

OFF TO THE RACES

BY MARGO PFEIFF

In the land of fractured ice and menacing bears, the Nunavut Quest is the North's toughest dog-sled course. But for the Arctic's hardcore mushers, the prize is all in the journey.

It's a bright, brisk afternoon in April on the frozen shores of northern Baffin Island. Almost the entire village of Arctic Bay has gathered on the sea ice in front of town. They huddle, laugh and shuffle to stay warm as 11 dog-sled teams from four different Nunavut communities line up in the wind-packed snow.

The past few days have been filled with feasts, dances and short-distance dog-sled races; now, after a group prayer, the timekeeper gives the signal for the big event to begin. The first musher takes off, then, a minute later, another leaves, then another. The crowd roars as each team glides down frozen Adams Sound, all of them bound for Igloodik, 600 kilometres away. The 14th annual Nunavut Quest is off and running. »



AND THE WINNER IS: Andrew Taqtu, second-place finisher in the 2012 Quest, waves as supporters from his hometown of Arctic Bay hoist him up in his *qamutiq*. Photo by Clare Kines



CLOCKWISE: Andy Attagutaluutuk placed first in the 2012 Nunavut Quest; one musher's kids – and support crew – huddle on the family bed; during a blizzard, caribou skin's the way to go.

CLARE KINES

AS THE HIGH ARCTIC'S BIGGEST dog-sled race, the Nunavut Quest is unlike any other mushing competition. Taking place far above the treeline, it requires solo racers to navigate from one far-flung village to another, travelling for about a week along untracked routes of jumbled pack ice, steep ravines and labyrinthine valleys choked with snow and slush. Some years, multi-day blizzards stop the event in its tracks; occasionally, fracturing ice sends participants scrambling for shore. Then there are the run-of-the-mill Arctic perils: the deep-freeze temperatures and, of course, the constant threat of polar bears.

Despite the dangers, though, the Nunavut Quest has almost no help along the way. Unlike more famous subarctic races like the Yukon Quest and the Iditarod, there are no shelters or checkpoints, no directional markers or hovering helicopters. Mushers have their own personal support teams travelling by skidoo, but there's no veterinarian or doctor. For the first decade of the Nunavut Quest, mushers' only connection with the outside world was a single orange Spillsbury radio.

These days, support teams carry a few satellite phones and GPS units, but, for the most part, mushers aren't following a predetermined course. Instead, the routes are decided on by daily consultations among Inuit hunters and elders on the support teams.

"It gets you back to the old times," says Olayuk Barnabas of Arctic Bay, who has run every Nunavut Quest since 2001. "The experience refreshes your mind and gets you out with others, meeting new people. It has become so much more than just a race."

The Quest was the brainchild of five Arctic Bay residents, including then-mayor Moses Ujukuluk, who dreamt it up one dark January day in 1999. An annual Inuit sled dog race would both celebrate Nunavut as a new territory and, they hoped, uphold Northern traditions. They

organized a few local races, then contacted other communities and found them keen for something bigger – a race from village to village.

Fundraising went into high gear: dance tickets were sold; Northern companies donated radios, snowmobiles and airline passes to raffle off. Cash prizes were announced – \$10,000, \$5,000 and \$2,500 for first, second and third places. On April 13, 1999, 15 mushers left Arctic Bay for Igloolik on what was then known as the North Baffin Quest.

Races have taken place every year since then. While the purse remains the same, the host communities change annually: mushers have raced from Arctic Bay to Hall Beach, from Igloolik to Repulse Bay, from Pond Inlet to Clyde River. It's spawning smaller, local races too: Clyde River started a local annual race to Qikiqtarjuaq, and since 2001 Nunavik has hosted its own dog sled race, Ivakkak.

In the third year of the Nunavut Quest, one of the founders, Joeli Qamanirq, then the Quest chairman, began to notice something surprising taking place: Entire families traveling along the Quest trail as part of the racers' support teams. As the contest unfolded, teens socialized, adults caught up on gossip and elders reminisced about travelling the same routes as children, pointing out landmarks and sharing legends along the way. The focus was no longer simply a contest; generations were mingling and relatives, far from the stresses of community life, were rekindling bonds. "At times it felt more like a giant family reunion than a race," says Qamanirq.

"We started this as simply a race, but it soon became clear it wasn't just about the competition or prize money," adds Joeli Sanguya, chairman of Clyde River's Iliqsivik Society, an Inuit-led community wellness and traditional culture organization. "It has also become a time of healing."

BACK IN THE OLD DAYS, spring was the traditional travelling season when longer, warmer days made families anxious to escape long winters hunkered down in sod houses or suffering from igloo-fever. Everyone packed up and travelled to visit friends and relatives in distant camps or communities. But over the years, as snowmobiles replaced dog sleds, that ritual largely fell by the wayside. The Quest is bringing back that tradition, and since races generally followed the same paths used by Inuit for centuries, elders have become valued consultants in daily route planning.

Each race day starts with a morning prayer and a meeting to discuss the upcoming route. First to depart is the convoy of support teams: snowmobiles pulling *qamutiqs* loaded with supplies. An hour later the racers head off, one by one, following the snowmobile tracks when conditions allow.

There's a growing rulebook in place to preserve Inuit tradition. Drivers must travel alone on 12- to 14-foot wooden *qamutiqs* lashed (not nailed) together. While some competitors use plastic runners, which they plane smooth daily, others stick to the old method of building up layers of ice for faster glide – although the ice is more likely to shatter on rocky terrain. The dogs, between 10 and 12 of them, are hooked up fan-hitch style, allowing each animal to find its own route through rough ice. All harnesses, whips and traces must be handmade.

Just as important as the gear is the Inuit tradition of cooperation on the land. It's become a tenet of the Nunavut Quest – and an official rule: If a musher helps another competitor in distress by stopping his runaway dogs or retrieving a lost whip, they get minutes slashed from their time as a reward.

And despite the racecourse's challenges, nobody has ever died during the Nunavut Quest, though there have been serious injuries. One of the most strictly enforced regulations is carrying a grub box stocked with a sleeping bag, stove, food, rifle, and snow saw and knife for emergency igloo-building. For every item that's missing at the daily pre-trip inspections, mushers are fined with 15 minutes added to their race time.

Peter Siakuluk, one of the few Inuit who hunt with dogsleds anymore, is the guru of mushing tradition: the 64-year-old has competed in every Nunavut Quest. He vowed 2010 would be his last, but after winning that year, he isn't yet ready to retire.



LEE NAPRAWAY

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Like most of the other mushers, Siakuluk has to travel far to reach the starting line – as many as 11 days by snowmobile. His dogs are fit, since he uses them regularly for narwhal and walrus hunting. But they're trained to look for prey on the horizon as they run, which means they're easily distracted. And that, he says, can really set you back: one year, Sam Omik, a polar bear guide from Pond Inlet, lost an hour when his dogs caught a bear scent and veered uncontrollably off track.

But the race isn't just for seasoned hunters; the Quest is helping revive the tradition among young people. Iliqsivik, the Clyde River-based Inuit wellness centre, has been holding its popular multi-week Dog Team Workshops since 2006, with mentors teaching youth to run dogs, travel on the land and hunt. And in Repulse Bay, a 25-year-old woman is one of the reigning dogsledding champions.

At 14, Denise Malliki began learning how to handle dogs so she could travel with them like her ancestors once did. Five years later, in 2007, the soft-spoken Grade 12 student ran her first dogsled race ever, and shocked the mushing world by crossing the finish line first in her hometown, earning her the nickname "Queen of the Quest." The only female among 15 starters, she came in after 32 hours and 24 minutes, an astonishing hour ahead of the next driver.

"To me, the most important thing about learning to handle dogs from my father is that it lets me go out on the land, have a little peace and quiet and enjoy the ride," she told *Northern News Services* after crossing the finishing line. Four years later, she won again.



LEE NAPRAWAY

Mushing is a Malliki family affair: Denise and her dad, Paul, take turns racing. Paul, who won in 2009, taught Denise everything she knows – including the “Happy Dog” strategy. “Dogs are like people: work is easier if they are happy, so we do our best to keep the dogs happy,” says Denise. She utters what she calls a sweet sound – a vocal treat that re-charges her team en route.

It’s people like Denise Malliki who are spearheading the resurgence of dogsledding in Nunavut. “Most people didn’t want dog teams until the Quest came along,” says Joelle Sanguya of the Ilisaqsivik Society. “The whole thing was dying out.”

WHILE THE RACERS WHIZ across the landscape, eating on the move and sometimes navigating by dead reckoning through white-outs, the support teams surge ahead by snowmobile to set up camp. Each musher might have as many as three snowmobiles in his support team manned by a group of friends and extended family. When Joelle Sanguya races, his team includes four generations aged 12 to 76.

Once they reach the agreed-upon camping location, everyone works hard axing anchors into the ice to hold chains onto which the teams will be clipped, and chopping frozen seal meat for the dogs. Even the kids help out pitching tents and preparing food for the mushers. “They work harder than we do,” says racer Olayuk Barnabas, whose wife and children are part of his support team.

At day’s end or well into the night after travelling roughly 80 kilometres, mushers cross an impromptu finish line set up outside the camp – often just a red gas can in the snow opposite a skidoo. The timekeeper logs their travelling time and the order of their arrival, as they will depart in the same order the following morning. They may leave within a minute of one another, but they can arrive up to 10 hours apart, having gotten lost or slowed down dealing with their teams.



FEAST: It's a dinner of champions, featuring char, muktuk, igunaq and seal meat

LEE NARRAWAY

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Joeli Qamanirq – Arctic Bay

Lee Narraway, an Ottawa-based photographer and sled dog owner – and often the only *qallunaat* in the group – has acted as timekeeper for 11 Quests. “Even though they’re all trying their best to win, I’ve never seen nasty competition,” she says. And during all the years she has attended, she has never once been asked by a musher where they stand in the overall race.

With the dogs fed and watered, everyone gathers for a dinner of country food, chatting about everything from the day’s travels to climate change. If the weather is bad, children hunker down in tents listening to elders’ storytelling or playing traditional games. On pleasant evenings, kids stay outside honing their whipping skills by knocking over tin cans, imitating adults dogsledding, learning how to build igloos and

kicking homemade soccer balls. “Many young people are very attracted to the event, getting away from phones and TV, because they meet up with old friends and make new ones,” says Joelle Sanguya.

Over the years, support teams have had to scramble into action to save lives. In the middle of the night during the 2010 race between Pond Inlet and Clyde River, the screeching and groaning of shifting sea ice had elders shouting for everyone to pull down tents and throw supplies onto their qamutiqs in pitch blackness. “Let’s go! Let’s go!” they yelled, revving snowmobile engines as open leads of icy water appeared beneath them. Luckily, everyone reached shore safely – and the scramble made for a gripping episode in *Race Across Baffin*, a six-part documentary on the Nunavut Quest produced by Clyde River-based Piksuk Media.

And there are tears. Even on the trail, morning prayers sometimes turn into impromptu healing sessions as stories are spilled of suicides, drug and domestic abuse, and a litany of other issues that have the entire group weeping.

“The community healing afterwards is as important as the race,” says Arctic Bay’s Joeli Qamanirq. Although he never owned or ran dogs, he often flies his entire family to the post-race hamlet. “It’s a satisfying and very emotional experience every time,” he says of the unique Inuit-initiated and run event he helped establish, “and something we never dreamed would happen as a result of a simple dogsled race.”

Watch the six-part documentary on the Nunavut Quest at piksuk.ca

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