

Camera Work



Linda Thompson rotates all her dogs and uses an old cookie sheet to keep track of who goes where.



Thompson readies her sled, which is made of aluminum. Sleds run upwards of \$1,000, according to Thompson. "It's a very expensive sport," she said.

Area musher 'in it for the fun'

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CANNON FALLS — When Linda Thompson steps onto her dogsled at the start of a race, she enjoys one significant advantage over most of her competition.

"I do pretty well against the men because I'm so much smaller than most of them," said the slightly built 33-year-old, who grew up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. "They have to work hard, running up the hills to help the dogs, while I can just get off the break and let the dogs do their thing."

Thompson doesn't run long, famous races such as the Iditarod. Her races tend to be one-day events, typically 25

to 40 miles. Although female mushers are in the minority, she says the numbers are improving. "There are more female mushers out there than there used to be," she said. "It is growing, but there are times when men's greater upper-body strength is an advantage."

Although she enjoys the competition, Thompson isn't terribly concerned with winning. In fact, in her 22-year career, she's won just one race.

"It was just my second race, and I was 11 years old, with one dog," she said. "I'd only trained on city streets, but when we took off down the trail, I passed three or four people in one shot, and I came across the finish line and won the race by several minutes. We were only run-

ning one mile, so winning by several minutes was a lot."

Still, with no victories in more than 20 years, she spends the equivalent of a full-time job's worth of hours each week in training, transporting, feeding and cleaning up after up after a team of sled dogs.

Why does she do it?

"It's nice to be competitive, but really, I'm in it for the fun," she said. "I like to run races where I know a lot of people, so we can all share our stories. Yes, this sport is a lot of work, but my love for it makes it not feel like work."

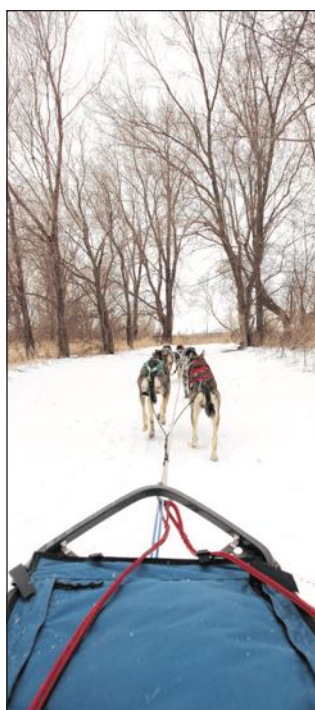
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"He loves to hug," says Linda Thompson, of Carter, one of her sled dogs. "They're all very friendly." Carter went missing for 17 days after a sledding accident on the Douglas Trail in 2014. He lost 20 pounds and had a severe nose injury. Thompson, who hit ice while running her team, was thrown from the cart and injured. Carter is now back to full health and does short runs with his teammates. But he is officially "retired" from competing in races. Buck is pictured at right.



"You're only as fast as your slowest dog," says Thompson, who typically trains her dogs at 10 to 13 miles per hour. Speeds top out at 15 mph during races. She races six-dog, mid-distance, which is between 20 to 50 miles.



"I should always have control," says Thompson, who trains with her dogs last winter. "There are three rules to dog sledding: Never let go of the sled. Never let go of the sled. Never let go of the sled."

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When Linda asked if I'd like a ride on her dog-sled sled around the 2.6-mile-loop at Lake Byllesby Regional Park, I was admittedly a little nervous. But I recognized it

was both a unique photo and life opportunity and that I would be foolish to decline. So Linda strapped me in as her dogs wildly barked, tugged and begged to be set loose. Soon we were gliding through the snow and around corners and most of my fear had subsided. It was surprisingly peaceful. And lovely.

Photographer's tip: It's important to dress for the weather elements when on assignment, particularly when making images for an extended period of time. In this case, it was cold and I bundled up head to toe.