



COURTESY PHOTO

To compete, mushers must start with a team of 12 to 14 dogs and end with at least five on the towline.



COURTESY PHOTO

Joshua McNeal runs his own dog kennel in Fairbanks with his wife, Jobie. The duo have 38 Alaskan Huskies, some of which McNeal trained with for the Iditarod.

La Center High School grad competes in 2021 Iditarod

CAMERON KAST

cameron@thereflector.com

Joshua McNeal finished 28th in his rookie year in the 'Last Great Race'

After nine straight days of sleep deprivation and sub-zero temperatures in the Alaskan wilderness, La Center High School Alumnus Joshua McNeal and his team of Alaskan huskies crossed the finish line of the 2021 Iditarod.

The arrival at the Deshka Landing South checkpoint in the early hours of the morning on Wednesday, March 17, marked the end of an 832-mile round-trip journey for the rookie musher and his team.

"(Finishing) was just a moment of being really proud," McNeal said. "My dogs are like our kids, and just looking at them and what we were able to accomplish together ... It was almost like a proud dad moment."

The Iditarod is an annual long-distance dogsled race that began in 1973 as an event to test the skills of the world's best mushers and their teams of dogs. Every March, mushers and a team of 12 to 14 dogs take off from Anchorage to embark on a multi-day journey across Alaska. In odd years, the race follows a Southern route through Iditarod and Eagle Island; even years take the Northern route through Cripple and Galena. Usually, both routes have an end goal of Nome, Alaska, and are just over 975 miles long. However, in 2021, mushers followed the Gold Trail Loop, which took mushers out to Iditarod and back to Deshka Landing, a checkpoint 83 miles from Anchorage.

McNeal and his team of dogs crossed the finish line at 7:07 a.m. Alaskan time, putting the team in 28th place overall. The journey took a total of nine days, 16 hours and seven minutes, beating six rookies and two veterans. Of the total time, McNeal spent 136 hours and 48 minutes traveling and 94 hours and 23 minutes resting.

"One of the hardest parts that I was expecting to be hard but I

had a bit harder of a time dealing with than I expected was the sleep deprivation," McNeal said. "You're just up all the time and not getting much sleep ... My hardest part was staying awake on the sled."

The 2021 race had three mandatory layovers: a 24-hour rest at any checkpoint between Skwentna or Iditarod (McNeal took his in McGrath), an eight-hour rest between Rohn and Rohn (McNeal at Iditarod) and an eight-hour rest at Skwentna on the return trip. Other rules include a minimum of five dogs being on the towline at the finish, mushers carrying mandatory items such as a sleeping bag and continual veterinary exams at race checkpoints. At checkpoints, mushers sign in and choose to stay and camp or press on. Supplies for those camping are flown in beforehand by the Iditarod Air Force.

McNeal said he got better at dealing with the "ups and downs" of sleep deprivation and the harshness of the trail toward the end of the trip.

"You have good runs and runs that aren't so good," he said about traveling between checkpoints. "When you're really tired, a bad run can make you think your race is over, but it's not ... Towards the end of the race, I got a lot better at dealing with that."

While the sleep deprivation part of the race was the hardest for McNeal, he said he "over-psyched" himself on the difficulty of the "Alaska Range" and "Dallzell Gorge" portion of the trail between Rainy Pass and Rhon. However, as for his all-time favorite moment on the trail, McNeal said nothing beats his return to the checkpoint of Ophir after his stop in Iditarod.

"You're out in this high country tundra and it's like negative 55 degrees outside, which wasn't great, but the Northern Lights were absolutely incredible," he said. "Being able to experience

WOOD RECYCLERS & LANDSCAPE SUPPLY COMPANY

We Accept Recycling

We Have Drop Box Containers

We Provide Deliveries

360-892-2805

8401 NE 117th Ave., Vancouver

Visit our website: www.hhwoodrecyclers.com

COMFORT FOR LIFE

The First Step to Lower Utility Bills

Install a high-efficiency Daikin brand ductless indoor comfort system in your home. Yes, it's a one-step opportunity that can enhance your home's indoor comfort, too. Find out more from your local Daikin brand dealer.

METFAB
HEATING & COOLING
(360) 892-9542
www.metfabheating.com

"Serving Clark County Since 1981"

Our continuing commitment to quality products may mean a change in specifications without notice.
© 2014 DAIKIN NORTH AMERICA LLC · Houston, Texas · USA · www.daikincomfort.com

Continued on Page A7

Continued from page A6

that is indescribable.”

The great outdoors has always been a focal point in McNeal's life. Growing up on a 40-acre farm in Amboy, there was always something for McNeal and his friends to do. From fishing and hunting to building forts and riding dirtbikes, McNeal spent most of his time outside.

“It was really great growing up (in Southwest Washington),” he said. “There was so much to do outside no matter what time of the year it was.”

From Kindergarten to graduation, McNeal was enrolled in the La Center School District and played in multiple sports, such as football and wrestling. Following his graduation in 2013, McNeal moved up to Alaska to pursue a degree in petroleum engineering at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

McNeal fell in love with Alaska after going on multiple fishing trips to the region with his grandfather while in middle and high school. When he turned 16, he worked up in The Last Frontier during the summer months. As someone who spent most of his time outdoors, the “freedom” of Alaska piqued his interest.

“I can take off from our yard and go 1,000 miles with our dog team and not cross a single road,” he said. “It’s one of the last few places you can just live your life.”

While attending college, McNeal started skijoring (a combination of cross country skiing and dog sledding). Not long after that, he was on a dog sled and enjoying the official sport of Alaska: mushing.

“The first time out wasn’t super great, but after that I absolutely loved it,” he said.

McNeal knew he wanted to get involved with the sport; however, as a college student, money was tight and getting the funds for his own kennel and team of dogs was off the table.

To get involved with the sport, McNeal became a handler, a person that lives at a kennel full time to feed, train and take care of the dogs, in 2017 for the then-competitor Ken Anderson.

Eventually, McNeal started his own dog kennel and began training his own set of huskies.

To train for the 2021 race, McNeal used many of the tactics he learned while working as a handler for Anderson. Training for the Iditarod starts around mid-August “when the temperatures start cooling off,” and early training consists of hooking the dogs up to four-wheelers to go on short 1- to 2-mile runs with stops and breaks. As the months go on, McNeal said trainers start slowly increasing the mileage. Eventually, the training crew starts incorporating camping and checkpoints.

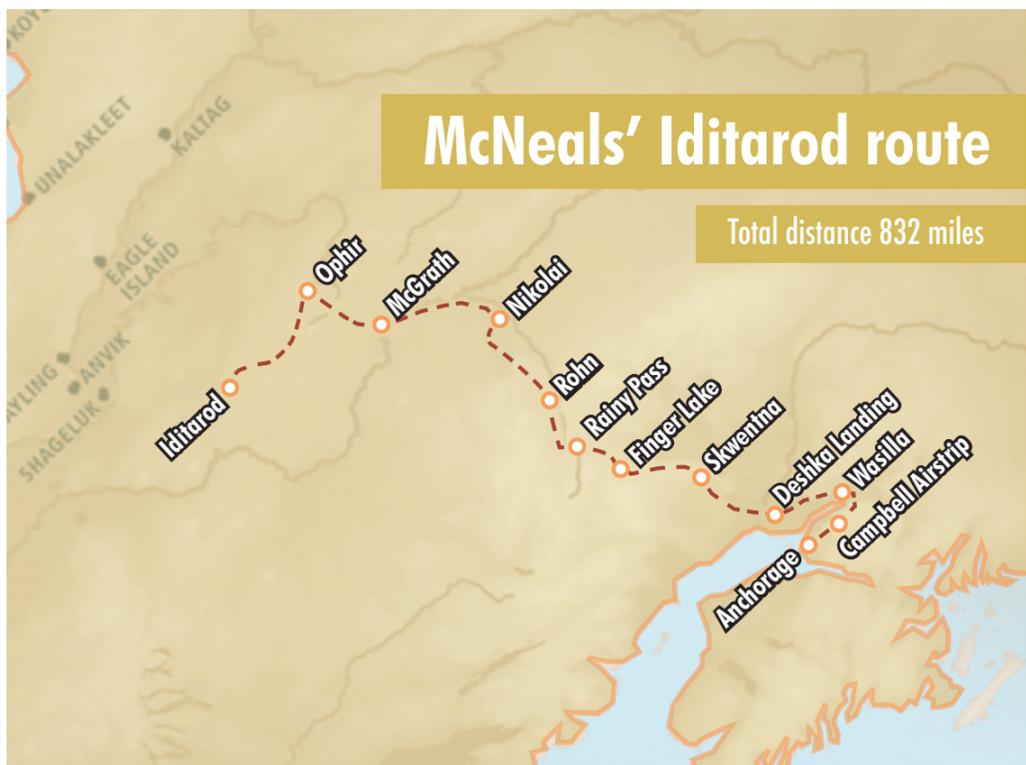
“It trains the dogs and helps me get my checkpoints down and feel better with sleep deprivation,” McNeal said.

As for why he chose to participate in the 2021 Iditarod, McNeal said “it just felt like the right year to do it” as a few mentors and leaders that were special to McNeal were getting older and may not be able to participate soon. Along with wanting his mentors along for the ride, McNeal finally had the right amount of dogs for training (21-24) and was living in Fairbanks.

“We had just moved to Fairbanks in March, so I knew we were going to have good training conditions,” he said. “However, I will tell you that moving a kennel with nearly 40 dogs, training for your rookie Iditarod and getting married all in one year is a lot.”

McNeal offered advice for young athletes looking to get into mushing.

“The first thing I would tell them is to take a \$100 bill and go outside and light it on fire. If you don’t start crying, you’re ready to start mushing dogs,” he said. “Secondly, I’d say just start slow



Joshua McNeals's Iditarod route was a total of 832 miles throughout Alaska. He took a mandatory 24-hour layover in McGrath and a mandatory eight-hour rest in Iditarod.

and don't try to jump into it all at once or you'll get overwhelmed ... Make sure you have the financial means to take care of the dogs and yourself as best as you can.”

Outside of training to be the best musher he can and taking care of 38 Alaskan huskies, McNeal and his wife, Jobie, like to fish during the summer and travel as much as possible, which they're hoping to do once the pandemic is over.

As for future Iditarods, McNeal said he plans to get back out on the tundra again when the time is right.

“Iditarod will probably be an every-other-year thing for us right now,” he said. “We both work full-time jobs and it’s a huge time and money and energy commitment to do.”

While he won't be in the Iditarod, McNeal plans to focus on smaller races such as the Kobuk 440, a 440 mile-long race that takes place above the Arctic Cir-



cle, as well as local races in the Fairbanks area, where he plans to stay for a while.

“Alaska has a lot of really incredible people and most of us live here because we want to live

here,” he said. “It’s a really incredible place.”

More information about McNeal and his kennel can be found online at crookedcreekmushing.com

ASK FOR US BY NAME

When you or your loved one are in need of home health or hospice, remember you have a choice! Tell your physician you want Community Home Health & Hospice. You deserve the highest quality services from your local hometown provider, caring for this community since 1977.



See for yourself at Medicare.gov

Community Home Health & Hospice
www.chhh.org | 360.425.8510