

# TROOPERS ON THE TRAIL

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## Promoting the Last Great Career at the Last Great Race

Alaska State Troopers utilize a variety of tools to tackle Alaska's tough terrain. Trooper Terrence Shanigan and Alaska Wildlife Trooper Thomas Akelkok have taken that one step further by returning to Alaska's dog mushing roots. Together, with a team of six sled dogs, the pair showed Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race spectators just how unique Alaska State Troopers are through a program Shanigan developed called Troopers on the Trail. As Shanigan explained, the program was designed to promote the Last Great Career on Earth at the Last Great Race.

Shanigan started the program as a way to recruit more troopers from rural Alaska and as a way to bridge the cultural gap between law enforcement and the people living the remote communities they serve. Shanigan, Akelkok and a handful of other troopers are members of the Rural Recruitment Unit started in 2005 as an effort increase the number of Alaska Natives that wear the uniform. Both Shanigan and Akelkok are Alaska Natives from the Bristol Bay area and have grown up around dog mushing. Akelkok crafts traditional wooden sleds on his days off.

The use of sled dog teams has an historic significance throughout rural Alaska. It served as a primary mode of transportation and a means to move supplies from one location to another. Similarly, Alaska State Troopers also have a rich history in Alaska. It was common for Alaskan law enforcement officers to use dogsled teams to get from one place to another in the days before snowmachines.

Akelkok, Shanigan and Recruitment Unit Sgt. Maurice "Mo" Hughes were at the ceremonial start of the Iditarod on March 6 with the two sleds Akelkok made and a dog box on a trailer Shanigan towed behind his patrol vehicle. The group had prime real estate for the ceremonial start as teams paused right in front of the trio during their march up to the starting line. That gave Akelkok and Shanigan a chance to talk to a few of the mushers they knew. It also gave them a chance to talk to the people crowded right outside the fence who spotted



Alaska State Trooper Terrence Shanigan, Recruitment Unit Sgt. Maurice "Mo" Hughes and Alaska Wildlife Trooper Thomas Akelkok watch as the first team lines up to start the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in downtown Anchorage on March 6.

the spiffy wooden sleds and AST sled bags.

The sturdy wooden sleds are outfitted with royal blue bags with gold striping and a decal matching those on the side of patrol vehicles. A blue and red blinking LED light is mounted right below the handlebar and right above a



Alaska State Trooper Terrence Shanigan guides his team of dogs back from a short run on Willow Lake before the restart of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race on March 7.



Three-time and defending champion Lance Mackey (middle) stopped to talk and pose for photos with Alaska State Trooper Terrence Shanigan and Alaska Wildlife Trooper Thomas Akelkok just before he took off from the starting chute at the ceremonial start on March 6.

wooden replica of Department of Public Safety patch that Akelkok's son designed for the sled. The three posed for probably hundreds of photos and were kept busy talking about the sleds and being an Alaska State Trooper.

Then for the restart on Willow Lake on March 7, Shanigan hooked up a team of six dogs he had been training throughout the winter. Prior to the 2 p.m. restart, Shanigan and the team of six dogs traveled up the local trail system where the public lined up to watch the dog sled teams as they pass by. Three of the dogs pulling Akelkok's sled with Shanigan perched on the runners, including the two lead dogs Wally and Al, are Iditarod

finishers with Martin Buser bloodlines. The other three dogs are veterans of the competitive mushing circuit.

Both Shanigan and Akelkok put in a lot of personal time and effort into this endeavor. Shanigan logged an estimated 250 hours training the team of dogs provided by Barking Lot Kennel in Willow. Shanigan trained with kennel owner Lance Best, who helped handle his dogs on Sunday.

Shanigan said Iditarod officials estimated his team had by far more visitors than any of the other mushers, including the top five mushers. He estimates he talked to as many as 4,000 people at the race restart. Part of that has to do with the team's location. The area where competing teams set up had controlled access while Shanigan and Akelkok were out in the open, flanked only by their patrol vehicles. Shanigan also made the rounds through the crowds on foot, talking to some of the local and Native mushers that are competing this year.

Shanigan has plans to expand the program next year. He's adopting eight dogs from the kennel, including five in the team. He's also talked to Iditarod officials about patrolling farther along the trail, possibly up to the first checkpoint at Skwentna, some 86 miles into the race.

Meanwhile, Akelkok may have picked up some orders for his sled-building business after some in the crowd, including three-time and defending Iditarod champion Lance Mackey, expressed interest in having one built after seeing Akelkok's craftsmanship.



Trooper Terrence Shanigan gives team dogs Bert (right) and Foxy a rub after a short run along the trail before the restart of the Iditarod Trial Sled Dog Race on Willow Lake. At right, leaders Al and Wally rest after a short run on the trail on Willow Lake.

