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Off to the Races

By Julia Phillips

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We'd stood in the cold for an hour already, muttering and stomping our feet. Fifty of us were pressed against the loose plastic strip separating our crowd from the track. Race organizers outfitted in orange wandered past us. "So when will the start be, really?" someone shouted to an organizer holding a walkie-talkie.

"They've started," he said. "The dogs are on their way."

The dogs! The dogs! "The dogs," we shouted to each other, and pressed closer together. Someone called out and pointed to a hill on the horizon. A dark sled was zigzagging toward us.

This afternoon marked the first annual Yelizovsky Sprint, a dog sled race organized in partnership with the Beringia. Hundreds of people turned out to the event, which featured Koryak dance troupes, tug-of-war competitions, and an appearance by the governor. Mushers awaiting the Beringia took last Saturday to dash an hour's loop around the city of Yelizovo.

Over the next few days, mushers, dogs, and Beringia organizers will head eight hours north

to the settlement of Esso. There, they'll make their final preparations for the 1,100-kilometer race up to Ossora, a village in the peninsula's narrow north. Twenty-one years after its founding, the Beringia has become an internationally known event — yet the race itself remains distinctly Kamchatkan. Participants use traditional sleds and harnesses. Their dogs are bred through generations. The race carries medicine, mail, and gifts to isolated settlements in the north. Today's race also felt, despite its relatively large scale, profoundly local. People brought their children and greeted friends. Waiting for the race was made cold by the wind but comfortable by some sense that we stood in a community.

The sled we'd seen from a distance came zipping past the crowd. Six dogs lunged their way along the track; behind them, the musher jumped on and off the runners of his sled, shouting to his team and pushing them forward. We watched in a dog frenzy. Everyone screamed and lifted their freezing hands. That sled was off, but half a dozen more followed. We all cheered like mad. Barks audible beyond the trees, a meter of snow under our feet, we waited for the last sleds to pass, then started hiking from our corner of the track up to the finish line.

Last Saturday was a taste of what the Beringia will bring: the dances, the speeches, the ice-cased sleds. The dogs, the dogs, the dogs! But where this race rose and set in a matter of hours, the Beringia, which had its opening ceremony on March 8, will stretch on for more than two weeks. And I'll be there with it. Along with the mushers, I'll travel the track from Esso up to Ossora. Dropping off this blog for a while, I will see a long stretch of Kamchatka that's entirely new to me. I've gone north.

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