The Race

VOCABULARY

vaccine: a medicine, usually given as a shot, that protects someone from getting a disease

desperate: willing to do anything to change a situation that is almost hopeless

mission: a job or task with a special purpose

frostbite: serious damage to the body caused by extreme cold

collapsed: fell down suddenly
In 1925, children in an Alaskan town were dying of a terrible disease. The medicine they needed was hundreds of miles away, across a frozen wilderness. There was only one hope: sled dogs.
Dr. Curtis Welch looked out of his apartment window at the last ship of 1924 pulling away from the dock below.

It was a cold November day in Nome, Alaska, and in a few weeks, the weather would turn even colder as the harbor filled with ice, blocking all ship traffic. The roads into Nome would be covered in deep snow, and the town of 900 people would be virtually inaccessible.

That final ship had brought Dr. Welch the medical supplies he needed for the winter, except for one significant item, diphtheria (dihf-THEER-ee-uh) medicine, which never arrived.

Diphtheria is a deadly disease of the nose and throat that mainly affects children. Today, it’s rare because most kids get a vaccine that protects them from the disease. But in 1924, very few people had received the vaccine, and the children of Nome would be in terrible danger if the disease began spreading.

A Deadly Outbreak

On January 20, 1925, Dr. Welch examined a gravely ill 3-year-old boy named Billy Barnett. He knew that the thick gray coating inside the child’s throat was a sure sign of diphtheria. Dr. Welch was desperate to find diphtheria medicine as soon as possible, but the closest supply was 1,000 miles away, in the city of Anchorage.

Nome’s harbor was already filled with ice, so the medicine couldn’t come by ship, and cars and horses couldn’t travel on the snowy roads.

By January 26, Billy Barnett and three other children had died and 20 more were sick. There was only one way to transport the medicine from Anchorage to Nome—along an icy, treacherous dogsled trail.

Super Mushers

Nome’s town officials devised a plan: They would have the medicine sent by train from Anchorage to the town of Nenana. From there, dogsled drivers—known as “mushers”—would carry the medicine to Nome. Each musher would travel a portion of the route and then hand the medicine over to the next musher and his team to continue the trip.

This dangerous journey—across hundreds of miles—ordinarily took 25 days, but the men on this mission were the fastest and most experienced dogsled drivers in Alaska. These “super mushers” would race around the clock in a valiant attempt to deliver the medication in 10 days.
A Long Road

The amazing race began on January 27 in Nenana, when a skillful musher named “Wild Bill” Shannon picked up a 20-pound crate of medication from the train. Shannon traveled throughout the night in temperatures that dropped as low as 50 degrees below zero. He ran alongside his dogsled to keep himself warm. When he finally handed the crate of medicine off to the next musher, Shannon’s face was black with frostbite.

The perilous dogsled race to save the children of Nome captured the public’s attention. It was major news. All across America, people read newspaper articles, listened to their radios, and prayed that the mushers would succeed.

The Final Mushers

On January 31, a musher named Leonhard Seppala picked up the crate of medicine at the halfway point.

Seppala’s portion of the journey included crossing a frozen body of water called Norton Sound, which was covered with sharp chunks of ice that could slice open a dog’s paws. The ice had the potential to crack or break up without warning, which would send Seppala plunging into the ice-cold water below—killing him and extinguishing all hope for the children of Nome.

Fortunately, Seppala made it across Norton Sound and traveled 91 miles before he passed the medication along to another musher.
On February 1, the crate of medicine was just 53 miles east of Nome when a tremendous blizzard hit with raging winds, heavy snow, and temperatures plummeting to 80 degrees below zero. A musher named Gunnar Kaasen was tasked with braving this powerful storm.

At one point, enormous piles of snow blocked Kaasen’s path, and he had no choice but to leave the trail in order to circumvent them.

Conditions were so bad that Kaasen couldn’t see the dogs in front of him, and it was impossible for him to locate the trail again. Things looked bleak for Kaasen and for the children of Nome. The only hope was Balto, Kaasen’s lead dog.

Balto put his nose to the ground and sniffed for the scent of other dogs that had used the trail in the past. The minutes crawled by. Everything depended upon Balto’s abilities: Kaasen knew that if Balto failed, it would mean disaster for Nome.

All of a sudden, Balto found the scent and began to run toward the trail!

Finally, at 5:30 on the morning of February 2, Kaasen and his team of dogs arrived in Nome, shivering and exhausted. Kaasen stumbled over to Balto and managed to mumble “fine dog” before he collapsed.

Within minutes, Dr. Welch had the lifesaving medication in his hands and was dispensing it to the sick children, all of whom recovered.

The wonderful news spread quickly, and all across America, people rejoiced and celebrated the mushers’ incredible accomplishment and the children’s amazing recovery.

To this day, Kaasen, Seppala, and Balto the dog are celebrated for their heroic actions in saving the children of Nome.