



By Doug O'Harra

S U S A N B U T C H E R ' S L A S T G R E A T R A C E

Her final showdown with an archrival showed why the late Iditarod champion was an Alaskan for the ages

»»The last great match between Iditarod legends Susan Butcher and Rick Swenson unfolded 16 years ago in a blizzard as brutal as any from gold rush lore.

With the 35th Iditarod under way this month, and another eight-day finish possible, it's worth taking a look back to another time, when the race narrowed to the clash of two remarkable people, and the weather walloped them both.

Imagine the 40-below wind chill that squeezes the chest and burns exposed skin. Visualize the 3 a.m. blackness of an Arctic storm in late winter. The wind cuts into your clothing like an icy knife. Your lead dogs disappear into a white maelstrom that envelopes forest, sky and trail.

Butcher had a one-hour lead when she left White Mountain on the last all-night drive to the finish in Nome. With a team thought to be the swiftest in race history, she was poised to seize her fifth championship in the 1,100-mile race across Alaska, settling her pumped-up

rivalry with the race's only other four-time champ, Swenson.

But a few miles up the Fish River valley, the blizzard drifted the trail and rendered her headlamp almost useless. The burled arch finish lay far ahead, more than 70 miles of hard travel. So she staked her dogs and crawled into the sled bag to wait out the storm.

When Swenson reached the spot, he found her team parked across the route, an old musher's trick.

"Hey, come on, Susan," he called. "Get out of that goddamn bag and let's have a race!"

But he didn't get far either. When Butcher came upon him a few hundred yards ahead, he was off his sled, dogs parked, struggling to replace the burned-out bulb from his headlamp. His fingers were starting to freeze.

In the swirling eye of the blowhole,



the two champions repaired Swenson's light before continuing. For hours, they navigated in unison, searching and then finding one reflector after another. Hype was forgotten. There were no sound bites or media-triggered retorts. Simply two expert dog trainers helping each other move closer to Nome through weather that could kill.

Then came a moment of extraordinary chance.

With Swenson in front and Butcher behind, they pulled their snow hooks and mushed forward.

They veered apart in the whiteout and never saw each other again until Nome.

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Butcher died Aug. 5 after an eight-month battle against leukemia that inspired thousands to test as potential bone marrow donors. She was 51, and is survived by husband David Monson and young daughters, Tekla and Chisana. More than 700 people attended her memorial service in Fairbanks last September, a crowd that included U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens, filmmaker George Lucas, former Gov. Tony Knowles, dog lovers, weeping fans and a couple of Seattle billionaires who had become close friends.

Though Butcher remains the most celebrated professional athlete in state history, she saw her family as her greatest accomplishment.

"She never really lived through her accolades," Monson said. "Her racing career, of course, was what made her who she was but it wasn't really something she dwelled on. When the kids came along, that was it. That was the most impor-



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tant thing to her."

Raised in Cambridge, Mass., Butcher arrived in Alaska in 1974 at age 20, a young veterinary technician in pursuit of outdoor adventure. She soon fell in love with the Alaska life of raising and training huskies. With Iditarod founder Joe Redington Sr. as a mentor, Butcher began an eight-year drive to win Alaska's premier long-distance sled dog race.

At first, she labored by herself in remote Bush cabins, a period she later described as "lonely times ... with my closest neighbor 40 miles away." Later, she partnered with Monson, and they worked year-round to develop the most competitive kennel the sport had ever seen.

"In order for me to win the race, I had to be much better

than they were," Butcher recalled in an interview she gave to "Women of Achievement" in 1991.

Over 17 races between 1978 and 1994, she won four Iditarod championships, each setting a new record. She placed in the top five 12 times. Her disciplined and meticulous approach to training huskies—Butcher was among the first to train year-round while tracking every detail of her canine athletes' lives—helped transform the race into its present form. She won many other contests and awards, dominating the sport in a way still unmatched.

But this record was seasoned with a bit of spice because Butcher had a nemesis: an Alaska man's man and sometime friend who stood as best man at her wedding, the miner and mechanic who yanked the early Iditarod to its professional feet.



Butcher was one of the first mushers to train year-round [FACING PAGE, TOP], transforming the Iditarod to its present form. Butcher's husband, David Monson [FACING PAGE, BOTTOM], said the Iditarod legend's ability to live in the present was "remarkable," whether racing, being with her daughters, or living at the couple's home in the Interior [ABOVE]. "She was always present."

It was Rick Swenson, first person to win the race four times.

Throughout the 1980s and early '90s, the Butcher-Swenson rivalry made Alaska's premier race sizzle. It became a litmus test among spouses and friends, our own home-grown, archetypal seesaw: female versus male. Yang or yin.

Are ye for Susan? Or Rick?

Goaded by news reporters, Swenson once blurted out that Alaskans were sick and tired of "this crap" of Susan winning. Guys on the street in Fairbanks would razz him. "Hey Rick, why can't you beat that woman?"

On T-shirts came the reply: "Alaska: where men are men, and women win the Iditarod."

The 1991 race would be the showdown. In the final week before the race, the trail leading from Knik was reported to be rock-hard and slick. With Butcher and Swenson each in the hunt for win No. 5, the word was—Watch out.

"They're going to be willing to take chances they might

not have taken otherwise," Redington said only three days before the start in Anchorage. "It's going to be a hell of a race."

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The contest practically streaked across the Susitna Valley and the Alaska Range with Butcher and her dogs at the crest. She crossed the Farewell Burn between the Alaska Range and the Nikolai village in less than 11 hours, the fastest time for any team that hadn't taken its mandatory 24-hour rest. She passed out of McGrath on the trail to Takotna almost eight hours sooner than any other musher.

But as Butcher led the way into the 90-mile crossing of uninhabited mountains and taiga toward the mining ghost town of Iditarod, the weather threw its first curve. A dump of snow combined with high winds filled the route waist deep. The race's snowmachine trailbreakers, already moving past Iditarod and beyond, didn't turn back.

Butcher donned snowshoes and stomped ahead of her dogs, trading the lead with Willow musher DeeDee Jonrowe, Tim Osmar of Clam Gulch, and a few others. It was a mind-boggling slog: dogs wallowing forward, snow churning under baskets, exhausted rests.

Out there in the wilderness, Butcher noticed that Swenson and a pack of mushers were following a few miles back. When she stopped, they stopped. She called it a "game of cat and mouse," if not outright rude, and she confronted Swenson and 1989 champ Joe Runyan out on the taiga.

"I'd say: 'You go by, I'm done.' And they'd say 'No, I'll lead later,' and I'd say 'When later?' And it was 'Not right now. I'll do my stint later.'"

At one point, Butcher and Swenson had words.

"She called me a goddamn, lazy bastard," a delighted Swenson said later.

Butcher reached Iditarod in the middle of the night, after moving about as fast as a person could jog for almost 25 hours straight. For sharing the trail breaking, she gave Jonrowe half of the \$3,000 in prize money awarded to the racer who reached the halfway point first.

"It's obnoxious of racers not to put in their turn," Butcher said as she fed her dogs in the below-zero cold next to the ramshackle buildings. "They were gambling that we'd blow up our teams, and they lost the gamble. My dogs look great."

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Butcher's team continued to outrun the competition up the Yukon River and over to the Bering Sea coast—resting longer and traveling faster than other teams. But the trail was soft and slow, reshuffling a deck stacked by Butcher's superior dogs. And Swenson held the face cards.



When a ground blizzard jammed the leaders together on the drive north to Shaktoolik, the top six teams played hopscotch across the sea ice of Norton Bay to the Seward Peninsula. Butcher arrived in Koyuk within two hours of Swenson and four other competitors, with only 94 miles left in the race.

Then the weather lifted. For the first time in a week, the trail to Nome was hard and fast.

Butcher was ready to take command.

She launched from Koyuk five minutes ahead of Buser and 25 minutes ahead of Swenson and Runyan. Over the next six hours, she and her dogs pulled steadily ahead, sometimes traveling more than three minutes per mile faster than any of the men.

In Elim, Butcher rested 71 minutes and left without seeing any other racer. Swenson arrived minutes later, quickly piled his sled with supplies, and followed her onto the ice without resting himself or his dogs. He was seven minutes behind.

All day long, Swenson lost more ground. By the time he pulled into White Mountain at 8:38 p.m., he was 67 minutes behind. Butcher's dogs were snoozing on straw, and she was already indoors taking a nap. In six hours, a mandatory rest would end and she'd leave for Nome with a decisive lead.

Swenson snapped at reporters when they asked him his chances. "What's the matter with you," he asked angrily. It would take a "bolt of lightning," he said.

"Hope springs eternal for the fluke, the win you don't deserve," said Runyan, who arrived 24 minutes after Swenson and worked nearby.

Swenson calmed. Crouching in the snow in the frigid dusk, he slit open food bags and prepared to cook his dogs a



THIS PAGE: JEFF SCHULTZ / ALASKASTOCK.COM; FACING PAGE: AL GRILLO

meal on an alcohol burner.

"You still can't know nothing in a dog race until it's over," he said, almost to himself. "You got to at least try. You can't just lay down and roll over."

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With the night came wind, and the chill factor plunged. Butcher slammed into the blizzard, as did Swenson, and they shared the lead in the bitter, blinding conditions. Runyan, Osmar and Martin Buser wallowed in the same storm.

And then, at the front of the race, Butcher and Swenson

veered apart after repairing his headlamp. Butcher bogged down within yards, unable to see where Swenson had gone. The gusts splattered from the darkness and blasted her with ice bits and snow, but she kept her dogs moving. Finally she saw a headlamp coming toward her. It was Runyan. He couldn't find the trail either.

Together, they continued and came across Osmar, tucked in his sled bag with dogs parked. The three consulted. The weather was dangerous and brutally cold. The dogs were balking. It seemed obvious that Swenson, and possibly Buser, had to be pinned down somewhere in the storm.

So, as travelers and racers have always done in the Alaska Bush during deadly weather, they decided to return a few

and trudged ahead. "As long as I stayed on the trail, I wasn't going to die," he said later. "The key was you had to stay on the trail, or no rescue party would find you."

By late morning, he reached a shelter cabin where a White Mountain snowmachiner had holed up and built a fire. By evening, he was back on the trail, in the thickest conditions yet. A man on a snowmachine pulled up and told Swenson that "they had all turned back." But Swenson assumed that meant every one except Butcher. Only when he reached Safety, 22 miles from the finish, did he learn the truth.

Swenson won in 12 days, 16 hours, 34 minutes and 39 seconds, the longest race since Libby Riddles took more than 18 days in 1985. As the only musher to win five times, Swenson took home \$50,000 and a new diesel pickup.

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Butcher would make the final drive to Nome very fast, crossing the 77 miles between White Mountain and Nome in a fraction of the time it took Swenson. But she would arrive in third place, arriving five-and-a-half hours behind Swenson and three hours behind Buser.

Butcher never rehashed the race, Monson said.

"That was the thing that was so remarkable about her—she was always present," he said. "Like when she was at the school play, she was there. When she was at her desk, she was there. And when she was with the kids or the dogs, she was there. ... And I think that made her happier."

An hour or so before she left White Mountain, the word came that Swenson had made Safety, 22 miles from the finish. She sat at the kitchen table in a small house on the banks of the frozen river. Her wind-burned face was stern as she took responsibility for the loss and congratulated the man who would be the five-time champ.

No excuses, no complaints.

"I am very, very, very happy for Rick," she said in a strong, unfaltering voice.

The dogs she had hoped would go down in history as the fastest and best-trained ever would be now be forgotten as another top 10 team.

The Iditarod has only one champion

per race. Or does it?

"It's the record books," Butcher said, a painful grin playing on her face as she opened the door to tend her dogs in the 20-below-zero dusk. "They only remember the winner." Not this time, Susan.



Susan Butcher: Born to Race

- **Born:** Dec. 26, 1954 in Boston
- **Second woman** to win the Iditarod
- **First person** to win three straight Iditarods
- **First person** to win the Iditarod four times in five years
- **Iditarod champ** in 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990
- **Top-five Iditarod finish** 12 times
- **Married David Monson** on Sept. 2, 1985
- **Two daughters:** Tekla and Chisana

Susan Butcher tends to her dogs

during the 1991 Iditarod [ABOVE]. In that race Butcher's team pulled ahead of other teams on the hard, fast ice of Norton Sound ice [FACING PAGE, TOP] before a blizzard slammed into the final stages of the race, bogging everyone down. Butcher reached the finish line in Nome [FACING PAGE, BOTTOM], five hours behind Rick Swenson and three behind Martin Buser.

miles to White Mountain and start again when it lifted.

But Swenson remained on the trail, pushing forward with an eye over his shoulder. He could not figure out what happened to Butcher. Where had she gone? Would she overtake him soon? Or had she gotten ahead?

The threat posed by Butcher loomed in his mind. It drove him on, and on. He wasn't going to stop.

Trail marker by trail marker, Swenson mushed toward Nome. At one point, the snow got so thick that the dogs wouldn't move. He tied a rope from his waist to his leaders