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The Morality of Marathon Dog Races

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The Morality of Marathon Dog Races

Is dog sled racing a form of fun or animal abuse?

Posted Mar 11, 2014

At 5:30 AM this morning (March 12, 2014), Dallas Seavey and his dog team crossed the finish line in Nome, Alaska and won the Iditarod, the grueling annual 1,000 mile dog sled race. Seavey and his dogs completed the race in record time: 8 days, 14, hours, and 9 minutes. The Iditarod is controversial. Animal rights groups such as PETA think it is cruel, while sled dog aficionados call it “The Last Great Race.”

Recently, The Dodo, an excellent new website for animal lovers, asked a group of people who have written on animal issues (including PT bloggers Marc Bekoff, Jessica Pierce, and Mark Derr) to debate the ethics of the dog race. (By the way, no dogs died during this year’s race.)

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Spending two weeks at 10 below zero chasing after a pack of Huskies through the Alaskan wilderness is not my idea of a good time. I assume, however, that the mushers enjoy this exercise in masochism. But from a sled dog’s point of view, is a 1,000 mile race in the arctic snow a form of animal cruelty or is it just plain fun?

I don’t know the answer to that question, but it is useful to put the dangers of the Iditarod into perspective. Between 2007 and 2013, exactly one dog died during the Iditarod, a sled dog named Dorado who was asphyxiated after being covered by blowing snow. While Dorado’s death was tragic, the scale of canine deaths associated with sled racing pales in comparison to the carnage caused by another form of animal competition – thoroughbred horseracing.

The statistics are shocking. Between 2009 and 2012, 2,300 horses died at state-regulated race tracks in the United States. And, on average, 24 horses die each week on American race tracks. That’s nearly four deaths per day associated with horseracing, compared to one death in seven years for the Iditarod.

Given the disproportionate cruelty associated with horse racing versus sled dog racing, why does a once a year dog race tend to generate more outrage from animal lovers than the daily carnage on America’s horse tracks? I can think of several reasons. One is that dogs are our pets and have special status in our hearts, whereas horses are more likely to be regarded as work animals. Another is that simply being outdoors in the arctic winter seems unbearably cruel to those of us who live in more hospitable climes. Finally, there is issue of social class. Mushers tend to be rural working class people (24% of the 69 competitors in this year’s event are women). In contrast, horse racing—"the sport of kings"—is a form of recreation for the rich and famous, the leisure class.
But even though a horse is a thousand times more likely to die on the track than a sled dog, in the next life, I would much rather come back as a thoroughbred colt in Kentucky bluegrass country than a Husky puppy in Alaska destined for the Iditarod.

I hate cold weather.