

WEEKENDER

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Hobby dog sled racer Gerry Walker takes his dogs for a run near Pierceland in late January.

PHOTOS: RICHARD MARJAN/The StarPhoenix

Going to the dogs

As the cost of sled dog racing rises, competitive distance mushers are disappearing from Saskatchewan



This dog anxiously waits for his musher hoping to be among the chosen ones near Pierceland.

ANDREA HILL
THE STARPHOENIX

THE YIPPING STARTS before Gerry Walker is even in sight of the dog pen.

With each crunch of his boots, the howling and baying intensifies as 39 dogs realize it may be their turn to run.

By the time the greying 62-year old in bright orange coveralls and heavy rubber boots opens the gate, the animals are frantic and straining at their leashes, desperate to run to their musher.

See DOGS, E2



The chosen ones. Gerry Walker runs with the dogs in late January near Pierceland.



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HUDSON'S BAY



PHOTOS: RICHARD MARJAN/The StarPhoenix

Dogs get excited as their musher Gerry Walker approaches, hoping they will get to run in the team this time.

Dogs Just two teams left from Sask.

CONTINUED FROM E1

"They get excited," Walker says with a laugh, stroking the dogs that leap up at him as he passes and gently chiding them to get down.

The scene's a common one for Walker — and the dogs — who go through this routine every day during the winter months.

Walker, a professional dog sled racer based in Pierceland, is getting his animals ready for the Canadian Challenge, the longest sled dog race within Canadian borders that sees teams of 12 dogs run 515 kilometres from Prince Albert to La Ronge over three days.

He's one of a shrinking number of racers in Saskatchewan who's doing so.

"It's hard if you have to hold a nine-to-five job," says Walker, a retired rancher and rodeo cowboy who got into the sport in his late 40s after his kids left home. "It's a big time commitment and a big money commitment."

JIM TOMKINS, A two-time winner of the Canadian Challenge who taught Walker to drive a sled about 14 years ago, has watched the number of competitive distance mushers in the prov-



Former dog sled racing champion Jim Tomkins and his wife Elaine at their home in Rabbit Lake.

ince drop for decades. He started racing in the 1970s and moved to Christopher Lake — Saskatchewan's dog sledding hub at the time —

in 1993.

"When I first went up there, there must have been probably 12 or 15 dog teams within a 30-mile radius. Now,

there are probably only two or three," he says.

Tomkins, 72 and retired, attributes the loss of mushers to people's evolving inter-

ests — "there are computers now" — and the rising cost of raising and racing dogs.

"It's much more expensive," Tomkins says. "When

I started, a bag of good dog food was probably \$8 to \$10. Now, I'm guessing you're probably looking at \$45 or \$50 for the same bag."

Yet the prize money awarded to mushers who win races has not increased to reflect the higher costs of the sport.

When Tomkins won the Canadian Challenge in 1999 and 2001, he took home purses of \$7,000 and \$9,000. The winner of this year's 12-dog race will receive just \$5,000.

"Don't ever let anybody kid you, it's not a money making thing," says Walker, who won the Challenge in 2003, 2010 and 2012, each time bringing in just \$4,500.

"Prize money does matter. It really helps buy dog food, so it is important."

He estimates it costs him \$400 per dog per year just to feed his animals.

Stefaan De Marie, a competitive musher based in Christopher Lake and former board member of the Canadian Challenge organizing committee, says it's difficult to pull together a significant purse because few organizations and donors are writing big cheques to support dog sled races in the province.

See DOGS, E3

MOVIES

The Ross brothers redefine the Western in documentary

LINDSEY BAHR
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PARK CITY, Utah — Documentary directors and brothers Bill and Turner Ross have made a career out of examining microcosms in the modern American landscape, from their first film, 45365, about their middle-class hometown of Sidney, Ohio, to Tchoupitoulas, which follows three young brothers wandering New Orleans at night.

Their latest, Western, takes them to a foreign territory: the border.

The film, which picked up a special jury award for verite filmmaking at this year's Sundance Film Festival, transports the audience to the once harmonious, now violence-plagued border towns of Eagle Pass, Texas, and Piedras Negras, Mexico.

"The Rio Grande is a natural boundary in visualizing

the frontier. If you're talking about something as visual as a film and using landscapes, I think the most iconic way to do that is to see two cities on either side of the river," Turner Ross said.

This new frontier is shown through the eyes of cattleman Martin (pronounced "Marteen") Wall and the longtime mayor Chad Foster, both of whom have had their livelihoods challenged by the increasingly imminent threat of cartel violence.

But it's not a political movie. Western is atmospheric, inventive and immersive.

Their father, a high school history teacher, taught them that history is not just "facts and texts."

"Those people are real and they fell in and out of love and they had dreams. He instilled in us an appreciation of the moment you're in. We've always tried to capture the fleeting moment," said Bill Ross.

Inspired by the likes of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The Ox-Bow Incident and "a lot of the psychedelic Westerns of the '70s," the Ross brothers set up residency in town for 13 months, entrenching themselves in the lives of the townspeople.

While shooting, Wall even took the time to take Turner Ross shopping for more appropriate frontier clothes.

"A couple of times it just got too real and it wasn't worth it. We like making movies, we like going on adventures, but if someone gets lost? It ain't worth it," said Bill Ross.

"We had to make sure we were with the right people, shaking the right hands. As Bill said, we weren't trying to get killed," added Turner Ross. Ultimately, though, the Ross brothers are just interested in people and "sitting on a porch with somebody all day and trying to get a better grasp of what they're doing," said Bill Ross.



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Gerry Walker's dog team waits to be released from the harness after a hard practice run.

PHOTOS: RICHARD MARJAN/The StarPhoenix

CONTINUED FROM E2

"It's getting harder and harder to find sponsorship," he says. "The Yukon and Alaska, they're fortunate that the people and the businesses there are a little bit more dog-friendly, have maybe a little bit more bond towards the mushing than we do out here in Saskatchewan."

He says the absence of a significant purse makes it difficult to attract racers. And fewer participants makes it more difficult to woo sponsors.

"I'm a little disappointed in the businesses, with Saskatchewan thriving, that we get so little support from the big companies," De Marie says. "It's unfortunate that they lost the connection to the mushing world."

De Marie and Walker are the only Saskatchewan mushers registered for this year's 515-kilometre Canadian Challenge race. Ten years ago, in 2005, five Saskatchewan racers competed in the event.

Canadian Challenge president Gill Gracie says persuading companies to sponsor the race is also "a hard sell" because dog sled racing is not a great spectator sport.

"You get the big crowds at the start and, after that, the teams kind of spread out and there's no real event," Gracie says. "The sponsors are concerned about their visibility through it all."

Some companies — including Cameco and SaskEnergy — continue to support the event, but Gracie says more donations are needed. The board had hoped to secure \$50,000 this year to run the Canadian Challenge, even after cancelling the annual musher banquet to save money. Less than two weeks before the race, which is scheduled to start on Feb. 23, Gracie said she does not expect to raise more than \$30,000. The board can't afford to buy merchandise to sell or give away as it usually does and is steeling itself for a "bare bones" event.

IN PIERCELAND, WALKER selects a dozen dogs for a training run and leads them to his homemade sled. He straps each dog in its personalized harness — a task his wife likens to putting on 12 training bras every morning — and ties them to the sled, anchored in place with a snow hook. When all the dogs are in place, he mounts up and lifts the hook.

"Ready? All right!"

The animals tear out of the yard.

For the first several minutes, Walker rides on the sled brakes, warning his dogs, now silent, to go easy.

Twelve-dog teams usually run distance races at 16 kilometres an hour. Walker's dogs always want to start at 20 kilometres an hour and he has to work to slow them down. He knows if his dogs set off too fast, they won't finish races — which can take days — or training runs, which can last up to six hours.

"You need patience to let



The dogs, back from a run, get to relax, eat and play.



Gerry Walker prepares his 12-dog team for a training run for the Canadian Challenge near Pierceland.

your dogs take their time and mosey through it," he explains. "Then you have a good strong team towards the end of the race when it really matters."

The 515-kilometre Canadian Challenge — a qualifier for the famous Iditarod race run from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska in March — takes mushers more than 60 hours to complete. Most racers continually alternate between four hours of running and four hours of resting.

"Dogs will maintain their speed and sprit almost indefinitely if you keep the runs short and the rest equivalent," Walker says. "Dogs get lots of rest, but the musher, he don't get much rest."

By the time Walker's done a race, he's usually on the verge of falling asleep on his feet.

"You don't think you can sleep when it's 40 below, but you can," he says.

THIS YEAR, NINE mushers — including Saskatchewan racers Walker and De Marie — have registered for the Canadian Challenge's 515-kilometre race.

Two registrants are from Quebec and the remaining five hail from Alberta.

De Marie, who says his dog sled supply store provides dog food for Western

Canada's mushers, says the seven Alberta and Saskatchewan mushers are the only professional distance racers in the West today. Other mushers exist, but they're pursuing the sport recreationally or competing in shorter sprint races that involve fewer dogs and hours of training.

When the Challenge started in 1998, 16 mushers ran in what was then a 10-dog race. At its peak in 2002, 23 competed in the distance event, the Challenge's flagship race.

"If we only have nine or 10 mushers, the board has to consider whether or not it's worth it," Gracie says.

A shorter, eight-dog race run alongside Challenge's distance event has garnered five entries. No teenagers have entered the junior event for youth aged 14 to 17.

"The lack of entries for the junior race tells a story," Gracie says. "Younger people don't seem to be getting into the sport."

Despite a shortage of registrants and challenges in obtaining funding, Gracie says she hopes the event can "muddle along" and continue. Gracie, who's never raced dogs, became involved with the Challenge's board in 2004 in an effort to promote the profile of dog sled racing in the north. She strongly be-



lieves the north needs "more activities and exciting things happening in the winter" and was instrumental in developing the race's northern loop that traipses through Grandmother's Bay and Stanley Mission.

"Some of the elders remember when they used to travel by dog and so they love it when the teams come in," Gracie says. "The elders relive their lives kind of by watching the dogs go by."

AS WALKER ROUNDS the bend back toward home, the dogs accelerate, thrilled with the prospect of food, play and rest. Walker lets them go this time and brings them to an

abrupt stop as they hurtle into the yard. "Whoa!" he hollers, and the snow hook drops. The panting, slobbering dogs are rewarded with "Popsicles" — chunks of frozen dog food, meat and water — before being stripped of their harnesses and given the run of the pen.

Committing to go on daily training runs like these in all weathers is a lifestyle choice — one Walker says he's chosen to make, financial challenges and all. "It's just nice," he says. "Every day's different, you go through there just with nature and the outdoors and the dogs running silent. That's the part I really enjoy."

A SPORT FOR THE MIND AND BODY

ANDREA HILL
THE STARPHOENIX

Retired sled dog racer Jim Tomkins never passed someone in a race unless he knew he could beat them at the end.

The accomplished musher preferred to follow just behind the leader until he saw his opening. "It's unnerving for them to have someone looking over their shoulder the whole time," says Tomkins from his home in Rabbit Lake.

In more than three decades of competitive racing, Tomkins earned the nickname "Silver Fox" because of the cunning methods he used to best his competition.

The Saskatchewan racer remembers one race out of Manitoba where all the competitors were racing in a pack. At a checkpoint, he made a point of heating up a big pot of dog food. It's common knowledge among mushers that dogs can't run on full stomachs and everyone expected Tomkins to rest for at least four hours. But as he was mixing his dog food, he was also sneaking outside to dress his dogs. When the food was done, Tomkins sauntered outside as if to feed his animals.

"As I walked out the door, there was a garbage can there, so I just dumped the food in the garbage can and got on the sleigh. By then, the team was all hooked up and I took off," Tomkins remembers with a grin. By the time the other mushers realized Tomkins had tricked them, he was already an hour down the trail. One competitor was so angry he dropped out. Tomkins ended up winning the race.

In another competition, Tomkins made a point of saying he would not like to drive his team up a big hill at night. As Tomkins rested, many of his competitors tried to do exactly that to get a head start on the veteran racer.

"They spent hours going up this hill and then they got to the top and had to come back down because they found out it wasn't part of the race trail," Tomkins says. "But I never, ever said anything about the hill being on the trail ... It's amazing what you can make people believe without actually telling a lie."

Mushing is as much a physical game as it is a mental one, says Tomkins, now 72. He retired from mushing in 2006 when his body couldn't keep up with the demands of the sport. "Hanging on and riding the sleigh is much tougher than it looks," he says. "You're using every muscle in your body from time to time; you have to steer the thing and they steer like skis, but not as good."

He reckons he would lose about five kilograms during a three-day distance race just because of how hard he was working.