

BY VINCE VERSACE
Staff Writer

NORTHUMBERLAND — Dogsled racer Aaron Mr. Peck is now facing a short sprint in patience with the start of The Last Great Race on Earth only two days away.

"I am starting to get nervous but it is a good nervous," says Mr. Peck. "If I did not have a team looking so good together but in pieces, as in January, I would be wondering why the hell am I am doing this."

Mr. Peck called the News from a pay phone on a sunny afternoon, in temperatures just above zero, from Talkeetna, Alaska to discuss his race preparations.

Mr. Peck and his crew of 16 Alaskan Huskies will surge from the Iditarod 2005 starting line on Sunday, March 6 to compete in the 1,160 mile (1,866 km) race. The Iditarod is also called The Last Great Race on Earth and this year's contest will be Mr. Peck's second Iditarod. His first Iditarod was in 2000 when he mushed a second team of dogs belonging to four-time Iditarod winner Martin Buser. Mr. Peck had apprenticed with Mr. Buser and lived at the veteran racer's Alaskan home starting in the summer of 1998.

Mr. Peck's Maple Leaf Kennels team has faced physical and mental challenges in Alaska since arriving in mid-December 2004 to prepare for the race.

Injured dog wrists and acclimatizing to less daylight took a toll on both him and his team, says Mr. Peck. The two factors ultimately culminated in a disastrous warm-up race in the Copper Basin 300 in early January.

"The team was in pieces. I may have been training them too hard and injuries started to happen," explains Mr. Peck, his voice fading as he speaks over the crackling phone line.

"We only made it to the third checkpoint, dropping dogs along the way at the first two checkpoints. It was really depressing. I thought 'If we could not finish a 300-mile race, what about 1,000 miles?'"

After the Copper Basin 300, Mr. Peck went to Whitehorse, Yukon to stay with two of his friends, fellow mushers Thomas Tetz and Bruce Langmaid, so he could recharge his batteries and clear his mind.



PEG MCCARTHY/NORTHUMBERLAND NEWS FILE PHOTO
Grafton's Aaron Peck is counting down the minutes to the start of the 2005 Iditarod dogsled race.

Aaron's ready for the last great race

Gold Harness Award for the best dog in the race that year.

Bronson comes from Mr. Buser's Magnificent Seven litter.

"Bronson gives me a back-up leader and a veteran dog who has been to Nome. He is older and not as fast as he once was but

he is a dog who will know where he is during the race," says Mr. Peck.

All of Mr. Peck's dogs are just over two years old and none of them have Iditarod experience. The two main pistons in the team's engine are Big Ben and Star Man. Big Ben weighs just over 70 lbs. and is Mr.

Peck's main lead dog who never disappoints him.

"He never gets close to being hurt, wants to be up front as much as possible and is awesome in turns. He was big as a pup as is named after Ian Millar's (famed Canadian horse jumper) horse Big Ben. Star Man is his brother and together they are an awesome pair," explains Mr. Peck.

There are 83 mushers entered in this year's Iditarod ranging in age from 19 to 62 and some come from as far away as Italy and Norway. There is a ceremonial start on Saturday, March 5 through downtown Anchorage and the next day the race truly begins in Willow. Mr. Peck will start from the third group of racers which means he will be somewhere between starting position 50 to 60. The race begins at 2 p.m., Alaska Time Zone time, (6 p.m. in Northumberland) but Mr. Peck will likely start closer to 4 p.m. Alaskan time.

"My Plan A is to attempt to stay with the pack and a top 20 finish would be the best we could do this year. There are a lot of professional teams here with all their dogs having seen Nome," says Mr. Peck. "If Plan A is not working and we are fading back or the dogs are rebelling, I will do shorter runs, rest and take care of them."

Buser also lent Mr. Peck a pistol just in case his team runs into a moose along the race trail. Mr. Peck will also ensure he has his race strategy, rest schedule and trail directions clearly and legibly printed.

"I need all that to be easy to read for when I am dead-tired in the race," explains Mr. Peck.

Mr. Peck says he will run his team in the late afternoons and early mornings when it is colder because his dogs have thrived recently running in such weather. The musher says the dogs are naturally more active at these periods of the day because of their inherited wolf instincts.

Mushers must finish with at least five dogs by the end of the Iditarod. The route from