



Zuma's
Paw Prints

PRE-RACE MUSHERS' BANQUET

March 2, 2006

Hello again boys and girls,

Before the mushers can start the Iditarod Race, they must have a starting position. After all, we couldn't have 83 teams of sixteen dogs and sleds and mushers all rushing down 4th Avenue in Anchorage at the same time. They would wind up with the biggest tangle of dogs, humans, ganglines and sleds in the world. Since 1973, a banquet has been held on the Thursday night before the start of the race so the mushers could draw for a starting position. This year, they still had the banquet, but getting that important starting position was totally different. In the past, they would draw a number out of a boot. This year for the first time, the mushers got to choose what position they wanted to start in. Of course, only the first musher to draw would have the opportunity to pick any of the numbers available. All the rest would choose from the numbers that were left. The 2006 Mushers' Banquet had 1800 guest for the sit down meal of beef, mashed potatoes, steamed carrots and rolls. For dessert, the attendees had their choice of cake or coconut cream pie. (Or they could do what Lois & Peg did and split their desserts in half so they got to try each one.)



Lois asked me to please attend the banquet and take pictures and write about it. I have always avoided the banquet because they don't serve pizza; I mean, think about it, what is a banquet without pizza? I only agreed to go because Lois is my best friend and she said we would only stay for a while. While everyone was coming in and getting settled at their table, Hobo Jim entertained the 1800 attendees of the banquet with his Alaska folk songs, finishing with the Iditarod song he wrote quite a few years ago. That got everyone's toes tapping including mine. Lois had people from St. Louis, Missouri; Pennsylvania and Orlando, Florida at her table as

well as Ellen Meyer, a teacher who has been to the Iditarod several times and our good friend, Peg Moore, also from Missouri. It was a really friendly bunch and they let me lay under their table when I wasn't busy. I even had a beef dinner all to myself.

Richard Burmeister, president of the Iditarod Board of Directors, gave the invocation. Donielle Carroll, a young female human from Fairbanks, who sang the National Anthem and the Alaska Flag Song, followed him. Oh my, that girl has a beautiful voice and her arrangement of these songs was unusual and thrilling.



I'm glad I went just because it gave me a chance to hear her. (Even if there was no pizza!) This year's Founder's Award was given to **Bill DeVine** of Anchorage. Bill is the artist who designed the world famous Iditarod Logo of the I and the dog. He was



(Martin Buser chats with Veterinarian, Al Townshend at the banquet.)

very involved with helping Joe Redington, Sr promote the Iditarod in the early years.

The 2006 Honorary Musher was Gene Leonard. Gene and his wife June were the only residents of Finger Lake when this race started. Gene ran a trap line, hunted and fished and lived a wilderness life style. He also was the weather reporter from his cabin home at Finger Lake. When the race first started, Gene was one of the first trail breakers, helping the Army to find, pack and mark the trail. Gene and June were gracious hosts to the checkpoint and they enjoyed helping the teams on the way up into the pass. Gene knew all the trails in the area and was a valuable adviser to the mushers and race officials. Gene ran the Iditarod himself after years of watching the mushers pass through his checkpoint. He loved the camaraderie the mushers shared on the trail. When Gene finally retired from the weather service and he and June move to Tennessee where they could enjoy less harsh conditions. Gene, who died in 2004, is honored this year as one of the great people who made a difference in the sport of dog mushing.

After the speeches, the auction of a couple of very nice items and all the announcements, the mushers began to choose their starting positions. It was interesting that Jeff King who signed up early picked number 30 as his starting position. None of the mushers told us what made them decide on the number they picked out, but I think some of them are planning on running Sunday during the colder night time hours. The teams are constantly planning new strategy as the conditions change. They have to be alert to changes and be able to change their plans fast.



There are lots of pictures from the banquet thanks to Jeff Schultz, Iditarod Photographer, June Price, Iditarod reporter and Zuma, the K-9 reporter. Musher & Author, Gary Paulsen →

More next time,



Lots of Tail Wags,
Zuma