



Mackey at Comeback Kennels with one of his sled dogs, Rivers

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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A SUPERB METEOR

JACK LONDON SAID THAT ACHIEVING GREATNESS SOMETIMES MEANS BURNING WHITE HOT, EVEN IF THERE'S A PRICE TO BE PAID ONCE THE FLAME GOES OUT. **JOSH DEAN** WENT TO ALASKA TO HANG WITH LANCE MACKEY, THE TOUGHEST COMPETITOR IN IDITAROD HISTORY. HE CAME AWAY WITH A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF RESILIENCE, BRAVERY, AND THE IRON BOND BETWEEN A MUSER AND HIS DOGS.

It takes a sharp blade to cut a frozen beaver into easily digestible strips.

If the Hobart Company, maker of fine commercial kitchen appliances, ever shoots a TV ad for its band saws, it should definitely feature the one Lance Mackey uses in his dog yard. Half-buried in icy, urine-stained snow, it is tasked daily with slicing up skinned beavers, along with halal-certified lamb chunks, 50-pound blocks of ground chicken and beef, and big king salmon—all of it frozen as solid as the rolling countryside near Fairbanks, Alaska, where any wintertime temperature above minus 20 degrees, Mackey told me, is warm.

Beaver isn't the kind of meat you can buy over the counter, but Mackey's mom has a good connection, a trapper down around Anchorage. Which is fortunate, since beaver, a pungent dark meat loaded with oil, is a musher's secret weapon. One of the great challenges of the sport is shoveling enough calories into your dogs, incredible endurance athletes that need to consume between 10,000 and 14,000 calories a day when they're running. Some stop eating for

various reasons, and that's when you dish up the beaver. "Even a stubborn dog can't resist it," Mackey said.

As he sawed away, the 42-year-old Mackey certainly looked like a guy who'd spent thousands of hours standing upright on a sled pointed into blasts of Arctic wind. He is thin and resolute, like a chew toy made of jerky. He has a windburned face with ice blue eyes that are often bloodshot, half-moon creases on either side of his mouth, and a brown

goatee that’s surprisingly trim and tame. The left side of his face and neck are sunken, the result of numerous cancer surgeries that scooped out most of the tissue between skin and bone. Mackey always wears a baseball cap—except when he’s mushing, when he wears a fur-trimmed hood—and he keeps his long, infrequently washed hair in a ponytail that stretches down to his spiky shoulder blades.

Because of the frigid winters in the hills north of Fairbanks, where Lance Mackey’s Comeback Kennels sits on three scruffy acres, the massive quantities of bulk meat stacked around the saw require no special storage. Which is also good, since Mackey will have to cut up more than 3,000 pounds just to provision the two big races he was planning to enter when I visited him in January of 2013: the Yukon Quest and the Iditarod. These brutal, 1,000-mile slogs through wild Alaska happen only a month apart, in early February and early March, and it used to be that few mushers would dare to tackle both in a single season. Winning them in the same year was considered impossible—until Mackey did it in 2009. And then did it again in 2010.

HAD HE DONE NOTHING else, Lance Mackey would be a legend for that accomplishment, but he ended up winning both races four times and taking the Iditarod an unprecedented four years in a row, from 2007 to 2010. “I would say he is *the* all-time great,” says 2009 Yukon Quest champ Sebastian Schnuelle, who recently quit racing due to the challenges of competing in an all-consuming but low-paying sport.

Operating a kennel with 80-some dogs like Mackey’s is exhausting work, and much of the food prep and poop disposal in recent winters has been left to a pair of young handlers, who Mackey often refers to as his “sons.” Cain Carter, 21, is actually the son of Mackey’s soon-to-be ex-wife, Tonya, a mainstay at the kennel who was expelled during an ugly split in 2011. Braxton Peterson, 26, is the ex-boyfriend of one of Carter’s two older sisters. He moved in with the Mackey family back when they lived on the Kenai Peninsula and then came along in 2003 when they relocated to the property outside Fairbanks. At one time, all six humans, plus seven house dogs, were crammed into a two-room cabin with no running water or electricity. As of January 2013, when I visited Comeback Kennels, Carter and Peterson were the only other people still around full-time.

The boys are sled racers themselves (each has completed one Iditarod), as well as pot-smoking buddies, self-professed ladies’ men, and amateur rappers who record hip-hop songs (mostly about dogs) under the name the Musherz. Each has a nearly shaved head and a profusion of tattoos, several of which they got the previous summer while working on a tugboat off the coast of San Diego. Mackey sent them south to earn money to fund their racing, but they came back broke. Thus, neither would be racing in the winter of 2013, which Mackey wasn’t too thrilled about.

But then Mackey didn’t seem thrilled about much of anything by the time I got to Alaska. He was just two years removed from his fourth Iditarod win, and yet he was going broke. Dog food costs him \$30,000 a year, and that’s after generous contributions from his feed sponsor, Red Paw, plus bulk discounts and a network of friends and family who help provide some of his more expensive meats. “This is top-quality lamb,” Mackey said, kicking a box stamped HALAL. “I’m not feeding the boys lamb, I promise you.”

Though he makes money from racing, sponsorship, and mushing instruction, Mackey’s ledger is solidly in the red, in keeping with dog racing’s ongoing financial woes. Across the sport, purses have been going down, mainly because of recessionary impacts on sponsorship. The winner of the 2013 Yukon Quest would get only \$19,000, and the \$50,400 winner’s check at the Iditarod, the sport’s Super Bowl, wasn’t much better. “It’s a fucking joke,” Mackey said. “Don’t get me started. I’ve won as many races as anyone, and I’m broke-ass.”

Preparing for and traveling to a race is a five-digit proposition. The only way to win the Iditarod is to show up with a team of dogs hardened by a season of competition, who have endured endless pain and crappy weather and technical problems and emerged with the knowledge that bad times are ephemeral. To do that means entering races with small purses, races that cost money even if you win. “Spending \$100 to win \$20 gets old in a hurry,” Mackey said. Going into 2013, his pride and ego didn’t require that he win, but if he couldn’t at least be competitive, he was certain to shed both fans and sponsors.

As he prepared for the season’s two biggest events, Mackey was at a breaking point. Racing dogs is his one true love, but the grind was becoming intolerable. “This is who I am. This is what I do,” he said. “I know there’ll be down days and years. But financially you can only handle so many of those before you’re forced out.”

MACKEY LIKES to say that he was “born into the sport of sled dogs,” which is very nearly true. As he recounted in his 2010 biography, *The Lance Mackey Story*, his mother placed fourth in the Women’s North American Championships in 1970, when she was seven months pregnant with him. His father, Dick, cofounded the Iditarod and won the race in 1978 by a single second, still the closest margin ever. Five years later, Lance’s older brother, Rick, also won. For both Mackeys, it happened on their sixth try, and they both wore the same bib number Lance would later use: 13.

Lance was a promising junior musher known for a near psychic connection to his dogs, but he went astray as a teenager. He left the sport, worked briefly above the Arctic Circle at his father’s oil-camp truck stop, and then spent a decade as a fisherman, working and drinking and abusing drugs. He was drifting further away from a decent life when, in 1997, he reconnected with Tonya, an old high school friend whose substance-abuse problems were at least as bad as his.

Tonya had three small children in tow, but Mackey married her inside of a few months and embraced the entire crew. For a short time, the two wayward souls indulged each other’s bad habits. Then, in 1998, they decided to clean up together, picking Lance’s birthday—June 2—as the end of one era and the start of another. He was 26.

They moved to the Kenai Peninsula and lived in a tarp-roof shack on a beach owned by a friend and were so poor that Tonya shaved her daughters’ heads because she couldn’t afford shampoo. But Lance, Tonya once said, “was like an erupting volcano—the energy of his personality had to go somewhere.” And, over time, he made enough money fishing to buy a piece of land and build a small cabin, and there he reconnected with sled dogs.

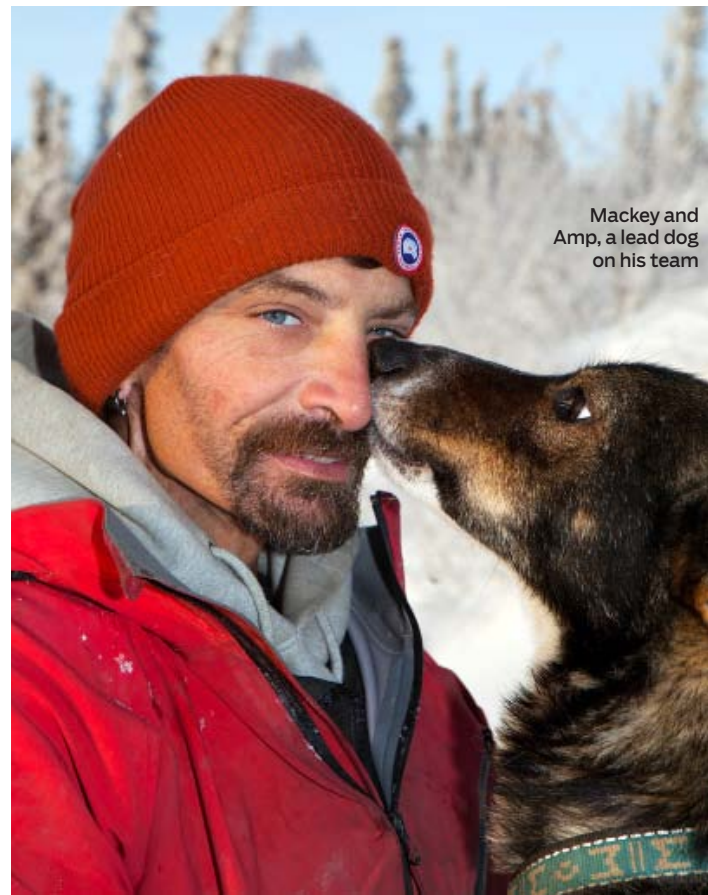
Mackey entered sprint races and slowly began to build his own kennel, using, he says, “dogs that nobody else wanted,” plus a single very accomplished bitch, “a trotting dynamo” named Rosie that he bought for \$100. He bred Rosie to a star dog from a friend’s kennel, and when it came time to split the litter, he picked first and chose Zorro, “a little furball” mutt who would become the genetic foundation of Mackey’s kennel, the linchpin of some of his greatest teams, and one of the most famous dogs ever to run across Alaska.

By 2001, Mackey felt accomplished enough to enter the Iditarod, but he was also troubled by chronic pain in his jaw and neck. He was sure it was just a bad tooth, and when a dentist agreed, Mackey went ahead with the race, only to have the pain become excruciating on the trail. After finishing 36th, Mackey immediately went to a hospital and was told he had cancer—squamous-cell carcinoma, which

an be caused by excessive sun exposure or tobacco use—in his jaw and neck.

In short order, a surgeon removed a fistful of tissue from Mackey’s face and neck, as well as his interior carotid artery, his salivary glands, and most of a large muscle that supported his right arm, causing it to go partially limp. Radiation treatments weakened him more. He lost ten teeth, and because neck tissue is full of connecting nerves, he suffered permanent damage to his hands and feet that caused chronic pain and a susceptibility to cold, which is kind of a problem in his line of work.

The massive extraction left only a thin layer of skin covering the main artery to Mackey’s brain. Just being *around* dogs could be perilous, he was told. “If you were standing in the ER with a team of physicians,



Mackey and Amp, a lead dog on his team

and a dog jumped up and scratched your neck,” he wrote in his book, “we would not be able to save you.” What’s more, without salivary glands, Mackey would have to carry water at all times just so he could swallow.

AND YET, ONLY SIX months after surgery, Mackey made plans to enter the 2002 Iditarod. He shouldn’t have been anywhere near the race, but he endured 440 excruciating miles before bowing out, mainly because the Ensure

he carried to pour into his feeding tube kept freezing, making it almost impossible for him to eat.

Mackey was too broke to race the following year, so he focused on strengthening himself and his team for 2004. He stretched out his distances and ran a full circuit of races, including the Iditarod, where he finished 26th. But his real focus was on 2005, when he planned to make his first attempt at the Yukon Quest, a rugged, mountainous race from Fairbanks to Whitehorse, Yukon, that follows the route of the Klondike Gold Rush and is even more grueling than the Iditarod. It paid off—he won.

Few mushers had ever run the Quest and the Iditarod in the same year; conventional wisdom held that it was just too hard on dog teams, let alone humans. But Mackey noticed a funny thing about his dogs—the more he ran them, the stronger they seemed to become. The year of his first Quest victory, he finished seventh in the Iditarod. Mushing fans were astonished.

Mackey repeated as champion of the Quest in 2006 and won his third straight in 2007. And then—in his sixth attempt, just like his father and brother—he won the Iditarod, becoming the first person in history to win both races in the same year. On a course that famously runs from Anchorage to Nome, he finished with 15 of his 16 dogs still going, a record. His Iditarod team, he says, was “the greatest dog team of all time”—so strong that he joked to reporters at the finish line that he should just turn around and do it again, for fun.

“I couldn’t do any wrong with them,” he later recalled. “I could feed them parts of cigarettes and they’d stand up, thank me, and go again. I’d sleep in at checkpoints. Everything you could possibly do wrong, I did.” And still he finished with a ten-hour lead.

The next year the team was just as powerful, and Mackey pulled off his historic two-peat. As Frank Gerjevic, a member of the Iditarod Hall of Fame selection committee, said when inducting Mackey in 2009: “He could start breeding cats tomorrow and still belong in the hall of fame. Iditarod and Quest in one year? Twice? Mold broken. Bar raised.”

Heading into 2011, Mackey had a chance to join Rick Swenson, the so-called King of the Iditarod, by becoming the only other five-time winner in the race’s history. He finished 11th, and he came in for surprisingly strong criticism in Alaska.

“Suddenly, the dominant, once-feared musher was an also-ran,” said a writer for the *Alaska Dispatch*, even though 11th is hardly a bad result. Things got worse from there. Mackey’s top lead dog at the time, Maple, went into heat just before the 2012 Iditarod, and the males on his team wore themselves out trying to get to her. The dogs wouldn’t eat, became dehydrated, and could barely jog. At one point, Braxton Peterson—racing for the first time and hoping only to finish—passed him.

Mackey fell so far back that he was in contention for the Red Lantern, a joke award given to the last-place finisher. But he scratched and clawed and finished 22nd, never complaining about his hard luck. To the surprise of many, he even showed up at the post-race banquet. “What are you going to do?” he said. “Cry in your beer?”

ARRANGING TO MEET Mackey in person last January was an endurance event in its own right. He has no manager, so you have to reach him by telephone, which doesn’t work too well, since he rarely answers and his outgoing message usually says: “I’m on a run, call me back.” I tried to connect with him for two months, racking up a calls-to-callbacks ratio of around twenty to one. I was finally able to persuade him to circle a couple of days on his calendar, and I booked a flight to Fairbanks on short notice. So, after 11 hours in

a plane, I drove on a dirt road through heavy snow the next morning to Comeback Kennels, where I expected to find Lance. Instead, I was greeted at the door by Peterson.

“Lance is out on a run,” he told me. “He left last night. I have no idea when he’ll be back.” He shrugged and asked if I wanted to come inside anyway. I sat at the kitchen table as he and Cain Carter got the day going with bong hits and eggs, then excused themselves to go clean dog pens.

If Mackey was around, he might have joined in on the wake and bake. It’s old news in Alaska that the drug-testing regulations instituted before the 2010 Iditarod were the result of complaints from fellow mushers about his not-even-kind-of-secret pot use on the trail, which he did mainly to ease his pain. In particular, Mackey and the boys blame their neighbor Ken Anderson, also a musher, for complaining about it, and Anderson had become such a hated personage around Comeback Kennels that Mackey wouldn’t even utter his name, insisting he

be called “my dipshit neighbor.” He is a common target in rap songs by the Musherz.

When I finally met Mackey in person, the next day, it was back at the Fairbanks Airport, where he’d gone after his training run to pick up Cindy Abbott, a teacher from San Diego who had hired him to teach her how to race.

Three winters ago, Mackey agreed to mentor Newton Marshall, a TK-year-old from Jamaica who aspired to become the country’s first dog-sled racer. Mackey managed to get the novice in sufficient shape to finish the Iditarod, using dogs he provided. Last year, Abbot contacted Mackey seeking similar help.

Like Mackey, Abbott is lean and wiry. Also like Mackey, she’s suffering from a disease—in her case, Wegener’s granulomatosis, a rare, incurable, and potentially life-threatening condition that attacks the body’s vascular system. She wanted to prove to herself, in the most extreme way possible, that life could go on despite her condition. She climbed Mount Everest in 2010 at age 51; a year later, she rang up Mackey to say that she wanted to try the Iditarod.

“I started the conversation with ‘I climbed Mount Everest last year,’ ” Abbot told me as we all sat together at a Mexican restaurant in Fairbanks. “So he knew that I had some exposure to storms and freezing.” That proved to be only partial preparation, though. “I didn’t think I’d say anything is harder than climbing Everest,” Abbott said, “but this is a lot harder.”

Mackey was busy devouring tortilla chips and salsa; already he’d finished one bowl and ordered another. Given his surgeries and skinny frame, I’d assumed Mackey didn’t eat much, but in fact he ate like a sled dog, gobbling down a combo platter with an extra beef taco thrown in, then chasing it down with fried ice cream. “I eat constantly,” he said.

Mackey has many idiosyncrasies as a racer. One is that he seems to require almost no sleep. This was central to the strategy he developed with his dog teams—he preferred to run them longer, at slower speeds, than his competitors. The technique resulted in less fatigue, which allowed for briefer rest stops. Mackey stuffs his dogs with the best food he can buy and lets them run slowly while it digests. He calls this “waddling.” Within an hour or two, they’re fueled up and flying.

The past two seasons, however, Mackey’s teams hadn’t been flying. By his math, he needed to finish in the top three of the big races to stay viable; anything less and he would be losing money on the race. Mackey had lost three major sponsors in the previous two years, worth a total of \$40,000. “So that had to be made up out of my pocket, out of my race earnings last year, which were \$25,000,” he said. “You can do the math.”

Even at the height of his powers, Mackey said, he’d never been able to climb out of the red. “Unfortunately, when I started doing well, I paid some guy named Uncle Sam for about 15 years for taxes that I had never done.” He didn’t have insurance when the cancer hit, and he estimates that he’s spent more than \$700,000 on operations. The only profit he’s made in recent years has been from selling dogs, and that money mostly goes into improving his rambling house and dog facilities.

I stated the obvious: it sounded like his finances were perilous. “I’m going to put it as blunt as I can,” he replied. “If I don’t do well this year, I’m done. That’s where I’m at. I’m on the verge of bankruptcy.”

A MUSER—EVEN a great one—is only as good as his dogs, and for Mackey, two have risen above the rest. One is Larry, Mackey’s long-time team captain and the only dog in history to win the Golden Harness Award as best lead dog at both the Yukon



Quest and the Iditarod. Larry, who like Zorro is a mix, is so beloved in the dog-racing world that he has his own fan club. Lance adores him, but out of the hundreds of dogs he’s bred and raised, his favorite, unquestionably, is Zorro.

Zorro came from that first litter on the Kenai, and he was named for the mask-like black rings that circle his eyes. At 72 pounds, he’s big for a sled dog (40 to 60 pounds is more like it), and when Lance decided to develop a team around him, his brother thought he was nuts. But Zorro loved to race, had an insatiable appetite, and never lost weight, not even on the trail.

Though Zorro never led a team, he was a tireless worker who could be counted on for extra horsepower, especially when things got tough. On the 3,700-foot ascent of a peak called Eagle Summit during the 2008 Yukon Quest—the hardest stretch of the hardest race of them all, since it goes over more extreme terrain than the Iditarod—it was Zorro who carried the day. When he leaned into his harness and drove the team into the howling winds buffeting the summit, Mackey later wrote, “you could feel the extra gear.”

That race was one of the most difficult of Mackey’s career, and he decided that Zorro, then eight, deserved a break. So he left him off the 2008 Iditarod roster, with an eye toward bringing him back for a special race, just two weeks later, that would cap what Mackey hoped would be his greatest year. The Nome Kennel Club was holding the All-Alaska Sweepstakes, an occasional event that had a purse of \$100,000 and a stirring backstory: the 2008 running marked the centennial celebration of a 408-mile race held from 1908 to 1917, which followed the gold trails of the Seward Peninsula.

At the Sweepstakes, Mackey’s team of 13 was capable but not outstanding. He couldn’t seem to get them to run at the level he expected. He was chugging along in third, trying to figure out what was wrong, when a surprise gust of wind blew his sled into a drift, upturning the basket and spilling dogs into deep snow. The damage to the sled and the team was minimal, but one dog came out of the wreckage with a limp. Unfortunately, it was Zorro.

Mackey had no choice but to carry Zorro with him in the sled basket, even though that meant another 70 pounds his team had to pull. That night, they were both asleep inside the basket, positioned comfortably just off the trail, when catastrophe struck: a drunk snowmobiler veered off course and hit the sled at 70 miles per hour. “It was like a truck hitting a Pinto,” he told a reporter the next day. At the last second, Mackey woke up and jumped out of the way, but Zorro was inside

when the collision happened. At first, his injuries didn’t look that severe, but the dog steadily declined: he was lethargic, and his long, lolling tongue seemed stuck outside of his mouth. Mackey arranged to fly him to a vet in Seattle, accompanied by Braxton Peterson, while Mackey stayed behind to deal with legal issues concerning the drunk driver.

By the time Mackey reached Seattle, Zorro’s near-death experience had become big news in Alaska and beyond. Unsolicited letters and packages began to arrive at Mackey’s home from around the world—ten dollars here, twenty there, plus dog snacks, blankets, and notes of love and encouragement. When Mackey walked into the clinic, he saw Zorro lying in a kennel, connected to IVs, sound asleep. He sat on the floor by the box and said, softly: “Zorro, old buddy, how you doing?” Zorro didn’t open his eyes, but he must have known who was speaking. His tail began to thump the box’s wall.

When the vets discharged Zorro, they weren’t sure he would ever walk again, so Mackey started a rehab process at Comeback Kennels. Six times a day, he and one of the boys would slip a sling under Zorro’s midsection and hoist him onto his legs. At first he would collapse immediately, but within a week he was taking tentative steps. Once Zorro worked up to 15 steps, Mackey knew he would walk again.

“His recovery reminded me of my own,” he wrote in *The Lance Mackey Story*. “And I recognized that Zorro was stronger mentally than physically.”

Zorro’s racing career was over, which was OK, since he was aging into retirement anyway. And as long as Zorro could walk, he could mate. “I told people, and I still believe it, that I could bring Zorro to a cat and come out with great dogs,” Mackey told me. “His genes are that strong.”

IT’S IMPOSSIBLE to say exactly how a musher can go from dominant to average as quickly as it happened to Mackey, but he’s not alone. There’s a pattern among multiple winners of the Iditarod and the Yukon Quest, in which a musher dominates for a few years and then drops off precipitously. It happened to Susan Butcher, Martin Buser, and Jeff King. Mackey was only the latest in line.

The best explanation is that it’s mostly about the dogs. The core of the team that carried Mackey to greatness has by now mostly retired to a life of leisure around the yard. Larry spends his days in one of the few heated buildings on the property, a small shed where Mackey lets his dogs warm up after winter runs. Once bullet-shaped and erect, Zorro now struggles to make his rear legs move. His back slopes precipitously, giv-

ing him the slouchy carriage of an old wolf, and tufts of tangled white undercoat burst out from his once rich black fur.

Mackey says he would do anything for Zorro, and he means it. He recalls a night a year or so back when he still had dogs living on a hill up above his house. Two bitches were in heat simultaneously, and Mackey heard a yelping commotion. He knew that Zorro was trying to mate with one of them. He hopped out of bed, threw on some boots, and rushed out to provide assistance to a dog who, despite being increasingly frail, was still the carrier of important genes.

“I went out there in my underpants and stood there holding him up until he finished,” Mackey said. “I am not at all embarrassed to say that I jerked his pecker to help him complete the deed.”

As Mackey walked me around the yard during my visit, he nodded his head at the sprawling collection of dogs, doghouses, and dog stuff. “Every house here is his,” he said of Zorro. “If he wants my bed, I sleep on the couch. If you’re on the couch and he wants your seat, I’ll tell you to get on the floor.”

Of course, Mackey knew that the future was all about other dogs. If he was going to rebuild his reputation, he had to rebuild his kennel, and that’s exactly what he’d been doing for the previ-

Mackey says his 2007 dog team was the greatest of all time. At the end of the Iditarod, he joked that he should just turn around and run it again, for fun.

ous two years, as bad luck, aging animals, and personal issues conspired to impede his racing. Over the fall and winter, he’d been working through his best new candidates, trying to identify which dogs were fast, durable, of sound mind, and willing to eat when he needed them to eat. This is not a simple matter, and there are many factors that go into a great sled dog, none more important than loyalty and trust.

“Time to go see my babies,” Mackey said, spreading love and pats from house to house as he walked among the 18 dogs that currently make up the kennel’s A-team. Notably absent was Maple, a proven lead dog: she was still nursing puppies from a litter born the previous month. But Mackey would still have Rev, a seasoned leader recognizable by his one and a half ears.

Mackey had 76 homemade doghouses in the yard, and he was in the process of winnowing his inventory down from a high of 120. His policy these days: if a dog doesn’t show potential to

make his team, or isn’t a special veteran who’s earned a cushy retirement, it goes up for sale. “I don’t have time and money to keep them,” Mackey said.

Happy dogs hopped and yipped as he doled out chunks of frozen salmon. “I have a feeling we’ll redeem ourselves,” he said, leaning in so that one of the excited animals could give him a kiss. “Everything has to fall into place, and I’ll need a little luck on my side. But the team will be capable.”

ALAS, THINGS DID NOT go well at the Yukon Quest. Mackey started poorly, with a promising team that seemed sluggish. He entered the first checkpoint hot on the heels of the leader, Allen Moore, but had fallen to sixth by the time he hit the second stop, in the town of Carmacks. Temperatures were unseasonably warm, his dogs wouldn’t eat, and Mackey made the tough decision to start cutting animals from his team, because individual dog health is always more important to him than results. He left four dogs in Carmacks, another at Pelly Crossing, and two more at Scroggle Creek. At the midway point in Dawson City—more than a full day off the lead and with only seven of his original 14 dogs still strong enough to run—he did something he hadn’t done since the 2002 Iditarod: he withdrew.

It wasn’t even a difficult decision. Still, Mackey was stunned, and embarrassed, and unsure of what would come next. The race was as disappointing as any in his career. In the immediate aftermath, he said he briefly considered walking away from the rest of the season.

“It was a body blow,” he said, “the kidney punch from hell.” What made the failure so hard to accept was that, for the first time since 2010, he was both prepared and confident in his dogs. “I had a good season, good weather, a positive attitude.” His dog team wasn’t just big and powerful, it was “probably the best dog team the Quest has ever seen, and they fall apart after 50 miles.”

Everyone who follows the sport talks about Mackey’s positive attitude, how well he takes bad luck. But the way he felt in Dawson City was crushing. “I’m not the kind of guy who gives up easily and quits on things, but that was one situation where I felt like I could fuck off and go away. Leave the kennel to the boys and go away somewhere where no one knows me.”

Test results soon revealed that an imbalance of iron from the dogs’ supplements had shut down their appetites. Knowing what happened, Mackey said, didn’t make it any easier to accept the loss, but it did give him “some peace of mind.”

When Mackey got home, he turned immediately to Iditarod preparations. His primary race team was in shambles, and he had only a few weeks to try and break in new dogs, including at

least two who would be racing for the first time. “Right to the big leagues for them,” he said with a chuckle. He had no choice but to temper his expectations. The chances of finishing first with so many unknowns were slim. “It’s always a possibility,” he said. “But I’ll have my hands full.”

AND WOULDN’T YOU know it, at the midway point of the 2013 race, who should be the first to arrive at Iditarod—the ghost town that marks the halfway point and gives the race its name—but Lance Mackey. He beat his closest chaser, Sonny Lindner, by 94 minutes and had dropped only one dog, Stiffy, because the pup seemed dehydrated. It was an encouraging start.

But Mackey warned everyone that this wasn’t the same caliber of team he’d had in his heyday. Soon enough, Mackey began to lose pace, falling to 13th by Unalakleet, a few days away from the finish. By then three more dogs were out. He also lost one of his last remaining teeth: it fell out while he was eating fudge on the trail. A dentist gave him penicillin to ward off infection, plus Tylenol to dull the pain caused by the exposed root, and he was on his way to Nome with a pocket full of pills.

The race turned out to be thrilling, with Mitch Seavey holding off several close pursuers on a soupy trail in unseasonably warm weather to become the oldest winner in history. Mackey wasn’t a factor in the end, but he had improved compared with the previous two years, finishing 19th, TK hours off the lead.

No musher can overcome average or inexperienced dogs, and it’s the natural cycle of things that great teams come and go. Whether a particular racer can endure and win again after losing depends on that person’s ability to rebuild. Jeff King and Martin Buser have done it. Rick Swenson’s five wins happened over a three-decade span. And Mitch Seavey’s only previous win came way back in 2004. “They were willing to rebuild a couple times,” says Sebastian Schnuelle, who provided on-course commentary during the race. “Time will tell if Lance can do that.”

Mackey, he said, has two strengths that point to an ability to rise again if he wants to. The first is “his phenomenal connection to dogs—a spiritual bond. He got more out of dog teams than the rest of us could.” The second is his “immense positivity and drive. Obviously, with cancer, he’s had problems few have had and come out on the positive side. And one thing I always noticed: the mental downs that a lot of us experience—the little things on the trail that hurt us—don’t effect him as much.”

MACKEY STAYED IN NOME for the Iditarod banquet, then flew home to Fairbanks and was once again difficult to reach. I assumed he was just enjoying the season’s end. But then, in the final days of March, Braxton Peterson wrote a Facebook message that caught my attention. It read: “MCBK Falls. A New Beginning Rises.”

I sent Peterson a note, and he replied that he and Cain Carter had split from the kennel, but he didn’t elaborate. A week later, I finally reached Mackey.

He was predictably harried. The boys, he said, were “gone for good.” When I asked why, he replied, “Well, two young boys is about all I really need to say.” He sighed. There was fatigue in his voice, and a mix of sadness and anger. “Some of the things they did aren’t acceptable. I had my fair share of bullshit when I was young, so I can relate. The bottom line is, I can’t have it around here. Bad for business. Bad for reputation. Bad for the dogs.”

Mackey had lined up handlers whose primary task would be raising and socializing a group of 55 puppies between four and six weeks old while Mackey his young girlfriend, a cellist, went on a speaking tour. I reminded Mackey of what he’d told me during my visit, that if he didn’t win one of the two races, or at least place high, he was going to quit. “I assume you’ve changed your mind,” I said. His reply floored me.

“No,” he said. “In fact, I sold my main team when I got done. I’m taking a couple years and regrouping. See some new things, get my interest and enthusiasm back. And make some money. I’m broke as shit.”



I mentioned something he’d said during the race, that his team was raw but capable of winning in 2014. “Oh, that team could win,” he said. “They have a real bright future. But I can’t afford to feed, train, and race them adequately.” So he sold 20 of the best dogs to Sonny Lindner, keeping only his five old-guard leaders—Rev, Amp, Munch, Mare, and Maple—plus the 55 puppies. If he should decide to race again, he said, “I’ll have a helluva team in a couple years.”

This was exactly how he’d started back in 2002, with puppies he bred personally. “That’s what I’m doing again,” he said. “I’m hitting reset. I cleaned house—handlers, ex-wife, the old dogs. It’s a complete start-over.”

When I pressed for more details about his Iditarod experience, he was reluctant to get into it. “I had some highs and very low lows,” he said. “To put it bluntly, last year sucked ass, and this was no different.”

In the end, it was as simple as Mackey had framed it back in January: he was broke.

His tone sagged. Mackey didn’t seem embarrassed to tell me this, but the reality of it was hurting him. “When I loaded those 20 dogs in Sonny’s truck, that was the hardest day of my life,” he said. “I’ve been through some bullshit, but that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Those were my babies.”

Mackey said he was certain he could have won the Iditarod with that team, possibly as soon as next year, but that personally he wouldn’t be able to get them ready. “Sonny has money, he won’t skimp on food. I can watch them in action.” He said that Sonny’s would be “the team to beat” next year and that it was plenty satisfying to have bred dogs that will compete at the highest levels of the sport.

Mackey revealed that, honestly, he hadn’t even wanted to run the 2013 Iditarod. “It was just another bad year for me,” he said. “I had more lows the past three years than highs. I needed to step back, take a breather, and get my love back for the sport.

“I’ll just get back to what I know,” he said. “That’s having fun. I didn’t start this to win Iditarod. I started to have fun with dogs.” **O**

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