Knik 200 is run.

Race organizer Bruce Braden said that's probably because the race date was changed from its original Jan. 1 start to Saturday because of the lack of snow.

"A few of them also ran some of the other races," Braden said.

The Knik 200 is an Iditarod qualifier, so many rookies count on it.

Among that group is Dodo Perri, from Moncenisio, Italy, who has been dreaming of running the Iditarod ever since he came to Alaska in 1985 and watched Libby Riddles mush into history as the first woman to win. Perri is training with Big Lake musher Lynda Plettner, who has finished 11 Iditarods. Perri says he has 20 years of mushing experience in Europe.

"I came here last year to qualify in Iditarod," he said, "but I had trouble with the Klondike (300 sled dog race)" and didn't finish. "This year, I hope I'm more lucky."

Paul Charron, a 62-year-old musher who operates a 30-dog lot out of Willow, said this will be his third attempt to make it to the Iditarod start line. He wasn't able to complete qualifying races the first two times, but he said he learns a little more every year.

"These are the best dogs I've ever had," he said of his dogs, many from yards of Iditarod veterans DeeDee Jonrowe and Buser. "They're fast, sometimes a little too fast. But my goal is just to finish the race."

Also hoping to reach the Knik finish line is Lynton McLean, the South African musher who came close to completing the Copper Basin 300 earlier this month before scratching. He still needs an Iditarod qualifier.

Mushers in the Knik 200 follow the Iditarod Trail past Flathorn Lake, then turn onto the Susitna River briefly before branching off onto the Yentna River all the way to Skwentna.

There mushers are required to take a six-hour break before turning their sleds around for the drive back to Knik Lake. That big plywood sign that saw them off Saturday morning should still be there.

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Musher Lynda Plettner approaches the Burma Road crossing about 10 miles into the Knik 200 sled dog race on Saturday. The winner of the 200-mile race, an Iditarod qualifier, will earn \$2,000. (Photo by Stephen Nowers / Anchorage Daily News)



Musher Rick Casillo leaves the chute during the start of the Knik 200 sled dog race Saturday. Casillo, a 2004 Iditarod veteran, is running Dallas Seavey's second team. "This will just be a good, positive experience for us," Casillo said. (Photo by Stephen Nowers / Anchorage Daily News)

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Musher Dodo Perri gets a goodbye kiss from his girlfriend Maria Rita before the start of the Knik 200 sled dog race Saturday. *(Photo by Stephen Nowers / Anchorage Daily News)*



Timekeeper Terry Langholz yells the countdown to Jerome Longo's dog handlers before the start of Saturday's race. Mushers in the Knik 200 follow the Iditarod Trail past Flathorn Lake, then turn onto the Susitna River briefly before branching off onto the Yentna River all the way to Skwentna. There mushers are required to take a six-hour break before turning their sleds around for the drive back to Knik Lake. *(Photo by Stephen Nowers / Anchorage Daily News)*

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