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SLED-DOG RIVALS

Yukon race prized as poorer but purer

Top musher passes up opportunity for bigger fame, money in Iditarod

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Special to The Globe and Mail
Angel Creek, Alaska

If Frank Turner of Whitehorse were to win the 1999 Iditarod, he would take home \$55,000 (U.S.) and a new \$40,000 pickup truck and earn thousands more through endorsements.

It's the Super Bowl of the sled-dog world.

The image of Turner crossing the finish line would be played on CNN and other television outlets throughout North America and Europe. Turner could also expect a late-night chat with David Letterman or Jay Leno.

Even though Turner is one of the top mushers in the North, don't look for the Yukoner to be among the pack of leaders on the 1,860-kilometre Alaskan trail from Anchorage to Nome.

The 51-year-old passed up the potential fame and huge prize money to compete in the Yukon Quest. The 1,600-kilometre race from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Whitehorse, one of Canada's premier sled-dog events, started last Saturday. There are 29 entrants in the Quest, which is expected to finish on Feb. 24.

If the Iditarod is the Super Bowl, than the Yukon Quest is like a Canadian Football League exhibition game — less money and less glamour. Most people below the 60th parallel don't even know the race exists. Some mushers, including Turner and a couple of former Iditarod champions, enjoy the Quest because of its lack of glitz. It has fewer distractions, simpler rules and tougher terrain. It is a race for the purists.

"I ran the Iditarod in the old days when it was more like the Quest," said Joe May, a race judge with the Yukon Quest and the 1980 Iditarod champion. "And those are the things that attracted me — the outdoors and being cold, wet and miserable."

"I don't like to say anything negative about the Iditarod, because it's a great sporting event. But it's grown away from what it was."

The 63-year-old, who lives 190 kilometres north of Fairbanks, believes the \$450,000 (U.S.) in total prize money, compared with \$125,000 (U.S.) for the Quest, has overshadowed the race.

"When a whole lot of money gets involved, people start to get picky," May said. "We [the Quest] only have half as many rules as the Iditarod."

"You almost have to have a lawyer to read all the rules of the Iditarod, and I don't like it when it gets that involved."

Rick Mackey, one of the few mushers to win both the Iditarod (1983) and Yukon Quest (1997), competed in 18 Iditarods in 20 years before he became burned out from the paper work and intense veterinary checkup programs. He has raced in three Quests from 1996 to 1998. He wanted to compete again this year, but a sponsorship deal is pulling him back to the Iditarod, which starts on March 6 in Anchorage.

"It was nice to have a change of pace from all that hubbub to the low-key atmosphere of the Quest, and it's the one thing I really enjoy about the Quest," said Mackey, who intends to race in future Quests.

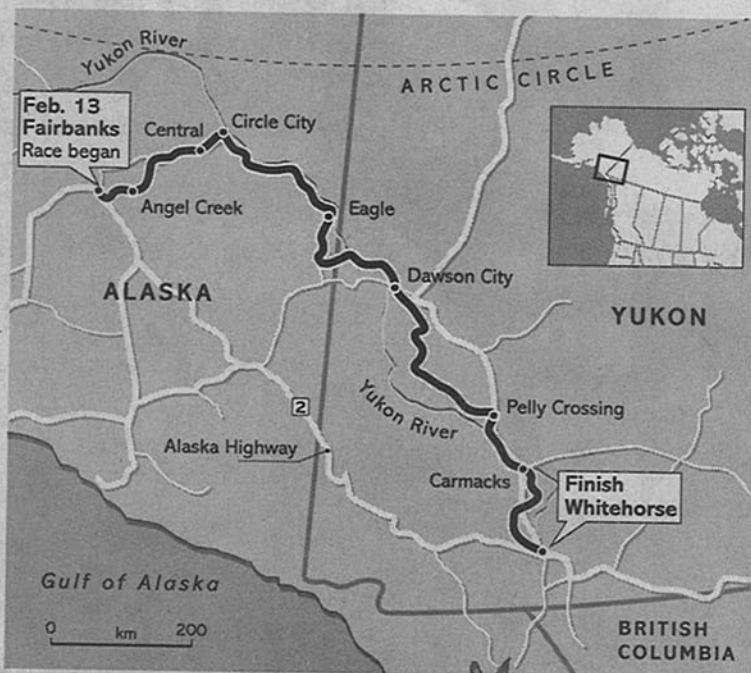
"But at the same time, I have to make a living at this and you need that publicity."

In the Iditarod, racers get "exposure" from the 300 accredited reporters and film crew members and the thousands of fans who line the trails of the event, which debuted in 1973. The Yukon Quest, which began in 1984, has slightly fewer than 50 accredited media following the race, and the majority are from Europe. It is run on isolated backwoods trails, where most of the mushers' "exposure" is from the Arctic weather.

There are 26 Iditarod checkpoints and plenty of opportunities

YUKON HO

Tracing the route of the Yukon Quest across North America:



YUKON QUEST

Begins Feb. 13
Start line: Fairbanks, Alaska
Finish line: Whitehorse
Length: 1,600 kilometres
Number of checkpoints along trail: 10
Number of mushers: 29
Race budget: \$350,000 (U.S.)
Total prize money: \$125,000
First-place prize: \$30,000
Year started: 1984
1998 winning time: 11 days 11 hours 27 minutes (Bruce Lee of Denali Park, Alaska)

IDITAROD

Begins March 6
Start line: Anchorage, Alaska
Finish Line: Nome, Alaska
Length: 1,860 kilometres
Number of checkpoints along trail: 26
Number of mushers: 59
Race budget: \$2.5-million (U.S.)
Total prize money: \$450,000
First-place prize: \$55,000, \$40,000 new truck and endorsement deals.
Year started: 1973
1998 winning time: 9 days 5 hours 52 minutes (Jeff King of Denali Park, Alaska)

for mushers to stock up on supplies and remove ice from their beards in a warm building in different communities along the trail.

The Quest has checkpoints in communities with populations less than a big-city apartment building, such as Pelly Crossing, Yukon, (population 300) and the Alaskan communities of Eagle (150), Circle City (120) and Angel Creek (two — Steve and Annette Verbanac).

Temperatures can drop to -50, and Quest mushers enjoy the pioneer spirit of sleeping outside on their sleds and going hundreds of kilometres along isolated trails, seeing only the Northern Lights and the occasional moose.

Alaska musher Mark May says the Quest is for the purists. The son of Joe May ran in the 1998 Iditarod.

"You really have to enjoy the wilderness to race in the Yukon Quest

because that's what it is from start to finish," Mark said. "With the Iditarod, you have airplanes and snow machines [zooming by you]."

It's the solitude on the trail with his dogs that Turner loves, and no matter how large the prize money becomes for that other race, the Yukoner is loyal to the Quest.

"[Money] hasn't been a big issue with me," said the 1995 Yukon Quest champion, who was 12th into Angel Creek, the first checkpoint, in this year's race. "Those times I have just done something for the money, I've found the money wasn't enough. It doesn't provide me with enough satisfaction."

Joe May said he, too, believes mushing is more important than money. "I know people who'd go out and race dogs if the prize was a dead fish and a bag of dog food."