

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



271 Leadership and Trust Along The Iditarod Trail

At least Eight days and as many as 32 in the Alaskan wilderness, wind chill temperatures as cold as -100, frequently total “whiteout” visibility. The goal, to cover 998 miles from Anchorage to Nome and all you have is your team of dogs to keep you company. I’m Jerry Roberts and today, leadership lessons learned from The Iditarod, next, on The Extra Point.

Debbie Clarke Moderow has run the Iditarod twice. She’s the author of *Fast Into the Night: A Woman, Her Dogs, and their Journey North on the Iditarod Trail*, which describes her experiences, and what she learned about trust and leadership from her dogs.

After a miscarriage Moderow adopted a sled dog, an Alaskan Husky, and the family began doing one-dog kid’s races. Then they added dogs and saw their teenagers competing in 150-mile races, eventually building up to several dozen dogs and planning for The Iditarod.

She said the racer, called the “musher,” is responsible for the health and well-being of the dogs. You take care of the dogs and the dogs take care of you. You also need to know your dogs intimately, knowing which ones are capable of leading, which have the strength and personality to be promoted into the lead, and the dogs who work well with others. The musher must know when to slow them down and speed them up, when to push them and when to let them rest. In some of the harshest conditions anywhere, breakdowns in trust and communication can lead to big problems.

In 2003, Moderow had completed 900 miles of the race, covering mostly hills and various depths of snow. Then the team hit ice at the Bering Sea, and stopped. One of the lead dogs didn’t like it, and Moderow believes she communicated her concern to the others. They laid down. She put different dogs into the lead but nothing worked. Her race was over.

Moderow would try again in 2005 and worked hard to retrain her team, particularly the dogs that seemed to cause the shutdown two years before. It took all the patience she could muster. All seemed to be going smoothly, but at approximately the same point as in 2003, the dogs hit the ice again, and again stopped.

This time, Moderow left the troubled dogs with a veterinarian at a checkpoint, and continued on with only nine dogs. Coughing, full of antibiotics, she made it to Nome and finished the race with her smaller team.

What she came away with are lessons we can all learn. The value of crossing the finish line wasn’t about simple success or failure, it was about being resilient and keeping your eyes on the horizon. It was about not getting bogged down by anything happening in the moment. That a lousy moment can be followed by a tremendous, mind-blowing moment, and you have to be open to it.

That success is sometimes messy and not anything like the picture you imagined when you started toward your goal. That if you don’t reshape your vision of success, you might not recognize that you achieved something good.

One more lesson. Sometimes you don’t arrive at your destination with everybody you started out with. You take care of those team members who won’t complete the journey and then pour your heart and soul into those who do.

That’s The Extra Point. Get out there and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I’m Jerry Roberts.

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