Greatest Race on Earth[1]
By Steve Ferree

It is March in Alaska and the greatest dog race on earth is about to start. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is run from Anchorage on the southern coast of Alaska all the way to Nome on the northwest coast of Alaska. It is a 1,152 mile race through the cold northern wilderness.

Round 1,152 to the nearest hundred miles, then to the nearest thousand miles.

Each team is made up of 1 person and 14 very special sled dogs. They must carry things on the sled to help them complete the race including a sleeping bag, lots of food, a large pot, a cooker, fuel to cook with, warm clothes, and an axe. It takes many days to complete the race especially when the weather is bad. To make sure the dogs stay healthy, each team must stop to rest for 24 hours at one point so that a vet can inspect the dogs to make sure they are healthy.

The racers use a breed of dog called a Malmute. These friendly dogs are very strong, weigh about 80 pounds, and will work very hard for days at a time. Still, the racers choose their racing dogs very carefully and then train them in all kinds of weather and over rough passages. The race is very competitive with more than 40 contestants.

Estimate the total weight of the dogs on a team.

The race follows part of the old trail that was run in 1925 to carry serum (medicine) to Nome to stop the diphtheria epidemic. The only way to travel the distance in those days was by dog sled.
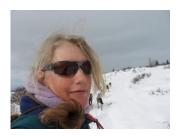
Language used by Racers:
   Hike – A command to the dogs to get moving.
   Easy or Whoa – A command to the dogs to slow down.
   Gee – A command to the dogs to stop.
   Haw – Turn right.
   Booties – Turn left.
   White Out – Winds and snow blowing so hard that racers can only see a few feet. The swirling
                    snow can make the racers dizzy or they can even get lost in a big storm.

Write the commands a sled driver would use to first make his or her dogs turn right, then turn left, and then stop. What command would be used as they start the race?

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[1] Suggested Grades: 4th – 6th Skills: Rounding, multiplying integers and decimals, dividing decimals & time

Libby Riddles (see photo) was the first woman to win the Iditarod. She was not favored to win because no woman had ever won and she did not have dogs from famous blood lines.   The race began on a bright clear 20 degree day in Anchorage in front of a large cheering crowd of people.

Assume Libby and her dog team averaged 10 miles per hour for 9 hours every day. How many days did it take her to go from Anchorage to Nome? Write as a decimal and then round to the nearest whole number of days.

For the first few days, Libby was slightly behind the fastest 12 teams. After sledding all day, she first had to feed all 14 dogs and get them set for the night. Libby had to set up her cooker, get the large bag of salmon out, chop off large chunks, and put them in the cooker with shovels full of snow.

If each dog eats 2.1 pounds of salmon per day, how many pounds of salmon must Libby cook?

While the salmon was cooking, Libby set up a cable between two trees and hooked each dog to the line so that the dogs would be far enough apart to prevent fighting while they ate. Then Libby grabbed a quick meal and crawled into her thick sleeping bag for a few hours of sleep only to wake up at 4 am for another hard day. The temperature dropped to – 15 degrees Fahrenheit on the third night out.

Libby and her dogs encountered a large moose. Everyone survived but she had to stop to repair the sled and two dogs had slight injuries. It slowed her down a little but the sled was becoming lighter as the dogs and Libby were eating the food on the sled. She dropped the 2 injured dogs off and was left with 12 dogs. She still had a chance to win because others were also dropping off injured dogs.

Libby pushed herself and her dogs really hard and was catching up to the race leaders. Finally, there was only one team ahead of her. Then a big storm rolled in off the Bering Sea. As she pulled into the last checkpoint, the winds were blowing at 50 miles per hour - it was a WHITE OUT and she could only see a few feet in front of her. Although some of the teams stopped to wait out the storm, Libby decided to go on. She believed in her abilities and those of her dogs. Her lead dog Julie wanted to run, so Run they did, through the night and into the storm with howling winds and blinding snow.

If each dog ate 2.1 pounds of salmon every day, how many pounds of salmon did she use during the race?

What characteristics do you think Libby needed to win the race?