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A Fiery Win for Dog Musher

By Julia Phillips

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On March 27, Andrei Semashkin crossed a finish line in the village of Ossora and became this year's champion of the Beringia dog sled race. He'd traveled 1,068 kilometers in 83 hours and 16 minutes. He looked sure of himself. In Ossora, there was no one who hadn't expected his win —though Semashkin had never won the Beringia before, he'd been leading this pack of mushers since the race's start on March 9 in Esso, collecting three prizes for best time along the way. By the race's final start, 20 kilometers outside Ossora, Semashkin had built a lead of nearly four hours between himself and the musher in second place. The time difference that morning between those in second and third places, on the other hand, was a mere 11 seconds.

Semashkin had a good reason to run. On the competition's first day, while he and his family were greeting crowds in northern Kamchatka, a loose ember lodged itself behind the chimney of their two-story wooden home outside Petropavlovsk. The house burned to the ground. Semashkin, his wife, and their four young children lost everything. He didn't even find out about the fire until days later, when the race arrived in its first settlement that had cellular service. Sitting in the Ust-Khairuzovo cultural center, surrounded by his fellow mushers,

Semashkin learned in a phone call from his wife that the only belongings he had left were tucked into his dog sled and the only clothes that remained were on his back.

A profoundly religious man, Semashkin spent the days after hearing the news thanking God that no one was hurt. "Family is the most important thing," he said — and his family was intact. With his dogs in prime shape and a new reason to pursue the race purse, he began mushing with renewed urgency. Meanwhile, in Petropavlovsk his wife, Anastasia, fielded interviews. She turned to the church for temporary shelter for herself and her children. She also released her phone number and bank information in the hope that those hearing their story would be moved to make donations.

Semashkin flew back to his family on March 28. At the moment, the six of them are staying with friends in Petropavlovsk. Everything that was recovered from the site of the fire — an old coat, a pair of boots, some charred toys — is tucked into the office of their kennel.
An oversized check for 300,000 rubles, Semashkin's race winnings, is propped against another wall. Forty-five dogs pace in circles outside. The spot where their house once stood has been covered by snow. "Andrei's hands are already itching to rebuild," said Anastasia.
After a month marked by flames and ice, Semashkin has high hopes for what the future will bring: a new home, and, eventually, another Beringia.

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