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Gunflint Mail Run

8am. There are 9 different mushers running 12 dog teams in the 100 mile race this year. Following their departure, the 8 dog teams will then take off from the same starting point around 9am. This year there are 17 8 dog teams running the 65 mile race. Mushers and teams will be coming from all over the country including as far as Alaska, as well as one team coming down from Ontario Canada.

Teams will start to make their way back to the Trail Center Lodge for a mandatory layover. The 8 dog teams will have a 3 hour mandatory layover and the 12 dog teams a 4 hour mandatory layover. After the mushers and teams are able to rest and be checked by the veterinary staff, they will head back out for the second leg of the trip in the late afternoon. All teams participating in the race will make their way back to Trail Center Lodge to the finish line Saturday evening and into Sunday's early morning hours. The winners and awards will be presented later Sunday morning, but are not open to the public. The results will be posted on the Gunflint Mail Run website.

It is great to see the dogs take off, and out on the trail. Great views of teams will be available at the Trail Center Lodge, Big Bear Lodge, and Rockwood Lodge. Both Big Bear and Rockwood Lodge close between 5-5:30pm. Please refrain from bringing your own dog to the race. This can distract the teams and cause safety issues. Always use caution when approaching road crossings. Visitors are welcome to take pictures, although please do not use your flash, not only when the teams are running, but while the dogs are sleeping. This can distract them during the race and disturb them while they are trying to rest. Do not assume you can pet the dogs while they are resting. Mushers want their teams to stay focused and relax when they are supposed to. Be aware and give space to the dogs, mushers, handlers and veterinarians. Also, please be aware of loud noises and running children. This can cause distractions for the teams as well.

Here is a run down of how exactly this sport works with some musher terminology.

Mushers will stand on what is called the runners of the sled. Runners are the two bottom pieces of the sled which come in contact with the snow. They extend behind the basket so the musher can stand on them. Runner bottoms are usually wood, covered with plastic or Teflon (in the past it was bone, antler, ivory or metal).

The Dogs are put in harnesses which help to efficiently distribute the weight of pulling, and then are attached to the sled by what is called a gang line. The dogs are attached by both a tug line (back) and a neckline (front). The dogs up front are called lead dogs. These dogs understand and take the musher's voice commands such as Gee (turn right) or Haw (turn left). When teams pass each other you will hear the musher call "on by" signaling the dogs to pass the team ahead or a potential distraction. There can be one or two leads up front. The dogs behind lead are called point, or swing. The rest of the dogs are called team dogs until you get to the final pair located just in front of the sled. These dogs are called wheel dogs. Their job is to pull the sled out and around corners or trees. These dogs are often larger than the other dogs and take the greatest load when making turns or changing directions.

There are multiple brake systems on a dog sled. There is a metal claw attached to the back of the sled which digs into the snow when stood upon. This will cause the team to slow down or come to a complete stop. Once stopped, a large metal hook (snow hook) can be driven into the snow to anchor a team for a short period of time. If the Musher needs to keep the team stationary for longer periods of time, they will use ropes to tie off objects such as nearby trees.

If a dog is unable to complete the race and needs to be "dropped," all mushers carry a dog bag that allows the dog to sit comfortably in the basket of the sled until they can make it to the next checkpoint where the dog will be left with the handler and receive any care/rest it needs.



Photo provided by Sue Kerfoot, Gunflint Trail Historical Society and Ted Young, Boundary Country Trekking.

There is an incredible team of dedicated veterinarians that will be present the entire time throughout the race. The Gunflint Mail Run rules were established to ensure the safety and health of the dogs. The veterinarian team examines all of the dogs, ensuring they are healthy before the race begins, are available if needed throughout the entire race should a dog become ill or injured while out on the trail, and check in with every dog during the mandatory rest period. They will also perform a final go through of each and every dog after they cross the finish line. While pulling a sled looks like hard work to us, to the dogs it is FUN! The vets present at the race have volunteered their time to be there for the love of these canine athletes. They put in long hours to make sure the dogs are healthy and well tended.

The mushers could not do this all on their own. There are so many important moving parts to be able to host and facilitate races like this. Each musher will have at least one handler. Handlers are a critical part of the sled dog team. They help to care for the dogs, feed the dogs, help get them to the starting gate, clean

up after the dogs, and collect veterinarian samples.

There is always a need for volunteers every year. Some positions require previous experience, but many require no experience whatsoever. Some of the positions include: road crossing volunteers, start line volunteers, finish line volunteers, inside volunteers helping with musher check-ins, race stats, media coverage and more. If you would like to volunteer please contact Cathy Quinn at gunflintmailrunvolunteer@gmail.com.

If you are unable to attend the event and would like to know where the mushers are and how the race is going, you can follow on Twitter @GunflintMailRun or stay tuned to the Gunflint Mail Run Facebook page.

This race would not be possible without the following sponsors: Trail Center Lodge, Visit Cook County, Nace Hagemann Photography, Cedar Grove Veterinary Clinic, Grand Marais State Bank, Borderland Lodge, Rockwood Lodge and Outfitters, Cook County Whole Foods Coop, Nutri Source, Sisu+Loyly, Stone Harbor Wilderness Supply, Cook County Dog Mushers, Cook County Snowmobile Club, Fika Coffee, JR Designs, BWARC, Voyageur Brewing Company, and Rocksteady Running, as well as receiving donations.

For many this truly is a once in a lifetime opportunity to witness such an incredible display of determination and strength of these powerful and resilient teams and the people that run with them. If you would like to consider a donation to the Gunflint Mail Run Sled Dog Race, please visit <https://gunflintmailrun.com/> for more information.

The Long Way Home

By Steve Fernlund

If you're reading this column you are likely a survivor of the Great Snowstorm of Christmas week 2022. With four days of wind, snow, brutal windchill, and blowing snow, you could say the storm was massive, unending, whopping, and huge--and not really Great.



This storm started early Wednesday and disrupted travel and life on the North Shore just days before Christmas. It didn't gasp its last until Christmas morning.

Having lived the majority of my life in Minnesota, I am confident in claiming the Great Snowstorm last week is the worst in my memory--at least in duration. There may have been worse storms, but I don't remember seeing four full days of snow and gale-force winds.

Last winter I was deliberately and gainfully unemployed, having chosen to avoid going anywhere that required a time commitment in case of a winter storm, winter weather advisory, or lack of daylight. There were a couple of storms that were doozies, but I didn't have to drive in them.

The Bohunk signed up for some part-time employment last winter, and she had to contend with some treacherous driving conditions because of it. This winter she chose the deliberately unemployed status and thus, did not have to drive during this Great Snowstorm.

I, on the other hand, chose to be employed now and had to commute from our refuge on the ridge to the stoplight in Grand Marais each of the four days of the storm. My expected arrival time at work was 5:30 a.m. which meant the entire 13 miles had to be driven in

the dark. With decades-old eyeballs, driving in the dark is a singular challenge. Add blowing, falling, and drifting snow to darkness, and my stress levels are stratospheric.

Already, my memories of this storm blur into one pile of stress-induced terrors. The drive downhill from the house to Highway 61 is taken slowly to avoid slip-sliding into snow banks. One morning, the last part of the road, always slick, was engulfed in a whiteout. I convinced myself to just turn around and go home, leaving my employer and co-workers in the lurch, but when I eased onto the highway I realized it was in pretty good shape so I ventured to make the drive.

The day before that trip, the first day of the storm, I got to a highway completely covered with a couple of inches of snow and more snow was falling at a rapid rate--did I mention it was in the dark? My high beams were useless of course, but the 17-year-old Subaru, Stella, handled the snow just fine. A car soon passed me headed in the opposite direction. I figured that it had managed to stay on the highway, so I followed what was left of its tracks in the snow to make my way to town at 35 mph.

Power outages were widespread. We had sporadic outages in Colvill, the longest of a couple of hours. Some I know lost power for a day or more. An inconvenience for sure, but think of how difficult power outages were in the good old days.

Lots of trees came down. We lost a stately, decades-old White Pine on Saturday night. Of all the trees around our house, it was one I thought would never fall.

In the end, I am grateful that I don't live in Buffalo, NY. This winter storm dumped over four feet of snow on Buffalo and was preceded by rain and rapid falling temps. People died.

We didn't have that at least.

Steve Fernlund is a retired business owner, living in Cook County. He was publisher and editor of the Cook County News Herald in the 90's. Got a good Cook County story for him? Let us know. Call 218-226-3335 or Email: steve.fernlund@gmail.com