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The tunes of the trail

Some mushers prefer the sound of silence, but many find music to be refreshing, energizing

By **JOEL GAY**
Anchorage Daily News

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ALONG THE IDITAROD TRAIL -- Rookie Dennis Kananowicz obviously planned to spend as little time as possible at the Takotna checkpoint last week, doing what some mushers call a "hit and run."

He signed in with checkpoint officials, then ran up behind the checkpoint to grab a bag of supplies. He tossed his dogs a quick snack before hopping on the sled runners.

Just when he looked ready to call out for his team to leave, Kananowicz did what many mushers do: pondered his next musical selection.

"Tom Petty, Johnny Cash, (Bob) Dylan," he mused as he searched through a tangle of cassette tapes in a ditty bag. Nope, nope, nope. Then he found the tape that would carry him down the trail, lifting his spirits as the miles wore on. "Jimmy Cliff," he said, and stuck it in his pocket.

"OK," he told his team as his lifted the snow hook and the dogs trotted off. One could almost imagine the plaintive wail in his headphones as the team left town for Ophir: "Many rivers to cross ..."

Not every musher carries music on the trail. Some say dog tags tinkling on collar snaps and the hiss of runners over hard snow is all the soundtrack they need.

But many find solace, inspiration and rejuvenation easing out of their disc players, iPods and Walkmans.

"I've always got a Walkman or something," said Martin Buser, the four-time champion. "Classic rock, soft rock, country, Alaskana," he said, listing the styles he downloaded on his iPod. "From Joanne and Monte to B.B. King," he said, "it's all good."

Mitch Seavey, the Seward veteran who is challenging to win this year's race, said he rarely mushed to music -- until this year. His family got him an MP3 player and packed it with songs.

"I like it," he said as he tended to his dogs. "I tend to be a detail guy. I worry. I'm always looking for problems. So it's nice to have something to take my mind off that and relax a little."



Martin Buser sits in his sled as his team heads across the Norton Sound ice between Shaktoolik and Koyuk on Monday. "I've always got a Walkman or something," said Buser. "Classic rock, soft rock, country, Alaskana. From Joanne and Monte to B.B. King -- it's all good."

(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)



Not all mushers like to carry music, but rookie Dennis Kananowicz does. His selection includes Johnny Cash, Tom Petty and Bob Dylan.

(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)

Five-time winner Rick Swenson is a music fan, and while the technology has changed from cassettes to compact discs to a mini-disc player, his music selection hasn't, he said. "It's still the same old stuff: zydeco, rock 'n' roll, and blues."

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But there's a time for music and a time for quiet, Swenson said. "I just put it on for the first time" on the trail from Takotna, he said. "The whole time I was having all those troubles" with broken sleds. "I just kept it packed."

Mushers who think less about the competition and their place in the race say their portable sound systems fill the long hours.

Rookie Ellie Claus said she's listening to audio books. Her choice thus far? "The Perfect Storm," Sebastian Junger's tragic tale of a commercial fishing boat caught and sunk by a hurricane far offshore. She wanted to see how others deal with stress, she said.

Karen Ramstead, the Alberta, Canada, musher who has scratched twice and finished 57th in 2001, said she has five audio books, not to mention every CD in her home collection installed on her iPod. "And I didn't even dent the memory," she said. "This is the slickest little system."

The players, which are the size of a pack of playing cards, came out several years ago and have become fashionable, according to recent accounts in the New York Times and other national media outlets. Mushers loved them early on because of their enormous memory and simple, gloves-on operation. This year's model is better yet, said Ramstead and Buser, because it can use an external rechargeable battery pack or disposable AA cells.

"I tried (cassette) tapes," Ramstead said. "But by the time you got done messing around" with a bag of tapes, adjusting the headphones and getting ready to go, she said, "the batteries were dead."

A friend made her iPod an insulated bag. She slips in a chemical hand-warmer to keep the batteries strong, she said.

Ramstead is listening to Charles Frazier's best-seller "Cold Mountain," and several inspirational books, she said. "I had to be really careful" when selecting novels, she added. "I don't want to be listening to anything too spooky. There's enough scary stuff on the trail as it is."

Her music runs the gamut, Ramstead said, from Hobo Jim to Jennifer Lopez. "I don't think anybody in the world has both those artists on their iPod," she said with a laugh.

Several mushers said they brought MP3 players, which have less memory and can't be programmed like an iPod but are relatively inexpensive and require only a single battery.

Bill Pinkham, a Colorado musher on his second Iditarod, loves his player. He downloaded dozens of songs, which play back in random order. "Now I've got Bob Marley in my head," he said as he took his 24-hour break in Takotna. But the 45-year-old musher also plugged in inspirational music, classical and the Mississippi-based hard rock quartet Three Doors Down.

"It changes from one mood to the next," he said of his audio mix. "But it's kind of like the race. One minute you're up, the next minute you're down."

There are times he turns the music off, too. "Sometimes I like to just watch the dogs and listen to them," Pinkham said. "But the music can really pick you up. It just puts a different perspective on things, and that's good for you."

Lynda Plettner disagreed. There's too much noise in life already, she said, so why add another layer with a Walkman?

"I don't even like listening to myself out there," she said over a breakfast of steak and eggs at the Takotna checkpoint.

A 10-race veteran from Big Lake, Plettner took a cassette player on her first several Iditarods, she said. "Everybody told me I had to have music -- for the dogs, for yourself. I'm just not one of them" who needs it. "Now I take no music and I love it."

Kasilof rookie William Hanes said he likes music -- but not on his first Iditarod.

"I have too many wires as it is. I need to be focusing on my dogs."

Charlie Boulding also can easily live without audio interference. "I like to hear what's going on around me," he said. "I don't even like to play the radio in the house."

But even the anti-music crowd can change.

Seavey, who's in his 11th Iditarod, said he bought a player last year and used it only briefly as he cruised down the Yukon River. This year, it's feeling like a new tool, he said, helping soothe frayed nerves and calm a worried mind.

"Maybe that's why I'm doing better," he said.

His new player definitely lightened his spirits the day he took a wrong turn and got off the trail. It's the kind of event that can sour a musher's disposition and sap their dwindling energy.

But out of blue, he got a little boost from Bob Dylan.

"He was singing, 'How does it feel, to be on your own, no direction home ...' " Seavey said. "The coincidence was unreal."

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Race leaders are out of Elim Mitch Seavey is the current leader. Miles from Anchorage: 989 Miles to Nome: 123

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