**Vet students help prep Iditarod teams for iconic race**

By Meghan Murphy

When the Iditarod’s start moved from Anchorage to Fairbanks this year, the race’s head veterinary technician needed to quickly rally a team of volunteers who could be fast with the furriest.

So Tabitha Jones turned to students in the collaborative professional veterinary medicine program that the University of Alaska Fairbanks and Colorado State University began two years ago.

She knew the students were experienced dog handlers who could “chip check” about 1,100 sled dogs in the few hours before the race began. Many of them had proven their chip-checking skills in the Yukon Quest.

“I figured the vet students would love to help, and they’re good with animals,” she said. “There’s a lot of them, and I need a lot of them because most of my volunteers are back in Anchorage.”

Jones figured right — the vet students wanted to help with the “last great race on Earth,” in which mushers race nearly 1,000 miles to Nome.

Thirteen students arrived at 8 a.m. Monday on race day, while the sun was still low and temperatures of about minus 35 degrees Fahrenheit blanketed the area in deep cold.

Over the next several hours, 71 dog teams pulled into a large, circular clearing, like spokes in a wheel. The veterinary students helped visit the teams in pairs — one armed with a scanner and the other carrying a clipboard and pencil. There were no pens because the ink would freeze.

“Our role was to scan the dogs for microchips to help with identification on the trail and with record keeping,” said veterinary student Amanda Grimes.

As part of the gig, the group met dogs and dog lovers from all around the world, including places such as Kotzebue, England, France and Norway. Mushers brought the dogs out to be scanned, or students scanned the dogs in the mushers’ specialized trucks.

Occasionally, when fingers chilled to uselessness, the students would sit in a centrally parked gray van with heat blasting from the vents.

While there, Jenny Klecka explained what it meant to be volunteering at such an iconic Alaska event.

“This is a big deal,” said the veterinary student. “I grew up in Alaska so I would always follow the Iditarod. It’s really cool to be a part of this because it feels like I’m surrounded by celebrities.”

Veterinary student Liz Millman feels the same way, although her celebrities are the dogs.

She said they’re the foremost endurance athletes of their kind and rival many other species.

“Dog sledding is our state sport, and these dogs are not typical pets,” she said. “This is a good opportunity for students to meet these athletes and see how fit they are, how they work together and how they’re cared for.”

Millman, who aspires to be a sled dog veterinarian in Alaska, organized the veterinary students at Jones’ request.

She came to Alaska from Wisconsin three years ago to work with Iditarod veteran DeeDee Jonrowe. Millman learned how to train sled dogs, care for them and pack for the trail.

She also volunteered at the Iditarod’s checkpoints and gained acceptance into UAF-CSU’s inaugural class. Now, she’s sharing her Iditarod experience with fellow veterinary students.

She even helped several of them become part of a 16-volunteer team that brought Jonrowe’s dogs to the start of the Iditarod.

Each student was assigned a dog to walk in a procession of stop-and-go as teams left the start. Although the 16 dogs were connected to a network of ropes that binds them into one team, the volunteers helped keep the dogs from tangling the lines.

It’s an experience like none other and one that veterinary student Victoria Hammer said gives her bragging rights for years to come.

“We made it to the start line, which is my favorite part of the event; there are hardly words to describe what happens there,” she said. “The dogs are all excited, most barking, pulling and some jumping, but when the announcer yells 'Go!' and the handlers let go … silence … as the dogs instantly switch from ‘primed and ready’ to ‘I have a job to do.’”

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Cutlines:

*Meghan Murphy photo
University of Alaska Fairbanks veterinary student Liz Millman helps ready the sled dogs for musher DeeDee Jonrowe. Millman spent two years as a handler for Jonrowe before joining the joint veterinary medicine program between UAF and Colorado State University.*

*Photo of Meghan Murphy
University of Alaska Fairbanks veterinary students Meg Gisonda, left, and Kari Rohl prepare paperwork before the start of the Iditarod.*

*Photo by JR Ancheta
Musher Wade Marrs of Willow and his dog team pass by Club Flamingo on the Tanana River during the 2017 Iditarod restart in Fairbanks. The Klauder family has lined up flamingos on a portion of the Iditarod trail for more than 20 years.*

*Photo by Meghan Murphy
Hanna Fredricksen cuddles lead dog Lykke, which means "luck" in Norwegian, while two UAF veterinary medicine students scan the team's dogs for microchips. This is Lykke's retirement race after a long career of winning many Norwegian long-distance races.*