

# Reader's Theater

*A short play on the rules of the Iditarod Race*

*Written by Jennifer Slifer, Cromwell Middle School, Cromwell, CT*

## **Characters:**

Snowy Winter  
Joe Redington  
John Baker  
DeeDee Jonrowe  
Aurora Borealis  
Jeff King  
Jessie Royer  
Susie Sleet  
Bob Blizzard

**Snowy:** Hi, my name is Snowy Winter and I am here today to cover the beginning of the 2009 Iditarod race. As is tradition, the race begins in Anchorage, Alaska on the first Saturday of March. Oh, hey, there's Joe Redington! Hi, Joe, how are you?

**Joe:** Hi, Snowy. I am well today. Very excited as I am every year at the beginning of the Iditarod. This is the thirty-seventh year, you know.

**Snowy:** Yes. That is just incredible! As the "father" of the Iditarod, could you give the viewers at home some information on how this tradition began?

**Joe:** I would love to. The reason the race was started was to keep the sled dogs, who were very important to Alaska's past, a part of Alaska's present. Before snow mobiles, sled dogs were an important means of transportation. They were important to the history of Alaska from the gold rush, to mail delivery to hunting. We started this race to keep the tradition of sled dogs alive.

**Snowy:** Can you tell us a little about the one of the most famous sled dog runs in the history of Alaska?

**Joe:** Sure. This may be a story that many of you are familiar with. In 1925, there was an outbreak of the deadly disease, diphtheria, in the city of Nome, Alaska. The closest medicine was here in Anchorage, nearly 1,000 miles away! The doctors needed to get the medicine as soon as possible. So, the medicine was sent North by train to the end of the railway in Nenana. From Nenana, there was a sled dog relay to get the medicine the remaining 674 miles.

**Snowy:** What time of year was this?

**Joe:** Well, that was the problem. It was the middle of the winter, the end of January. Temperatures were well below freezing and blizzards were normal weather conditions. The teams faced wild winds and deep snow but delivered the 300,000 vials of medicine in 5 days! It was truly amazing!

**Snowy:** So, men and dog teams traveled to race the serum to Nome?

**Joe:** Yes. And the dog that is famous for this is Balto. Maybe some of your viewers have seen the Disney movie.

**Snowy:** I've seen that movie! I didn't make the connection to the Iditarod.

**Joe:** Well, most people don't. I wanted people to remember the importance of sled dogs and so started the Iditarod race.

**Snowy:** How long is the race trail?

**Joe:** The trail is almost 1,100 miles. The official length is 1,049 miles, which commemorates Alaska at the 49<sup>th</sup> state.

**Snowy:** How do you find people who want to race?

**Joe:** Well, it takes a special person who loves the outdoors and can bear the extreme cold. There's also prize money to get people involved.

**Snowy:** Are there men and women who participate?

**Joe:** Yes. Like I said, it takes a very special person who is physically fit and mentally strong.

**Snowy:** Thank you, Joe, for speaking with me today. I see the mushers lining up and want to speak with them. Take care and I'll see you next year.

## Scene 2

**Snowy:** Hey! John Baker! I see you are the first to line up today. But if you are first, why does your bib say #2?

**John:** Hi, Snowy. I am wearing #2 because no one ever wears #1. The number one spot each year is to remember a person from the past that is important to the Iditarod. So, no one ever wears that bib number. The person wearing the #2 bib is the first person to leave the start line. And I must keep this bib on at all times.

**Snowy:** How did you get that great position? Were you the first to sign up?

**John:** Oh, no. Sign ups began at the end of June and go until November 30<sup>th</sup> which is the last day to sign up. At the Mushers' Banquet two nights ago, we draw our numbers for our position in the race and I drew this number. As excited as I am, this is a hard place to start. I am the one cutting the trail for everyone behind me.

**Snowy:** Do you have to pay to be part of this race?

**John:** Yes. The entry fee this year was \$4,000.

**Snowy:** Does everyone win money for participating in the Iditarod?

**John:** The first 20 mushers to cross the finish line win money. The person who crosses first wins the most and the 20<sup>th</sup> person wins the least. Mushers who finish in 31<sup>st</sup> and after will each receive \$1049.

**Snowy:** Wow! Can anybody race?

**John:** As long you are 18 years or older and have participated in other sled dog races over 500 miles long.

**Snowy:** Thanks for your time. Maybe I will see you at one of the checkpoints.

**John:** Sure. Mushers have to stop and check in at each checkpoint on the route. And, all of us must make two eight hour stops and one 24 hour stop, so I will have plenty of time to catch up with you then.

### **Scene 3**

**Snowy:** I see veteran racer, DeeDee Jonrowe, wearing bib #26. Let's see what she is carrying on her sled. Hi, DeeDee.

**DeeDee:** Hi, Snowy. Nice to see you.

**Snowy:** Great to see you here again! I see you only have 12 dogs with you this year.

**DeeDee:** Yes. Well, you know I need 12 to 16 dogs to start the race. I have some pups on the line that may not make it the whole race but that's okay. I only need to cross the finish line with 6 dogs on the line so this is a good chance to train the pups for next year.

**Snowy:** Can you give the viewers at home an idea of what you carry on the sled? It seems like you need a lot of stuff for you and 12 dogs to survive in the wilderness of Alaska.

**DeeDee:** You know there are certain items the Iditarod race committee says I need to carry with me at all times. I must have a sleeping bag, an ax, one pair of snowshoes for me, eight booties for each dog, one pot that I can boil water and fuel to boil the water, and a notebook for the veterinarians to make notes in at each check point.

**Snowy:** Wow. That's a lot of stuff. What about food for you and the dogs?

**DeeDee:** I carry a small amount for the dogs and for me. Before the race I ship food to each checkpoint along the way. Otherwise, it would be too much to carry in the sled.

**Snowy:** How do you care for the dogs on the trail? I know the weather can get well below freezing and blizzards are common.

**DeeDee:** I need to make sure that at all times the dogs are in good condition. I need to make sure the line holding the dogs is secure, safe and comfortable for each dog. If a dog is sick or injured I have to drop him off at a checkpoint. If a dog dies, I have to take him to the next check point and fill out a form on how he died.

**Snowy:** If a dog is sick, can you give him medicine to help him finish the race?

**DeeDee:** No, I can't give any type of drug to a dog. Dogs are randomly checked for drug use. If a dog tests positive he will be removed from my team.

**Snowy:** Can you take any type of medicine while you are in the race?

**DeeDee:** I can be tested randomly, too. So, no medicine or drug of any type is the best bet.

**Snowy:** Thanks for your time, DeeDee, and good luck!

#### **Scene 4**

**Snowy:** I am going to turn coverage over to my friend, Aurora Borealis. Hi, Aurora.

**Aurora:** Hi, Snowy. Things are looking great out here. I am standing with Jeff King, wearing bib #3. We're going to continue our coverage on what's allowed in the race and what's not. Hi, Jeff. How are you?

**Jeff:** I'm great. Can't wait to start this race.

**Aurora:** I know the mushers are usually anxious to get out of Anchorage because it's hard to manage the dogs in the city streets, even though snow is brought in to cover the streets. Could you tell the viewers a little more about this?

**Jeff:** Well, it's hard in Anchorage because the dogs are used to running in the wilderness and on trails. The cars and snowmobiles spook them. We start the race here because it draws a great crowd and helps us to get psyched up for the 1,100 miles ahead. The real competition starts tomorrow.

**Aurora:** What do you mean?

**Jeff:** Once we all leave Anchorage tonight we drive our dog teams to the first check point, Eagle River, 35 miles north of here. In Eagle River we load our sleds and dogs into trucks and drive to the next check point which is Wasilla.

**Aurora:** Why do you drive there?

**Jeff:** The route between Eagle River and Wasilla is too hard for the dogs. Once we get to Wasilla, we line up again in the same order and then the race truly begins. This is called the race re-start because we literally start the race again. Once we leave Wasilla, we can't get help from any one in or on a vehicle - car, truck, snow mobile or ATV. If we accept help, we're disqualified.

**Aurora:** What if you get lost?

**Jeff:** No one can help us between checkpoints. Many mushers over the years have gotten lost because we can't carry anything to help us navigate - no emergency locator transmitters, no electronic devices that measure speed or direction including GPS, Loran and night vision goggles. We can only use a traditional paper map.

**Aurora:** Sounds scary. How do you know if you are going the right way?

**Jeff:** I use my map and count on the dogs for that.

**Aurora:** Thanks for that great information. Good luck!

## Scene 5

**Aurora:** We're moving down the line. I see Jessie Royer with bib #8 on. Let's see what she has to say about how the mushers must behave. Hi, Jessie.

**Jessie:** Hi, Aurora.

**Aurora:** Can you tell me a little about how the mushers are expected to behave during this long race?

**Jessie:** Well, you know we must help another musher in an emergency and won't be penalized. We have to treat each other with respect through out the race. One musher can't mess with another's dogs, food or gear at any time.

**Aurora:** What happens if you get hurt half way through the race? Can someone take your place?

**Jessie:** No, I would have to quit, or scratch as we call it on the trail. No substitutes are allowed.

**Aurora:** What happens if you run into a problem with a moose or buffalo?

**Jessie:** I can kill it in self defense and any mushers behind me must help to gut it. No one can pass me. Once the animal is gutted, I leave before any other musher.

**Aurora:** Is a musher allowed to pass another musher at any time during the race?

**Jessie:** Yes. When one musher comes within 50 feet of another, the musher behind can demand the trail and the musher in front has to step aside and let him or her pass.

**Aurora:** What happens if you are in the lead and close to the finish line? That doesn't seem fair.

**Jessie:** In the last leg of the race, the trail between Fort Davis Roadhouse and the finish line in Nome, this rule doesn't apply. This part of the trail is called No Man's Land. Once you reach this part, if you are in the lead, you can keep it!

**Aurora:** Thanks for the information. Good luck! And now I am going to send it back to Susie Sleet and Bob Blizzard in the studio.

**Bob:** Thanks, Aurora. Sounds like things are off to a good start.

**Susie:** Well, Bob, they do and remember, it's an even-numbered year so the mushers follow the northern trail this year. The southern trail is followed on odd-numbered years. But, both do end up at the same finish line in Nome.

**Bob:** Thanks, Susie, for the information. We hope you follow the race as closely as we will. Mushers will start on Saturday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Don't forget to tune in! Good night.