

# Civilized, indeed: Urban Iditarod survives streets of San Francisco

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One begins by admitting that, despite its name, the Urban Iditarod has nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with the real Iditarod.

Which is not to say the Urban Iditarod, a crazy 2-hour, 3-mile crosstown race from downtown San Francisco out to the Marina, is not Alaskan in spirit, for the Urban Iditarod is all about going a long way with friends to have fun and drink beer, occasionally in that order.

Here's the deal: Four people don the doggie duds of their choice and tie themselves by clothesline to a shopping cart. Another similarly bent individual rides along on the back, pushing off whenever it appears the sweathounds are looking reprovingly over their shoulders.

Running on streets and sidewalks, the pack makes its way along a hilly, nay, a mountainous route, to mandatory rest stops at five taverns -- ideal locations at which to water the dogs. But as the idea is to drink together, and as the jammed sidewalks aren't conducive to breakaway, and as all the teams leave the rest stops at the same time regardless of when they arrived, it can hardly be called a race.

The Urban Iditarod was started last year after Tom Marsh, a Stanford business school student, watched the Iditarod on television with some friends and thought the dogs were enjoying it.

"We asked, 'Why should the dogs get all the fun?' " Marsh said. "We decided it must be extremely fun. We were right."

Also in keeping with the Alaska spirit, the organizers talked big. They claimed that last year there were 20 teams and this year they expected about 100. In reality, only seven ran the race.

Despite the lower turnout, it was a real kennel at the starting area. There hasn't been this much public howling since Arsenio Hall went off the air.

For the most part the doggies wore floppy ears, painted or rubber noses, and baseball hats. Not a Husky in the bunch. A couple looked like poodles, one team plastered patches of black adhesive on white shorts and T-shirts to represent Dalmatians (and what a racket they raised every time a fire truck raced by), but the vast majority of the dogs looked like Goofy.

The shopping carts were something else. Racers swore they had leased the carts from local markets -- shopping cart theft is such a problem that it is about to ruin the entire Bay Area economy, if the retailers are to be believed -- and most left it at that. Others were more ambitious and creative.

One had a simple vertical strap in the back that, when pulled by the driver, lifted the front of the cart up.

"A curb hopper," explained driver Rob Nelson of the team Catbox Bandits. "You're lost without one of these. Your cart's overturned."

One team put a little stand on the back for the driver to ride and push from. Another team brought a cat doll on a rope, named Kitty Kat, partially to toss out in front of the dogs to encourage them by letting them kick it, and partially to toss down alleys to distract other teams.

Yet another team had welded the back of a bicycle to the back of the cart, allowing the driver to pedal. Another team had no shopping cart at all -- just a dry bar mounted on a wooden flat-bed truck.

But all of the other entrants combined were outdone by a team from Cal. Yes, they had a shopping cart, but you had to look hard to see it. Over it they had built what was essentially a light armored tank. A fire extinguisher that powered two pop-bottle cannons that sprayed mini-marshmallows in a cloud of misty foam. Six car batteries in back to power a caterpillar drive.

"That won't go over a curb, will it?" the driver was asked.

"It'll go over a car," he growled.

The racers gathered in a parking lot well stocked with dead pigeons, none of which the dogs even sniffed. All of the big names were there. Cave Canem (Beware the dog). Carpe Canem (Seize the Dog). The Catbox Bandits.

Officials immediately DQed the tank and went over what passed for ground rules, while three or four members of the local constabulary sat on bikes and watched.

"Traffic laws are obeyed or disobeyed at your discretion," the racers were told.

Next, the teams learned they would draw for starting position, and go out in rows, "just like at the Indy 500."

Adam Green of the Catbox Bandits had a question. "If you're on the pole, do you have to mark it?"

The police listened as the well-planned, well-organized course was described. They made one observation. The route runs through Chinatown. There is a parade of some fame there. Two of the streets on the route were closed. But after an ad hoc detour was established, the dogs trotted to the starting line.

You think the real Iditarod is tough? Try this: Two blocks before getting to the starting line, disaster struck the bar cart when two of the wheels, held on by light finishing nails, were suddenly no longer held on by light finishing nails. That forced the team to retreat and pound in some killer spikes, thereby missing the start.

Ah, the start. It was in an alley behind a Nordstrom department store. Then, as a doll was dropped by the starter, the teams clattered off into the bright sunshine.

Chinatown. Fishermen's Wharf. North Beach. All of them packed with tourists and street artists. And here's the remarkable thing: The dog teams actually turned heads. In a land lousy with drag and camp, this is a noteworthy achievement.

It was at the fifth and final beer stop that Kitty Kat bit it. First the dogs tore off a limb. Then the belly. Finally the head was in the middle of a soccer match. Everywhere one looked, there were Goofy-looking people running around with stuffing hanging out of their mouths.

All of this in tribute to the valiant men, women and dogs up North, whom racers said they were honoring.

"Who's your favorite Iditarod driver?" the racers were asked.

Names were hard to come by.

"That woman -- yeah, that woman who won it two times in a row," offered one pooch.

"Klondike," said another. "Yeah, that's it -- you know, that guy Klondike."

Only in Alaska.

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