



History of the Race

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The Iditarod Trail was first used when the Alaskan Gold Rush began in the 1880's. Towns came alive as gold was discovered. One such town was called Iditarod, named for the Indian word Haiditarod, which means a far, distant place. The Iditarod Trail became a way to reach these far, distant places. It was full of swamps in the summer, but in the winter, it was a major transportation route for the dog sled teams that were used by most people. It continued to be used until the mid 1920's.

In 1925, an epidemic of diphtheria hit the city of Nome. The disease could be treated with a special antitoxin, which is a special medicine to fight the bacteria in diphtheria. Unfortunately, the closest antitoxin that could be found was in Anchorage, on the other side of Alaska. Airplanes were still very new, so no one knew if they could fly in such cold weather. It was agreed that the liquid would be taken to Nenana by train, and then a relay of dog sled teams would carry it to Nome.

The trip covered almost 700 miles, and about 2/3 of it followed the Iditarod Trail. Leonhard Seppala, a Norwegian who had come to Alaska looking for gold, travelled 260 of those miles. He and his lead dog, Togo, crossed the frozen Norton Bay in order to speed the journey. He had to depend on Togo's sense of direction in the blinding snow, and Togo turned out to be a dependable guide. The last leg of the run was done by Gunnar Kaasen, who had been driving dog teams in Alaska for 21 years. His lead dog was Balto. Balto also proved to be an able leader. At one point he refused to go any further, and saved the team from falling into icy water. He led the team through blowing snow into Nome, and the diphtheria outbreak was stopped. Balto became a hero. He became so well known that a statue was built in New York's Central Park to honor him.

In 1967, a dog sled driver named Joe Redington, Sr. joined with Dorothy Page, an Alaskan interested in history, to celebrate dog sleds. At that time, sleds were being replaced by snowmobiles in Alaska. A sled dog race was held, and it was extended to Nome in 1973, with part of it following the old Iditarod Trail. The trip from Anchorage to Nome was similar to the famous diphtheria run of 1925. The race became known as the "The Last Great Race on Earth", and Joe Redington and Dorothy Page were known as the 'father and mother of the Iditarod'.