PULLING THROUGH

Deep in the Alaskan wilderness, one intrepid dogsled team battles the elements and harsh terrain to preserve a hundred-year-old mountaineering tradition—the long, technical ascent up Denali, North America’s highest and nastiest summit. Meet the dogs who deliver the goods.

Words: SCOTT YOKO  Photography: ZACH DUGLEAG
now Many breakouts there, in no Pandemic monitors on the gang line. The 45-pound Alaskan husky slips her collar and blasts down the ferry gauge of the remaining 32 sled dogs, backing, shrieking and leaping against their harnesses. As her nose slaps beneath her on the hard-packed snow, Many begins straight for an open bag of fresh meat—kibble and inhuman several months before. At Neville's, she grins another with a thick red band, bowls over in buoyant home to see the 2-year-old pop back into line.

“I guess they’re all doing that in their next day,” says Brian Taylor, Neville’s lanky, dog-handled cruiser on the trip. “They’re getting excited. Some of the older dogs know what lies ahead.”

After 19 straight days of clear weather and monight-walk, the two-man team is gearing up for their final push. It’s early March, and they’ve seen more than 500 miles from Hope, Alaska, to the frontier town that serves as the gateway to Denali National Park. They have some of their heavy freight 1,200 feet up Cache Creek to McGonagle Pass, which drops down in the Muldrow Glacier at the base of Denali, North America’s highest and most significant mountains. At McGonagle Pass, which sits as an elevation of 5,195 feet, the kitelers with 1,200 pounds of gear, food and fuel for two mountaineering teams—four months of climbing season.

Each day, only a few climbing groups attempt this route on the north side of Denali, avoiding the now standard route up the West Buttress route, which climbs almost with the help of an elevator last that first them 7,200 feet to Denali’s base camp on the Kahiltna Glacier. By contrast, the mountaineers use the troglodyte Muldrow Glacier requires a 21-mile approach from Wonder Lake—the last stop on the Denali shuttle bus route. Just to get in the base of the climber. It’s not only much longer but also a more technical and logistically challenging route.

The northern route requires several gear stopovers on foot and additional 1,000 miles in the very immovable. Today, he kicks the only commercial dog sledding permit in Denali National Park.

Since 1994, Nesterberg has been running a dog-hauling operation in the park. He’s also taken dogled teams 16,437 feet up nearby Mount Sanford, jumped casses and raced in the Iditarod.

Before Nesterberg’s visit, the park’s current dog-hauling permit, several other operators kept the northern route tradition alive for decades, with Will and Linda Priggen hauled 5,000 pounds in a season and stayed out with their dogs for months on end. And before that, in the 1970s, Dennis Kigucki set dogs up 11,000 feet on the Muldrow Glacier.

But the persons who want to climb Denali the hard way, these dog haulers exist out of necessity.

In 1994, the use of remote emergency and mountaineering teams were equipped with 2 million acres of the “prime” Alaska.

With ice and snowpack melting, the northern route was the only way to keep the climb on Denali. But the story of this journey and its unique supply chain begins long before the 1990s as the turn of the 20th century, when dog sledding became as much a part of Denali’s mountaineering legacy as the mountaineers themselves.

Dogs with advancements in aviation, the park continued to support the use of dog sledding. In 1979, park superintendent Frank A. Bechtel wrote in a memorandum: “As dog teams are given way to airplanes, we hope that the McKinley Park Sleds will always be maintained as part of the historical interest of the park as well as the service.”

Despite the tradition and practicality, mushing in Denali would not always be safe from government bureaucracy. Just a few years after his memorandum, Bechtel banned all dogs from the park, in part due to the work of wildlife biologist Alphonse Moreau, who believed that sending dogs would interfere with the wolf population.

After several decades of destructive horsepacking and mechanical travel that had a high impact on the topography and local ecosystems, in 1990 the park’s chief ranger, Ina Milby, declared that “sled-dogging was a cultural, historic and prehistoric resource worth preserving,” adding that “it provided a sense of transportation compatible with the Alaskan wilderness that the park was set aside to protect.”

“The northern route up the original Karstens Ridge is the true, authentic way to climb Denali.”
As a young National Park Service patrol dog was eliminated in Denali, and a few years later, in 1973, Dennis Kugl’s commercial operation began.

In the last century, almost every mountain climbing expedition on the north side of Denali has relied on dogs to haul its gear. Without dogs, the time is too long for most people to handle it in one trip with a full load. The dog haul doesn’t just enable mountain climbing on North America’s tallest mountain—It’s a constant reminder of its place in history and a way to preserve its legacy.

“His really important to carry on the tradition,” says Roger Finkbohner, a recently retired mountain climbing ranger at Denali National Park. “I’m sure it will always be a need for dogs to haul supplies, because when there is a demand, someone will come forth to provide the service. And we’ve seen that through the 40 years I’ve worked here. I think it will carry on in one form or another. You would be out if there were no park dogs.”

“There aren’t many dogs in the world truly fulfilling their food purpose—so you can see where that might come from,” says Taylor. “Denali dog haulers are a rare breed and they’re not easily replaced.”

On the morning of their big push to the pass, Neville gets used to 70 mph winds are in the forecast. The smell of boiled meat still lingers in the air as camp. The excited dogs stand at attention and stare into the distance with piercing blue eyes. The weather is calmer now, but as Neville goes south toward the hilly mass of Denali—it’s now snowing, and the sunlight from the surrounding frozen peaks—silent goats of wind kicked up from the snow flush and whip along the snow-covered ridgeline. At that moment, 23 minutes past the 600 mark, the park released a postbreakfast hand, organizing in units for a solid minute.

Weaving noise-canceling earbuds, Taylor stands nearby with a notebook and tablet as their load of tending plowroom boxes, which contain 100 ounces more than what they had planned for the journey. Both men have helped out on previous dog hauls, but neither has led one before without the guidance of a more experienced musher. This trip to the proverbial passing of the dog-hauling torch.

“Is it really hard and definitely not a job that people are knocking down the door to do,” Taylor says while calculating weights distribution with a small pencil. “But I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I’m the luckiest person to be able to come out here and mess around with the dogs and call it a job. It’s the pinnacle of dogfleding jobs. That is as good as it gets.”

“Any job where you can bring your dog to work is great,” Neville adds.
It's clearly hard work, but it seems like the dogs are living out their greatest fantasy.

But like many jobs, if they don't execute the task, they won't get paid. Once the sleds are loaded up and the dogs, yelping and snuffling with anger, are harnessed in, the two workers lift their boat anchors out of the water. With a sharp command ("Hiya"), they take off across the meadow and break a slow left turn up Creeke Creek and into the belly of the beast.

As they enter the winding ravine, the granite walls on either side shoot upward and obscure any view of the surrounding landscape, including much of the sky. Clouds tip overhead as the dog tips closer to 20 degrees. The dogs slam their chews into their harnesses as they drag the debris through uneven runs and leashed embankments. Neville and Taylor repeatedly jump off their runners to push and pull alongside their team. "Up, up, up, up, up," they yell. "Oh! Hi! Good dog!"

Glancing at the snow, the dogs bear down under the load, their tongues out, but hanging far out the sides of their mouths. It is clearly hard work, but every dog appears as engaged and worn to look as if they're being pulled by their greatest fantasy—the kind of thing dogs chase in their dreams.

After an hour or two, the team slows in on the top of McGonigal Pass— a razor, rocky switch—one 40-50 mph winds gust over from the upvalley confluence of glaciers and blast their faces with snow and ice crystals.

At the top of the pass, the whole team looks happy but exhausted. "We're not just the dogs working," Neville says. The dogs curl their tails over their noses to nap, appearing completely warm and comfortable in the frigid winds. While Neville and Taylor prepare to haul the team 500-yds up hand over hand, down a steep and icy slope that leads to a giant granite boulder covered in black crustacean fish. It's a treacherous crossing that barely pays what their pay rate—just $8 per pound for the bunch of them. Taylor curses under his breath. Neville takes a moment in front of Melones Glacier with a proud, electric grin.

Even in modern times, when technology makes everything seem easier and simpler and more accessible, the glowing work of moving thousands of pounds of freight across some of the least hospitable land on the continent is truly going to get harder. Traditionally, March is the ideal month for the journey because there are more hours of daylight, reasonable temperatures (meaning, snow!—40°F) and clear weather. But any Alaskan will tell you that evidence of climate change is rampant across their state, with glaciers retreating at unpredictable rates and shrinking temperatures pushing wildly unstable snow activity. Early melting snow and rapid river crossings alone are enough to thwart the feasibility of completing the smoke.

In 2018, the year before Neville and Taylor took over the reins at Dena'ina Seamless Expeditions, Chris Mahler ran the hauling operations for owner Joe Hirschberg. A buddy filmmaker with local sled dogs named after heavy metal bands, Mahler is a seasoned wrangler who has taken expeditions to the North Pole and guided ski trips to the South Pole. He's also an
“There is pride in climbing the mountain the way it was done before everyone just took a plane to base camp.”

Jen Ruffert, Denali National Park's research manager, shares an appreciation for the tradition. Instead of managing the dog team that help patrol the north side of the park during the winter and spring, she and Neville and Taylor greet the climbers on the morning of their ascent with tequila sunrise cocktails. "In a way, it's almost like being the first to see the sunrise," says Ruffert. "It's a feeling that's not without its own special charm."