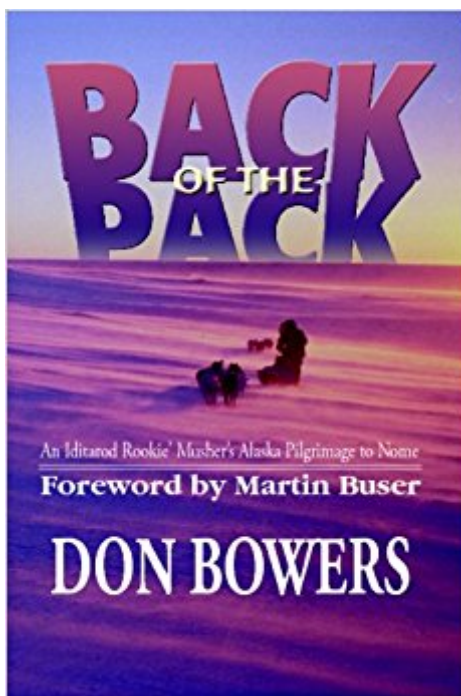


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Back Of The Pack: An Iditarod Rookie Musher's Alaska Pilgrimage To Nome



Synopsis

Once infected with the mushing virus, there is no cure -- there is only the trail" Don Bowers learned the truth of these words as he lived his dream of running Alaska's grueling 1,100-mile Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. With no mushing experience and little money, but with a spirit of adventure and support from friends, he started from scratch to put together a team. Over the next two years, he discovered that becoming a serious musher is not to be undertaken by the faint of heart, or by those who cannot learn to laugh at themselves and keep going in the face of daunting difficulties and dangers. By the time he eventually pulled under the famous burlled arch at the end of Front Street in Nome, his perspective on life had been changed forever by his dogs and by the staggering scope and intensity of the Iditarod. This is Everyman's Iditarod, a tribute to the dedicated dreamers and their dogs who run to Nome in back of the pack with no hope of prize money or glory. This is truly "the rest of the story" of the Last Great Race on Earth.

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Customer Reviews

Don Bowers has accurately captured this marvelous transformation in *Back of the Pack*, and has beautifully conveyed the poetry and sense of awe and respect that come with it. He faithfully shows us the joy and work and heartbreak and intensity of learning how to drive dogs, culminating in an incredible journey to Nome in the 1,100-mile Iditarod Sled Dog Race. Before he could make it to the finish line on Front Street, he discovered that he and his dogs were capable of far more than he ever thought possible. Don's story is a true-life example of learning how to "Dream big and dare to

fail." Norman Vaughan After reading Back of the Pack you'll watch the rookies heading down Fourth Avenue at the start of the Iditarod with a much better insight. Don draws a clear picture of what it's like to be a neophyte musher. Anyone with an interest in dogs--or who just likes a good read--will thoroughly enjoy it. This may be the best book yet about the Iditarod. Phil Meyer, D.V.M. (20-year Iditarod and Junior Iditarod race veterinarian)

Don Bowers lives at Montana Creek, Alaska, in a cabin he built himself. Born in 1948 in Fort Smith, Arkansas, Don is an Air Force Academy graduate with masters degrees from the Air Force Institute of Technology and Alaska Pacific University. For most of his Air Force career he was a C-130 Hercules transport pilot, flying Hurricane Hunters in the Caribbean and Spectre gunships in Southeast Asia as well as "trash haulers" all over Alaska. Don arrived on the Last Frontier in 1975 and became involved with the Iditarod as a member of the volunteer Iditarod Air Force. Upon retirement from the "real" Air Force, Don set about to run the Iditarod with his own team, even though he had virtually no experience as a musher. He is a certified elementary teacher as well as a commercial pilot in Talkeetna during summer. Don is the author of Alaska Airmen's Logbook for Alaska, Northwest Canada, and Russia, published by the Alaska Airmen's Association.

He describes his failures, of which there were many, as well as his triumphs. It changed my views towards dog sledding.

This is a well written book by someone who didn't expect to win, just the love of the race.

This is a poignant and entertaining addition to the musher library.

My husband loves books on Alaska and the Iditarod and this book was no exception. It kept his interest and that is hard when he does not enjoy reading

A very good book if you have a beginner's interest in dog sleds or have ever been intrigued by Alaska, Dog Sleds or the outdoors. The author can be a bit wordy and long winded, particularly in the first half of the book, but it is well worth it anyway. The last half of the book describes the race and his experience in great detail and really puts you there. Easy reading. I couldn't put it down for the last 100 pages.

I knew nothing about the Iditarod before reading this. It was easy and fun to read and helped me understand the challenges of the race.

Subtitled, "An Iditarod Rookie Musher's Alaska Pilgrimage to Nome", the author, Don Bowers, shares his 1994 and 1995 experience in running a team of sled dogs on the 1,100-mile run from Anchorage to Nome in the race that has been sometimes called the "Last Great Race on Earth." He was 48 years old, a bachelor, with no previous experience in dog mushing. However, he was a pilot who lived Alaska and had worked as a volunteer in previous races. He knew many people who had run the race before him and they all encouraged him to do it. Every March, since 1967, between 50 and 80 dog sled teams set out on the trail, which can take up to three weeks to complete. Most are not competing for the front-runner prize. Merely finishing the race is a personal goal for many. The trek is difficult, requiring stamina, endurance and the ability to make quick decisions in constantly changing conditions. The temperature can vary from 40 degrees above to 65 degrees below zero and there are storms and flooding, drifting snow and heavy winds. In some places the trail plunges down 200 feet or more, twisting between trees and at the edges of steep drops. At other places, there are long empty stretches over slick icy rivers. The sled often spills, the dogs get tangled and sometimes they find themselves miles and miles off the regular trail. Mostly, they prefer to travel at night when the weather is cooler and the dogs are more comfortable. The musher wears a single beam headlight if the night is dark. Other times the moon and stars reflect off the snow. And, on rare occasions there is a spectacular display of flashes and colors in the northern sky. The mushers stop at about 20 checkpoints over the course of their travels. These are mandatory rest stops which often are no more than a tent or a cabin with a place to put a sleeping bag. A few of the checkpoints are towns with a place to purchase a meal. Mostly though, the musher must rely on the 50 or more large bags of supplies weighing 2000 pounds or more which he or she personally packed and had shipped to these checkpoints. This includes huge amounts of food for the 16 hungry dogs who must be tended to and rested at each of these stops. The Iditarod Trail was actually used as a mail route during the boom time of Alaska's gold rush. And the dog teams of that day did not have the advantages of modern technology. There were no helicopters charting their progress. Or airplanes to fly their food to various checkpoints. There was little if any shelter. And the conditions for the dogs were certainly not humane. I can't help thinking of Jack London's "The Call of the Wild" and "White Fang" which depicted the life of a sled dog at the turn of the century. In those days dogs were whipped, beaten with clubs, and often starved as the food they were given had to be hunted for as the mushers went along the trail. They lived and died in their harnesses and it was a constant fight

for survival. Modern dogs are never beaten. The dogs are trained to respond to simple verbal commands and whips are never used. They are well fed and rested and checked by a vet at every checkpoint. If they are injured they are flown by helicopter to a place they can be cared for. A musher might start out with 16 dogs, but is allowed to finish with as little as 7 if necessary. I enjoyed the book tremendously, even though Don Bowers is no Jack London. This is his first book and he is not a professional writer. He's good at descriptions of trail conditions and details of the race. He's also good at discussing his own personal challenges. I really did empathize with him when a virus killed some of his dog pups. And I held my breath during his most scary outdoor challenges. I also have a lot of admiration for his adaptability and sheer determination to finish, no matter what. By the end of the book I had really accepted his style of writing, which is probably like his personality, which tends to be introspective. And sometimes I felt he went on a little too long about some detail. I must say also that I yearned for deeper characterization of the people around him. There was a woman named Lisa and a man named Andy who were also "back-of-the-packers". They met at checkpoints and helped each other during the long trail. I wanted to know more about them and wish he would have included a few personal details and a little characterization. I did get to know his dogs though. Each one was a distinct and interesting personality. I'll never forget "Socks" one of the leaders, who was able to sense the trail without any markers. Or the time the team refused to move because the females were in heat. His love for his dogs really came through. I thank Mr. Bowers for writing the book and definitely recommend it. It took me to Alaska, put me right on the sled and made me feel I was part of it all. Quite a departure for a woman who lives in New York City. It was a great read and I loved being part of the adventure.

Don Bowers takes the reader through the process of training for, and running the Iditarod and makes you wish you were there even though it's umpteen degrees below zero and snowing like crazy. It was very hard to put the book down and so readable! Mr. Bowers leaves you "thirsty" for more about the great race to Nome and its history. I hope there's more to come.

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