

Some Iditarod dogs are being prepped with massage

BY: DAVE GOLDMAN



Dog massage.

Yes. It's a thing. But this isn't the latest trend for people with disposable income to spoil their pets.

It's for dogs getting ready to run in the biggest sled dog race on the planet: The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

It starts in earnest Sunday, March 8. The trail stretches 1,000 miles. The demands are physical. So these runners need to have every physical advantage.

Katie Mehrtens, who owns The Right Spot Pet Massage, is doing her part.

"There you go. There you go. Good boy," she said to Whack a Mole, one of veteran musher Karin Hendrickson's dogs who'll be bound for Nome.

"I'm thinking, when he pulled away from me with his right front leg," she said as she gently massaged both back legs, "So I want to get back into his right front leg and see if he just pulled away just because or if there's a tender spot. And that's why I'm checking his left hind because often times it's diagonal on the guys, on the dogs."

Massage is already used by many professional human athletes as a way to help themselves and extend their careers. It's been going on for years in horse racing too.

While there are obvious physiological differences between humans and dogs, there are similarities between the two, like the same names for some muscles and bones.

"Like in the arm, you have your humerus. So does a dog," Mehrtens said. But it doesn't mean the process is the same.

"Human massage therapists will tell me, 'Oh, I can massage dogs. And I went to school. I had to go for over 300 hours and do all kinds of stuff.' So I always say to them, 'Well could I massage a person?' and they say, 'No.'"

This is not Mehrtens' first trip to Alaska. She was here last summer. After taking a sled dog ride she gained a new appreciation for the animals.

"They're just such amazing dogs."

After returning home to Skokie, Illinois, a Chicago suburb, Mehrtens got an idea. "So I wrote letters to mushers and said, 'I'm here to offer my services. Would you be interested?'"

There are 57 teams running in this year's race. Hendrickson and one other musher said yes.

"All the dogs can benefit from massage. It just makes them feel good," said Hendrickson who's completed six Iditarods. "Their muscles are working hard, and these are athletes. It's great for them."

But as two mushers took Mehrtens up on her services, which run \$60 an hour, it means 55 passed.

"I don't think you can hurt a dog with massage unless you're really rough and I'm sure she wouldn't be," said Hendrickson about Mehrtens.

The bigger reason why the vast majority of teams said no to massages, however, could lie with the unknown.

"I think we're really leery about having strangers come into our dog lots anymore," surmised Hendrickson. "There's been a lot of animal right activists showing up with false stories and it makes us nervous. We don't know what kind of story they're going to tell about us. But I'm pretty confident Katie is here to help the dogs."

Part of Hendrickson's comfort with seeing her dogs massaged comes from her own discomfort. In November 2014, she was struck by an SUV on the Parks Highway while training with her team for the 2015 race. She suffered three broken vertebrae and missed that year's competition. Close friend and fellow musher Bryan Bearss filled in for her.

She returned for 2016. But the physical toll is still there. It's why she's an advocate.

"With my back injuries and all the damage I had from a couple years ago, if I don't have massage on a regular basis, my muscles get so knotted up I can barely walk. I'm not a professional, so why not have somebody who really knows their stuff come in and work on them?" Hendrickson said.

Mehrtens began her career as a special education teacher and it's easy to see the strong connection of caring. She has a gentle way with the animals who even with a camera crew were well behaved and relaxed.

She can feel for potential problem areas. A spasm may occur, and she'll know. Sometimes, Mehrtens says, it's instinct.

She is legally blind, having lost her sight about 20 years ago due to diabetes. She has no vision in her right eye and some in her left. "I can see [the dog's] face. Not 100% clearly, but I can see him," said Mehrtens.

"I watch the dogs really closely, even though I'm visually impaired but they'll turn around and just give you a look or it might just be a slight turn of the head. It can be that subtle."

Now she has a special connection to The Last Great Race. When she heads home she'll be following her new teams with a renewed interest.

"I have the world's greatest job," she said.

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