

Gin Gin 2008

The first 200 miler of the 08-09 racing season

Story by John Schandelmeier & Images by Theresa Daily

“It’s gonna be cold! It’ll be blowing forty up on top!”

It sure didn't seem that way at Paxson as day-break came to the morning of the Gin Gin 200 start; just above zero with bluebird skies and absolute calm. The bustle of mushers, handlers and race personnel checking sleds and equipment and the restless barking of nearly five hundred dogs brought the Lodge parking lot in this tiny community to frenzied life. Handlers, trail breakers, organizers, checkpoint volunteers, even the Army National Guard—they are all here; excited to be a part of the first long race of the season. Forty-five mushers have arrived in Paxson on this first Saturday after Christmas to take part in the 2008 Gin Gin. It is the largest field in the four year history of this race.

The weather forecast promises cold for the next week and diminishing winds; 2007 Gin Gin champion, Jodi Bailey is a little nervous, “I don't mind the cold, I hate the wind. It scares me.” “How's the trail over thirteen-mile? Is there pavement?” Darrin Lee of Chistochina queries. He's trained dogs up there and has been stuck in Denali Highway gales before. The Gin Gin runs on the road for the first thirty miles, and though it has not been plowed since September, the winds can blow it clean in sections. Jeff King rides his snowmachine into Paxson a couple hours before race time; he has sent his truck, handlers and team by the highway route—he has ridden 135 miles across the Denali on race morning so he could spend one more evening with his family during the Christmas holiday. “There's some wind here and there, he understates...Thirteen-miles' the worst, looks like the trail is blown out on the Sue too.”

One by one the teams are brought to the starting chute; the Army Guard has snowmobiles and troops; they bring the teams forward using the snowhook on a loop of rope through the bumper. Silence. The teams are gone. The first won't return until late Sunday night.

While handlers clean-up around the trucks and the race veterinarians, Sarah Love and Renee Rember, prepare for their trip to the Maclaren checkpoint, drama is unfolding out on the Denali. It is indeed blowing forty, many of the teams are blown off of the rock hard trail and over the edge of the road. Several turn back but most sort out the tangles of dogs and move forward. In just a few miles the wind is silent and the temperature begins to drop. It is thirty below now. Teams begin to scatter into Maclaren River Lodge, the first checkpoint; the fastest in 5-1/2 hours, a full hour slower than previous years. Jodi has the fastest time, Jeff King and Judy Currier are within five minutes.

The temperature continues to drop as the teams take their mandatory



six hour layover at Maclaren. By the time the trail crew returns from the loop trail it is forty below. They report it to be “at least fifty below” on the lower portions of the Susitna River. Several more teams make the decision to return to Paxson, but most continue on. The checkers, Chris Walker and his fiancé, Becca, get a very welcome break—they have been outside with teams for over eight hours!

It takes the fastest team just over thirteen hours to do the 112 mile loop. Again, Jodi Bailey is the first to arrive at Maclaren, “The trail is good, a little overflow here and there; but it's cold!” Teams trickle in throughout the afternoon. Most take between fifteen and eighteen

hours. Trail reports vary. Agreement is unanimous about one thing—it's cold! Jeff King, who has one of the faster times to this point, scratches. His second team's driver, Jason Reppart, has frost-bitten feet. Jeff and Jason decide to make shorter runs from camp to camp toward home on the Cantwell end of the Denali.

No one is a hurry to leave the checkpoint at Maclaren. It is warm and comfortable. The trail report from 13-Mile Hill is: still windy. Jodi Bailey, Brent Sass and Coleen Robertia leave at the end of their mandatory six. No one else moves.

“I thought this would be an easy race. You know, on the highway, a nice flat river run. So we brought our handler to run a team. And now, Oh wow, what did I get her into?” Michelle Phillips says. Marie Claude, running a team for Michelle and her husband Ed Hopkins, crashed face first into the only open water hole on the entire race—on the Susitna River not far below the Denali Highway bridge. Many teams took a break on the Maclaren/Susitna loop near the half-way point where the trail crew had cut a pile of firewood. Teams reported that their sled thermometers were bottomed at fifty there. Sonny Lindner was smarter. He took a break with his son, Chad, and daughter, Ava, after reaching the Denali and climbing several hundred feet above the river system. It was a balmy minus twenty.

It is nearly daylight on day two of the Gin Gin before most teams start making preparations to leave Maclaren. Michelle and Ed leave together at 2:00 am. The majority of the rest are out between 5:30 and 9:00 am. Just before 5:00, Jillian Rogers walks into Maclaren disoriented. She had parked her team where they took an offshoot trail. She backtracked to the highway and walked to the checkpoint. A quick search finds her team less than a quarter mile from the Lodge on the incoming trail where it leaves the Denali. She takes a long break at Maclaren, cares for her dogs and brings them to the finish alone and unassisted.

While mushers at Maclaren are still sleeping, Jodi Bailey has finished at Paxson. “I was really nervous about the wind, scared, but I knew I had to go anyway,” she tells the Paxson checkers. Coleen Robertia is the second woman to finish—well over an hour later at 01:28. She is followed 30 minutes later by the first of the men's division: Brent Sass. The Gin Gin has two divisions and both sets of times are kept separately. Ken Anderson is the second guy in at half-past four. Michelle and Ed arrive together just before daylight to round out the top three in each division.

Teams arrive in Paxson throughout late morning and early afternoon. The award ceremony is set back from 2:00 pm until almost 5:00 to accommodate later teams. All but Rogers make the short ceremony.

Coleen Robertia received the Vet's award for superior dog care. Iris Sutton, who scratched, received the Sportsmanship award for helping teams through the wind on the outbound leg. Jason Reppart got an honorable mention for carrying in a loose dog from Christina Roaloff's team, as did Darrin Lee, for giving out some extra dog food at Maclaren.

All teams are to be congratulated on finishing one of the tougher 200s in recent memory. Dog care was exemplary—only 35 dropped dogs out of 450. The Gin Gin purse payout was \$10,000 in 2008, with an increase of \$2,000 from the previous year. ●

Jodi who?

Jodi Bailey storms onto the race scene, turning heads as she goes.

Story and image by Jillian Rogers

Mid-distance dog driver Jodi Bailey, 40, may not be a household name in the world of mushing, yet. But rest assured, she's a threat that should not be overlooked.

Bailey has been running dogs for more than a decade but over the past couple of years has begun to stretch her competitive legs. And bidding her time on the race scene has paid off. This year she won the Solstice 100 in Two Rivers and took top spot in the Gin Gin 200 in December for the second consecutive year. December's Gin Gin was especially grueling for all racers with gale-force winds on the Denali Highway and 50-below temperatures on the 100-mile stretch of the race.

Bailey, an instructor for the Interior Aleutians Campus of UAF, shares a kennel of about 50 dogs with partner Dan Kaduce, a perennial mid-distance and Yukon Quest contender. She works during the winter though most of the teaching is done from Fairbanks via phone or Internet to remote locales, so Bailey has time to train and can even teach when she's handling for Kaduce on the Quest.

Bailey grew up on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts and was always interested in animals, getting her start riding horses.

“I was always animal crazy,” Bailey laughed over the phone from Fort Yukon. “It was always a joke in my family that I would grow up to be a penniless horse trainer but I one-upped them and became a penniless dog trainer.” She came to Alaska in her sophomore year of college in 1989 to study Athabaskan storytelling in Fairbanks for her degree in theater studies and anthropology.

“My first summer here, I really felt like Alaska was where I needed to be,” Bailey said. “I was always a little out of place where I grew up.”

She graduated in 1991, moved to Alaska and has been here since.

“I was living in Goldstream Valley

and so I was exposed to dog mushing a lot. Someone talked me into taking a dog and anyone who gets one sled dog knows what happens.”

But Bailey, who started skijoring after acquiring a few huskies never thought she'd be a musher. Until she met Kaduce. He also had a few dogs and was skijoring at the time and combined, they had enough for a small team.

“We got a used sled and that was the beginning of the end,” Bailey said.

Always the athletic competitor, Kaduce started racing first. He handled for Tim 'Mowth' Mowrey on the Yukon Quest in the mid-90s and decided that distance racing

was where he wanted to set his focus for he and Bailey's kennel.

Around that time, Bailey started racing in smaller, fun events like the Two Rivers Tune-up and the Denali Dash.

“Obviously, Dan got serious about racing first and he's very good at it,” Bailey said. “Our kennel changed from a recreational kennel to a racing kennel and we really started to focus on nutrition, conditioning and handling various situations on the trail.”

“In the last two years, I decided that I was going to be competitive and really race.”

It was about that time two years ago, that Bailey gave up drinking, started running and dropped 60 pounds. She completed her first marathon in the fall of 2008.

“I knew I wanted a better life,” she said. “Sled dog racing was part of that decision, but I also wanted to be healthy. I started running and realized that the ideas of conditioning and stamina and training for a distance race can be related directly to dog training. Mentally and physically, you understand the training process better when you put yourself through it.”

Like a team of race dogs in training, Bailey learned her limitations but also learned how to push herself and test

Continued on page 27

European mushing and bikejoring champion Igor Tracz of Poland came to Quebec with four dogs who had to spend 10 hours on a plane after an eight-hour drive to the airport.

"It was a very long day for the dogs," Tracz said. "The first day here it was very cold for the dogs, but they are adapting well."

Tracz said his dogs did fine on the flight but he ran into a bit of trouble at customs when the Canadian officials confiscated 50 kilos of dog food.

"They took my special food," he said. "I don't know why and then I



had to go out and find some food that was close to what I use."

Luckily, Tracz was able to find a similar brand available in Canada.

Taking the minimalist approach to the IFSS worlds was the two-man team from Argentina who traveled north from Ushuaia with one dog – their beloved husky Colmillo.

"We flew to Buenos Aires to Toronto to Montreal to Quebec City and from there we took a taxi to the races," musher Hugo Flores said. "Colmillo did really well mentally with the trip and he raced yesterday."

Colmillo raced with Juan Pablo Lovece in the one-dog junior skijor event and together they took the silver medal.

"He's a really good dog," Lovece said. "He really liked racing here."

Flores raced the four-dog sprints, leasing three dogs from a Quebec musher, and finished in 22nd place.

Back home in Argentina the two run a kennel of 90 dogs.

For mushers like Flores and Lovece, the world championships are about more than racing.

"It's a place to share ideas and help each other out," Flores said. "When I got here, I did not have a face cover for the cold (and) the Lithuanian musher gave me his."

Lovece was equally impressed by the camaraderie. "The Swedes helped me wax my skis," he said.

Traveling cross-country was just about as labor intensive as coming from overseas. Just ask Jennifer Probert and her partner Brian Sanford of Fairbanks.

It took four people, each responsible for three dogs, on four different flights to get to Quebec.

"We did it that way because Alaskan Airlines only allows you to have three dogs on the flight," Probert said. "We all met up in Boston – it was a lot of logistics and the dogs seemed to do really well with the flights."

At the Worlds to race the four- and six-dog sprints, Probert said there were a lot of steps taken to get them to the race with everything thought out in advance.

"We had to be really structured in our packing," she said. "For gear all we brought were the sleds, the runners and gangline sections."

Sanford took the sled bag as his extra luggage and once on the ground, the team hit Home Depot to purchase buckets, food dishes and shovels.

"The airport officials had a lot of questions for us once we landed in Boston," Sanford said. "I'm not sure if it was policy or because they had just never seen sled dogs before."

As the first one arriving in Boston, it fell to Sanford to secure the rental car.

"I had to pull the dogs off and then try to get them and my luggage to the rental place," he said. "I couldn't leave the dogs alone and you're

not allowed to leave unattended baggage (and) I was having a rough time."

In the end, Sanford was able to convince a Massachusetts State Trooper to watch the dogs while he went off in search of the rental car.

"The novelty of having sled dogs helped," he said.

"I'm sure doing it all in reverse to get back home will be just as interesting," Probert said.

Making his first World Championship appearance was Damion Robb of Jamaica who ran the six- and four-dog sprints with dogs leased from Ken Davis of Minnesota.

Robb's debut at the races was marred on day one of the six-dog event when he was disqualified after alleged trail violations were lodged by Czech Republic musher Jiri Trnka, who was given a warning himself for improper finish line conduct.

Robb and his support team regrouped for the four-dog sprints, finishing 20th overall. Jiri Trnka placed 11th in the event.

Though a setback for the Jamaicans on the world circuit, Robb and his team were excited about their IFSS debut and future for Jamaicans in the sport.

"This was not Robb's first time out on the runners," Danny Melvin, team founder, said. "He was training and racing in the USA all last season (and) he knows the dogs."

Davis agreed, pointing out the Jamaican was 13th overall last year in ISDRA rankings.

"For Robb it's all about the trust with the dogs," he said. "When he steps on the runners he's the seventh member of the team (and) I trust Robb out on the trail." Davis said.

Davis coached the Jamaican sprint team last year and worked with Robb for more than a month leading up to the 2009 World Championships.

The Jamaican Sled Dog Team was started three years ago by Melvin with major sponsorship from singer-songwriter Jimmy Buffett.

Most of the canine members of the Jamaican team are rescue dogs from the island's animal shelters and any profits the team realizes go straight to the Jamaican Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Melvin said the venture allows him to promote Jamaica, help save unwanted dogs and gives young Jamaicans an opportunity to train in the sport.

This year Jamaican Newton Marshall has qualified for the 2009 Yukon Quest.

For Robb, the sport is about far more than medals or awards.

"Mushers tell me when you run dogs it's not about winning the race," he said. "If that's all you think about and then you don't win, you are not happy and then the dogs are not happy. I just like my dogs to be happy."

Robb is happy to run the sprint races and leave the distance mushing to Newton Marshall.

"Races like the (Yukon) Quest are tough," he said. "Even though I really like challenges, that's too much of a challenge."

Davis and Robb planned to keep on working and running together, racing in several Ontario Federation Sleddog Association events on their way back to Minnesota.

"Everything is going really good," event president Max Vidal said four-days into the championships. "I'm very happy to see all the countries that are competing and the atmosphere here is very friendly."

Vidal, who owns and operates an 80-dog touring kennel – several mushers competing leased dogs from him – recognizes the sacrifices made to attend the event.

"It is difficult for many to come with dogs from outside of North America," he said. "But the world championships is the biggest event in mushing (and) the prize money and titles justify the costs – the title of 'world champion' means a lot."

The IFSS World Championships in Quebec covered 246-km of trails, 25 road crossings with 34 race starts.

"My job is to make sure everything runs good," Vidal said.

Jodi Bailey... Continued from page 23

those limitations. She researched distance runners' plans on interval training, cross training and various other methods and incorporated them into her dog team.

Needless to say, her fall training was very different this year. Without wanting to give too many secrets away, Bailey noted that adding elements to the race team like speed, distance and hill training was done separately and methodically this fall, while in the past, these elements were combined at once.

"You choose what you add and when you add it based on what your final goal is," she explained.

Though she may not be a household name for mushing fans yet, she's been behind the scenes for years, so none of this is new for her and, she said, she hopes people aren't surprised to see her out there and doing well. And, she noted, even with her successes, she still gets very nervous before a race.

"But with each race, I also get more confident, especially in a race like the Gin Gin," she said. "There are definitely mushers I gravitate to at races because of their positive attitudes, racers like Aliy Zirkle and Michelle Phillips. They are both so strong and calm and that's something I aspire to be."

"I've realized that you can only drive the team you have in front of you and that you need to set goals for yourself that aren't contingent on other people."

"Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, but in the end, the race is long and you're only in it with yourself," Bailey added, reciting a quote she heard in a song and applied to her own life.

Bailey and Kaduce's dogs are now mostly their own breedings with just one race dog in the team that wasn't born on their property. They started their breeding program with Joe Redington dogs and their most recent litter of Redington huskies are an exceptional brood.

All five lead, Bailey said, and have been in every race they've done including champions on the Solstice, the Gin Gin and twice on Kaduce's winning Taiga 300 teams.

"They're honest dogs and very focused. They got me through the wind on the Gin Gin with no mutinies and stayed very business like."

Breeding their own dogs and raising them from pups has been a huge key in their continued success, Bailey said, adding that they do a lot of free running before, during and after harness-breaking at about nine to 12 months.

"When you live with dogs, you life is a constant conversation with them, whether you realize it or not," she said. "They're watching you and communicating with you even if you don't know it. You establish habits and behaviors that they'll learn to read in the yard or out on the trail."

It was perhaps that communication aspect that helped Kaduce and Bailey save their 52 adult dogs and two litters in the summer of 2004 when their property became engulfed in flames during that infamous forest fire season near Fairbanks. Kaduce and Bailey acted quickly and saved all their dogs and pups before the wall of flames destroyed most everything on their lot at 42-mile Steese Highway.

"That was the scariest thing I've ever done, but one that I'm most proud of," she said.

Bailey was quick to admit that she doesn't believe she has all the answers when it comes to dogs or races. "After all," she said, "there are a million ways to skin a cat." But what she and Kaduce are doing seems to be working well for them and they never discount the element of luck in a dog race. "After you pull the hook at the start line, there are so many things that are out of your control," she said.

"Success comes with knowing how to react and deal with those situations, but there are absolutely no guarantees." ●

Trapline Realty

**Your guide to Mushing Properties in Willow, Alaska
The Dog Mushing Capital of the World!**

**Dog friendly properties: Lots from \$6,500 - Cabins/Homes from \$65,000
Call or visit our website for a complete list!**

(907) 495-5263 www.TraplineRealty.com

dogbooties.com

888-727-3121