

Learning to Mush

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On March 14, 2010, fifteen dog sleds lit out from the Kamchatkan village of Esso. Standing in a cheering crowd, Lisa Strecker saw them go. She was witnessing the start of the twentieth annual Beringia dog sled race, certified by the Guinness Book of World Records in 1991 as the longest mushing trail in the world. In 2010, it would cover 950 kilometers. The previous day had been spent on celebrations and opening ceremonies, but as Strecker watched the teams race away, she couldn't help but feel left out of the fun. "Our party was already over," she said, "while their adventure was just beginning."

At a friend's house that afternoon, Strecker harnessed three dogs. She and her friend waited on the sled behind. The animals stood in confused silence. Eventually, the two women made a horse run ahead to start their makeshift team moving. This was the first time Strecker had stood on a dog sled — but it wouldn't be the last.

The next January, she returned to Kamchatka from Germany to begin training. Three weeks passed while she learned the basics of mushing. "I fell off my sled each time it turned," she said. "I must have kissed every tree around Petropavlovsk." Her first race was the Bystrinsky

sprint in February. As soon as it started, her sled dogs, borrowed from other mushers, turned and ran backwards toward their trainers. Once she got the team turned the right way, though, she beat a couple others to the finish line. So the first two months of 2011 were passed in preparation and practice. March would bring the Beringia.

People lent her the animals and equipment she needed. Strecker had to train some dogs so young they'd never been harnessed to a sled before. Organizers gave her the race's first starting number. At the line at Esso on the morning of March 7, surrounded by familiar crowds, she prayed that her dogs would perform well. "Please run in the right direction this time," she thought. Then the crowd screamed, and they were off.

That winter saw weeks of rain. Sidewalks in Petropavlovsk, seven hours to the south, were slippery as glass, and the land surrounding Esso was only patchy with snow. "This is the consequence of climate change," Strecker said. "Instead of -30 degrees Celcius, it was around 8 degrees. Rivers opened, bears woke up." The fifteen participating teams ran over mud and yellow weeds. Strecker spent long periods running alongside her sled so she wouldn't force extra weight on her dogs. The Beringia's first day covered 93 km. Two days later, one musher quit the race. By the twelfth day, the racers had reached Palana, and their dogs' paws were raw. Strecker and three other mushers stopped there.

The 2011 Beringia officially ended on March 21 in the village of Ossora. Its winner, Andrei Pritchkin, finished with a time of 89 hours 48 minutes. Though planned to follow the 950-km mushing trail, the race ended up covering 1100 km — "We were following snow," Strecker said, who completed 710 km. The bare terrain so exhausted that year's participants that one musher ended up walking over the finish line, accompanied by only two dogs.

This winter, though, should be more promising. Organizers are already taking applications for the 2012 competition. Strecker arrived this week in Petropavlovsk to begin working with her team. Her first two years around the race were spent in preparation and practice; this year, she'll finish the Beringia.

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