



Racing Through March: The Iditarod, A Legacy of Change in Alaska

By Alissa Griffith

Looking for an engaging unit of study to challenge students as they “race” toward the end of the school year? Looking for ideas to melt the doldrums of the winter and “march” forward? Are you weary of St. Patrick’s Day and “Spring is Coming” to enhance learning and motivate students during the month of March? You may want to consider the rich content offered through investigation of the running of The Iditarod. This historic dog sled race, founded to commemorate the contributions of dog sled teams and their mushers to Alaska’s development and history, held annually during the first weeks of March (this year’s start date: Saturday, March 7, 2009), offers educators a multitude of possibilities for highly engaging, integrated studies. Want to know more?

The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, began as an event to commemorate Alaska’s Centennial Celebration in 1967, was the 1964 brainchild of Dorothy G. Page, chairperson of the Wasilla-Knik Centennial committee. The Iditarod, first run as two short races in 1967 and 1969, and was run at its full length (from Wasilla to Nome) beginning in 1973. The route for the race, The Iditarod Trail, one of the National Historic Trails designated by the Congress of the United States, follows the route early settlers of Alaska blazed via dog sled to transport themselves, mail and other supplies inland across Alaska’s frozen terrain.

So what are some possibilities for developing curriculum for units of study and will enhance the NCSCOS? Whether teaching Language Arts, Social Studies, Math or Science, investigation into concepts depicted through study of The Iditarod Trail Dog Sled Race offers students a unique perspective regarding history, economic development, change and extinction, adaptation, character development, and visionaries as they follow their dreams. How could this content be incorporated into a simulation in which students create a virtual running of the Iditarod?

Language Arts—Novel studies to support themes including: survival, determination, change, perseverance

Social Studies—Historical development of Alaska: economics, exploration, journey to statehood, founding fathers, explorers, famous sons, natural resources, geography, exports

Science—Flora, fauna, habitats, ecology, weather patterns, geology, land forms

Math—Distance, area, perimeter, elapsed time as related to distance, graphing

Consider these ideas; then challenge yourself or your students to “march” forward with their own areas of interest.

Web site

The Official Site of the Running of the Iditarod
www.iditarod.com

Recommended Reading

The Klondike Fever: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush by Pierre Berton

Alaska: A Land in Motion by Nancy Ferrell

Alaska’s History: The People, Land, and Events of the North Country by Harry Ritter

The Alaska Almanac: Facts about Alaska edited by Don Graydon

Alissa Griffith is the lecturing fellow in the Program in Education at Duke University. She was a teacher for 33 years in Durham and Orange Counties.