



MEDIA RELEASE

Finish & Awards Banquet

February 20, 2016 (Whitehorse, YT) – Hosted by Coast High Country Inn Convention Centre, this year’s Finish & Awards Banquet began with a flag procession by the Canadian Rangers, followed by thunderous applause as each of the mushers from this year’s race filed in. Taking the stage next were Chief Doris Bill of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and Deputy Chief Michelle Telep of the Ta'an Kwäch'än First Nation for some welcoming remarks and a traditional blessing. Deputy Minister of Tourism & Culture Murray Arsenault, Yukon Member of Parliament Larry Bagnell, and Whitehorse Mayor Dan Curtis also offered their welcome, and spoke of what an inspiring event the Yukon Quest is.

Banquet guests were then treated to a performance by the Air North Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous Can-Can line as they enjoyed their dinner. An unwitting Gaetan Pierrard was brought onstage at one point to assist with a tutorial on how to perfect the infamous French dance style.

In customary fashion, each musher was then introduced in the order in which they finished and given an opportunity to share trail stories from this year’s race, as well as give thanks to their friends and supporters. Nineteenth place Gaetan Pierrard was first, explaining how he’d managed to hit a tree early in the race, and recalling fondly breaking trail on the way out of 40 Mile with Tore Albrigsten and Sébastien Dos Santos Borges.

Eighteenth place Rob Cooke joked that his remarks would be significantly more upbeat than those made upon his arrival in Dawson after battling through a storm on the Top of the World Highway. He went on to thank his wife, brother, and handlers.

Tore Albrigsten, who finished 17th overall, thanked the Quest for a fantastic race and an incredible experience. Albrigsten said he met amazing people, and saw places he wished he could have spent days enjoying. “I will for sure come back,” he said.

Healy, Alaska’s Andrew Pace was next at the podium, thanking his wife Kristin, his travelling companions Paige Drobny and Cody Strathe, and fellow musher Laura Neese for helping him make it to Dawson. “This race is nothing like you expect it to be, and altogether more humbling,” said the 16th place finisher.

In the interest of saving time, Cody Strathe and wife Paige Drobny, who finished 15th and 14th, respectively, divided their list of sponsors in two and each thanked one half. Strathe also praised the volunteers and race officials who make up “the Quest family,” while Drobny talked with pride about the performance of her lead dog Sullivan.

After thanking her handlers and her parents (who were one and the same), 13th place musher and rookie phenom Laura Neese thanked the trailbreakers and her mentor Ed Stielstra, who had flown in as a surprise to attend the banquet.

Twelfth place finisher Luc Tweddell described the Quest as an “adventure and a journey for me,” and made sure to thank his housesitter: his mom.

Dave Dalton, who took 11th place in this, his 26th Yukon Quest, illustrated the comradery and generosity between mushers with a story about being inundated with donated harnesses after mentioning in Dawson that he was in need of a couple. “I came back to my sled and there were about 50 harnesses hanging off it,” he said.

Tenth place Mike Ellis offered congratulations “to everyone that had the guts to sign up,” cited Brent Sass as an inspiration (“I like to carry a little wild and free in my back pocket”), and gave a shout out to his “other Siberian brother on the trail,” Rob Cooke.

Yuka Honda was next to take the stage. She said this race was special for her because she promised her recently deceased mother she would complete another Quest. Honda finished this year’s race 9th overall.

Rookie Seth Barnes, who finished in the number eight spot, revealed that his involvement in the Quest began as a volunteer when he first moved to Alaska. He went on to tell a story about being assisted with some dog wrangling by Yukon Quest 300 competitor Aliy Zirkle not far out of Fairbanks.

Fellow first-timer and 7th place finisher Tom Frode Johansen said that the Quest “family” had welcomed him in with open arms, and that he was happy and proud to be a member.

Referencing his close encounter near Trout Creek, 6th place Torsten Kohnert joked that he spent this year’s race being chased: first by a moose and then by Johansen. Kohnert said it was easier to shake the moose.

Yukon’s own Ed Hopkins received a special gift of a handmade quilt from his bib sponsor Bear’s Paw Quilts when he took the stage as the 5th place musher. Hopkins thanked his wife Michelle Phillips, who he said “cracked the whip on me when I was getting lazy.”

Fourth place Matt Hall kept things simple and brief, using his stage time to thank his family, handlers, dogs, sponsors, and all the Quest officials and volunteers.

Allen Moore shared a humorous trail anecdote about capsizing his sled in knee-deep overflow, and said he'd be giving the handcrafted sealskin mitts he received for his 3rd place finish to his wife Aliy Zirkle for all her support.

This year's runner-up Brent Sass mentioned the surreal nature of "joking around with guys that you really want to beat" when he, Allen Moore, and Hugh Neff all turned up at the Trout Creek hospitality stop. For his second place finish Sass was the recipient of a handsome pair of handcrafted beaver skin mitts.

Finally, 2016 Yukon Quest champion Hugh Neff took the stage. Calling his 16th Quest "quite magical," Neff said the event is "not really about the prize money or the glory-- it's about showing people the beauty of Yukon and Alaska." After inviting one and all to a "summer mushing convention/victory party" he plans to hold in Dawson this summer, Neff had the crowd laughing with a story about the guest appearance made by his entire dog team at a favourite local "eatery" this morning. Before he could leave the stage, Neff was treated to a surprise performance by the Dakka Kwaan Dancers, who had created a special dance in his honour called 'Wolf Song.'

Following the mushers remarks, Race Marshal Doug Grilliot proceeded to announce the recipient of this year's awards.

The Dawson Award of four ounces of Klondike placer gold went to Brent Sass for being the first musher to reach Dawson City and go on to finish the race. The gold is donated every year by Dawson's own Fellers family of Fell-Hawk Placers.

Rookie of the Year honours were bestowed upon Tom Frode Johansen of Norway, for being the first rookie to cross the finish line.

Selected by the Quest race officials, the Challenge of the North Award is given to the musher who best exemplifies the spirit of the Yukon Quest. This year's recipient by unanimous decision was veteran Dave Dalton, who said he'd been "waiting a lot of years for this one."

The Sportsmanship Award went to 19 year-old Lauara Neese. Presented by this year's champion, Hugh Neff, this award is decided by the mushers themselves, and is presented to the competitor who demonstrates outstanding sportsmanship along the trail. Neff described Laura as full of joy, and said her radiance helped buoy the spirits of the other mushers. Upon collecting her trophy, Neese said it had been a thrill to be out there and get to know all the other mushers.

Matt Hall earned his second Veterinarian's Choice Award for being the musher who best demonstrates outstanding canine care while remaining competitive during the entire race. Selected by the Quest veterinary team, the award is good for \$1,000USD toward veterinary services from Alpine Veterinary Medical Centre in Whitehorse.

Sponsored by the White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad, this year's Red Lantern Award went to Gaetan Pierrard. Presented annually to the race's last official finisher, the Red Lantern commemorates the tradition of keeping a light on for all mushers still out on the trail.

The evening closed with the presentation of the Golden Harness Award. In honour of their loyalty, endurance, and perseverance throughout the race, Hugh Neff's two lead dogs, George Costanza and Stevie Ray, received custom-made golden harnesses from Tanzilla Harness Supply, and steaks prepared by the Head Chef of the Coast High Country Inn. Neff joked that George, who led for him in his 2012 win, is "quite the ham" when it comes to media attention, and warned, "you guys better get used to Stevie Ray because he's gonna be here again."

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