The Ultimate Test

Most sports have separate divisions for men and women. No such distinction exists between male and female participants in the Iditarod, a grueling race of sixty or more dogsleds across 1,157 miles from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. Probably its most famous competitor was Susan Butcher, who won the event for the third consecutive year in 1988, and who—despite the most adverse weather conditions in the history of the race—went on to win it for a fourth time in 1990. Butcher considered the Iditarod to be the ultimate test of endurance for both animals and humans.

The race, which extends over some of the most desolate trails on earth, lasts up to fourteen days. The competitors, called “mushers,” get little sleep during this time. A compulsory twenty-four-hour stopover at the checkpoint of their choice gives them a brief respite. But even the most robust mushers have to fight a constant battle with fatigue during the race’s final days.

Unpredictable weather conditions are another hazard. Temperatures can fluctuate between 50 degrees below zero and 40 degrees above. Snowstorms are not uncommon, with icy winds reaching speeds of 140 miles an hour. In the 1984 race, a section of the overland route was closed. Strong winds had blown away the snow covering. Butcher and her dogs took an alternative sea route over the ice-covered Norton Sound. The ice gave way. Susan and her dog team plunged into the frigid water. Led by Granite, her lead dog, they scrambled for shore and went on with the race. Butcher stayed warm by running alongside her sled. That year she came in second.

Wild animals are another of the many dangers mushers face. In the 1985 race, Butcher’s dog team was attacked by a starving moose that probably thought her dogs were a pack of wolves. Having to protect her dogs and herself, she fought off the enraged moose with an ax. Finally another musher, who was armed with a gun, pulled up behind her and quickly dispatched the moose. Two of her dogs were killed in the attack. Thirteen other dogs were badly mauled. That was one year she did not finish.

Born in 1954, Butcher had loved dogs since her youth. In 1975, she moved from her native Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Eureka, Alaska. There she bred and trained dogs at her Trail Breaker Kennels up until her death from leukemia.
in 2006. As many as 150 dogs were there at any one time. She said that they were all her pets and had the run of her home, although of course not all at once. Butcher was somewhat aloof by nature. She was more at ease with her dogs than she was with people. She believed that the secret of her success was the strong bond she formed with her canine companions from the time they were born.

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson's word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. What does the phrase “adverse weather conditions” suggest?

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2. Do temperatures generally remain steady during the course of a race?

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3. What are two qualities needed for success in such a grueling event?

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4. What is the meaning of desolate as it is used in the passage?

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5. What do the dogsled teams do if the route ahead has no snow?

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6. Is the twenty-four-hour stopover voluntary?

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7. What is the meaning of dispatched as it is used in the passage?

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8. Is fatigue a problem during the race's final days?
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9. How many of Butcher’s dogs were injured when the moose attacked?
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10. Why do you think the moose mistook Butcher’s dogs for wolves?
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11. What does it mean to say that Butcher won for the third **consecutive** year in 1988?
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12. Why might the start of the race be particularly hectic?
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13. How is the Iditarod different from most athletic contests?
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14. Why do you think so many people—like Butcher—respond to the challenge of the Iditarod?
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15. Why might Butcher not have enjoyed going to parties?
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___________________________________________________________________
• **Adverse** should not be confused with *averse*, which means “having an active, strong dislike.” If a person has a serious heart condition, strenuous exercise might have an *adverse* effect on that person’s health; such a person might, therefore, be *averse* to such exercise.

• Don’t confuse **alternative** (the noun or the adjective) with *alternate*, the verb meaning “to happen by turns” or “to take turns.” (Boys and girls *alternate* in using the swimming pool.) *Alternate* is also an adjective, meaning “happening by turns” (The wall was painted in *alternate* stripes of red and white) and “every other” (We take turns driving the children on *alternate* days). Finally, *alternate* is a noun meaning “a person chosen to take the place of another.” (If you cannot attend the meeting, you must name an *alternate*.)

• **Canine** comes from the Latin word for *dog*, which is *canis*.

Latin names of other animals provide us with a number of words having to do with animals or with qualities associated with them. Among them are the following: *Apis*, “bee,” gives us *apiary*, a collection of hives where bees are kept for their honey. *Avis*, “bird,” gives us *aviary*, a large, caged enclosure where birds are kept, and *aviation*, which is the science of airplanes and flying. *Asinus*, “donkey,” gives us *asinine*, which means “like a donkey” and hence, “stupid” or “silly” because of the belief that donkeys are stupid animals.