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Hendricks opens season with Sheep Mountain win

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Photo by [Jillian Rogers](#)

SHEEP MOUNTAIN — A four-time Iditarod champion and a three-time Yukon Quest winner were no match for Two Rivers' dog musher Jessica Hendricks at the 2008 Sheep Mountain 150 Sled Dog Race this weekend.

The 26-year-old Iditarod veteran won the race with a total running time of 12 hours, 52 minutes, beating out Allen Moore of Two Rivers by six minutes and Whitehorse, Yukon's Hans Gatt, who was just two minutes behind Moore.

Kasilof's Jon Little was a minute behind Gatt, the three-time Quest winner. Jeff King, who has won the Iditarod four times was fifth in his first Sheep Mountain 150 with a total time of 13:17.

Hendricks, who was crowned Iditarod rookie of the year in 2003, had the fastest times in the first two legs of the race.

A record 47 teams started this year's event, the fourth running, which is organized by Iditarod and Yukon Quest veteran Zack Steer, who, with his wife Anjanette, own Sheep Mountain Lodge.

The race starts at Sheep Mountain Lodge at 113 Mile Glenn Highway and travels just less than 50 miles to Eureka Lodge, where competitors take a mandatory five-hour layover. The trail then takes off from Eureka and loops around, up and over various summits in the Talkeetna Mountain Range, back to Eureka for another five-hour rest before heading back to Sheep Mountain Lodge and the finish line.

"There's only two parts to this trail: uphill and downhill," said Steer.

For Hendricks, the punchy first leg of the race and those endless hills weren't an issue, she said.

She trains predominantly in Two Rivers, but unlike most distance dog drivers, she generally trains a little faster than the average 10 mph trot. Especially this year, she said.

This season, she and her kennel partner Thomas Lesatz aren't running either of the two 1,000-mile races. Instead, they're focusing on mid-distance racing to save a little money. For her victory this weekend, Hendricks will pocket \$1,750.

"This was a good start to the season, but a tough start," Hendricks said. "It's a tough 150 miles."

Besides the steep, laboring hills and white-knuckle descents, Hendricks said there was some glaciated overflow that sent her and her team sprawling at least once.

The tough trail took its toll on the field with several mushers opting to scratch from the race and a few more taking extended rests.

But for many, especially the front runners, the dogs picked up the pace on the second day. Gatt had the fastest time on the third stage, completing it in less than four hours.

Gatt said he never intended to race hard, so he brought a team of inexperienced dogs to the event for training.

"I had no idea how this dog team would perform because they haven't raced before and in the second half of this last run, they really put it into overdrive," Gatt said.

Gatt is mentoring Jamaican musher Newton Marshall with the goal of getting the rookie dog driver through the Yukon Quest in 2009. Marshall entered the Sheep Mountain race with some of Gatt's top dogs for more practice before the 300-mile Copper Basin in January and the Quest in February. Marshall finished the 150-miler in 21st place.

But all of the mushers, rookie or veteran, agreed on one thing — the Sheep Mountain 150 is a challenging and exciting way to start the racing season.

"Zack does a really great job, everything is perfect," Hendricks said, adding that she hopes to compete in the Sheep Mountain in the future.

"A lot of us mushers, we go to these races and a lot of times they're put on by people who have the best of intentions but maybe don't know the best way to do things, so I started this race from

a musher's point of view," Steer said while waiting for teams at Eureka Lodge Saturday night. "I want a race to be dog-friendly. I want the instructions to be clear. I don't want to be dealing with a lot of complex rules and regulations. I just want to keep it simple. And keep it friendly and low-key."

Blake Matray won the Vet's Choice award while Micah Dage Lund won the Sportsmanship Award.