

Sheep Mountain race is back

Mushing: lack of snow that canceled competition last year isn't a problem for Saturday.

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Thanks to good snow pack in the Talkeetna Mountains, Saturday's Sheep Mountain 150 sled dog race is back after a year hiatus.

Last year's race was canceled because of the lack of snow on the 150-mile trail between Sheep Mountain Lodge on Mile 113 of the Glenn Highway and Eureka Lodge, which marks the turnaround point.

This year the snow pack is good enough to run dogs, reported Anchorage musher Robert Bundtzen, who kennels his dogs at Sheep Mountain with lodge owner Zack Steer.

Bundtzen, 59, has commuted to the lodge since September for training runs. Until the snow started falling about a week ago, he ran his team behind a four wheeler.

"It got a little boring," Bundtzen laughed.

So to celebrate good trail conditions -- and Sheep Mountain's resurgence -- the first mid-distance race of the season will bolster the biggest field in its four-year history, one that includes a plethora of Iditarod and Yukon Quest veterans.

"That's good for the race," said Bundtzen, who has raced the Iditarod 11 times. "I'm looking forward to it."

The field includes big-name mushers such as four-time Iditarod champion Jeff King of Denali Park, perennial top-10 Iditarod finishers DeeDee Jonrowe of Willow and Ken Anderson of Fox and three-time Quest champion Hans Gatt of Canada.

Missing is two-time Iditarod champion and four-time Quest winner Lance Mackey -- the 2006 Sheep Mountain champion.

"I'm surprised he's not there," Kasilof musher Jon Little said.

Little is racing for the first time since tragedy hit his kennel during a late-September training run on the Kenai Peninsula. His team was being driven by a handler when it was struck by a vehicle while crossing the busy Sterling Highway near its intersection with Kalifornsky Beach Road.

The impact killed four dogs, including Handle, a prized 9-year-old who had finished nine 1,000-mile races, and Braeburn, who helped King finish second in last March's Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

"It was hard to get back on the trail," Little said.

One of his dogs, Wolf, had major reconstruction surgery on his foot in Anchorage. Little calls Wolf his "\$6 million dog," a reference to the \$6,000 it cost to put Wolf back together.

Wolf has been kenneled for the last two months while his foot heals, Little said. The dog is walking, but Little's not sure if it will ever race again.

"There's a sliver of hope," he said.

Meanwhile, Little is using Sheep Mountain to prepare for his second Quest, a 1,000-mile race from Fairbanks to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, which starts in February. Jon Cox, a handler who was hired after the accident, will race Little's yearling team.

Cox has only been mushing for six weeks, so Little has given him the mushing 411.

"He's under strict orders not to race," said Little, who wants Cox to let the dogs experience life on the trail.

Meanwhile, Little is looking for his first sled-dog victory. But he knows the competition will be tough to crack for a race that takes roughly 24 hours to complete.

Mackey set the course record in 2006 when he finished in 22 hours, 49 minutes.

"I'm like a locomotive," Little said, "not a race car."

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Sheep Mountain 150 Mushers List

1) Gerry Willomitzer, Whitehorse, Yukon; 2) Judy Currier, Fairbanks; 3) Jeff Deeter, Wasilla; 4) Ryan Redington, Wasilla; 5) Anjanette Steer, Sheep Mountain; 6) Kyla Johnson, Whitehorse, Yukon; 7) Colleen Robertia, Kasilof; 8) Louis Bissonette, Fairbanks; 9) Sebastian Schnuelle, Whitehorse, Yukon; 10) Jeff King, Denali Park; 11) Allen Moore, Two Rivers; 12) Aliy Zirkle, Two Rivers; 13) Mark Sleightholme, Whitehorse, Yukon; 14) Dave Decaro, Denali Park; 15) Travis Fuller, Kasilof; 16) Jason Mackey, Kasilof; 17) Robert Bundtzen, Anchorage; 18) Ray Edwards, Whitehorse, Yukon; 19) Cindy Barrand, Kasilof; 20) Robert Tasso, Eagle River; 21) Kris Boyer, Canmore, Alberta; 22) Jessica Hendricks, Two Rivers; 23) Jake Berkowitz, Anchorage; 24) Ken Anderson, Fairbanks; 25) Kathleen Frederick, Juneau;

26) Ashley Irmien, Sterling; 27) Thomas Lesatz, Two Rivers; 28) Jon Little, Kasilof; 29) Jon Cox, Kasilof; 30) Lucas Cramer, Willow; 31) Ed Hopkins Tagish, Yukon; 32) Michael Suprenant, Chugiak; 33) Jim Lanier, Chugiak; 34) Sarah Spinola, Willow; 35) Clint Warnke, Fairbanks; 36) Jerry Sousa, Talkeetna; 37) Nancy Yoshida, Thompson, ND; 38) Matt Hayashida, Willow; 39) Hans Gatt, Whitehorse, Yukon; 40) Jerry Sousa's B Team; 41) Nancy Yoshida's B Team; 42) Blake Matray, Two Rivers; 43) Rich Savoyiski, Wasilla; 44) Newton Marshall, Whitehorse, Yukon; 45) DeeDee Jonrowe, Willow; 46) Micah Dagelund, Fairbanks; 47) Dallas Seavey, Sterling; 48) Jayne Hempstead, Cantwell.

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