In 1925, children in a remote Alaskan town were being struck down by a deadly disease. The cure was hundreds of miles away, across a frozen wilderness. There was only one hope: dogs.

From his apartment window, Dr. Curtis Welch watched as the Alameda, the last ship of the fall season of 1924, pulled away from the dock in Nome, Alaska. In a few weeks, the freezing winter weather would almost completely cut off Nome from the world until spring. The town’s only link with the rest of Alaska would be one frozen and windswept dogsled trail.
The *Alameda* had brought Dr. Welch his winter supplies: cotton balls, ether, tongue depressors, thermometers, and medicines. Only one item had been either misplaced or lost: his order of fresh diphtheria (dif-THEER-ee-uh) medicine. Today, most American children are vaccinated against diphtheria, a deadly disease of the nose and throat. But in 1924, the diphtheria vaccine had only been around for a few years.
The majority of Americans hadn’t been immunized.

Fortunately, Dr. Welch hadn’t seen a single confirmed case of diphtheria in the 18 years he’d been in Nome. Yet he knew that the disease strikes suddenly and is highly contagious. Without medicine, Nome’s population would be helpless in an outbreak. Dr. Welch prayed diphtheria would stay away for another winter.

A Deadly Outbreak

Unfortunately, the people of Nome wouldn’t be that lucky. Soon after the Alameda had steamed off, a Native Alaskan family with four children arrived in town. The youngest was ill, and the doctor guessed the child was suffering from a mild infection.

By morning, however, the child was dead.

Within weeks, two more children had died. Then, on Tuesday, January 20, 1925, Dr. Welch checked in on a 3-year-old boy named Billy Barnett, who had been admitted to the hospital two weeks earlier with a sore throat and fever. The boy had developed a thick, gray coating in his throat. Dr. Welch knew this could mean only one thing: diphtheria. In a matter of hours, the coating could block Billy’s windpipe and kill him.

The town’s situation was desperate. Through a single touch or sneeze, diphtheria can move from one warm body to the next. Dr. Welch needed 1 million units of fresh medicine to treat the town. By January 26, medicine had been located in Anchorage, a major city 1,000 miles away. It wasn’t enough for the whole town, but Dr. Welch hoped it would be enough to keep the disease from spreading.

But how could the medicine get to Nome? In 1925, there were no jet airplanes, ice-cutting ships, rugged trucks, or snowmobiles. Nome is located on a peninsula that juts out into the frigid Bering Sea. The sea was already partially frozen, making it impossible for ships to travel. The closest major railroad was 674 miles away in the town of Nenana.

So Nome’s town officials came up with a bold plan. They would have the medicine sent by railroad from Anchorage to Nenana. From Nenana, there was but one reliable way to get the medicine across hundreds of miles of frozen wilderness to Nome: by dogsled.

Super Mushers

Town leaders hoped to find the very fastest teams of dogs and the most brave and experienced mushers, as dogslde drivers are called. One musher would pick up the medicine at the railroad station in Nenana. Twelve others would wait with their dog teams in villages along the trail. Each musher would travel a portion of the trail and pass the medication to the next musher until the medicine reached the trail’s midpoint, the village of Nulato. One particularly skilled musher, Leonhard Seppala, would set out from Nome and travel alone 300 miles to Nulato to pick up the medicine and bring it back to Nome.

Under normal circumstances, the journey from Nenana to Nome would take 25 days or more. Town
leaders hoped their team of “super mushers” could make the trip in 10. It was a risky plan for both the drivers and the dogs. And there was no guarantee the medicine would even survive the freezing journey.

But hundreds of lives were at stake. There was no other choice: It was to be a race against death.

The journey began in Nome on January 27, when 47-year-old Seppala rigged up his seven dogs and set out on the 300-mile journey to Nulato. He would have to travel one of Alaska’s most hazardous trails and take a 42-mile shortcut across the frozen Norton Sound. The shortcut would be littered with ice rubble—sharp fragments of ice that could slice open a dog’s paws. With little warning, the ice might break up and carry them out to the Bering Sea.

Seppala had been chosen because he was the fastest musher in Alaska. If anyone could make it, it was Seppala.

A Single Push

As Seppala raced east, “Wild Bill” Shannon and his team of nine dogs were at the other end of the trail in Nenana, meeting the train carrying the medicine. The crate of medicine weighed 20 pounds. It contained glass vials of amber-colored serum packed in a padded container and wrapped in heavy quilts and canvas. Shannon loaded the crate onto his sled and set off for the village of Tolovana, where another musher was waiting. Normally, the 52-mile trip over frozen terrain took two days.

Shannon was told to make the trip in a single push, traveling through the night. As a rule, dogsled drivers avoided traveling in the dark and in temperatures lower than 40 degrees below zero.

That night, it was 50 below.

Still, Shannon made the trip in record time, pausing for just a few hours near the end to rest his dogs and warm his frozen body. Three of his dogs were too exhausted to continue, so Shannon left them to warm up at the trail outpost. He traveled the final four hours of the journey with only six dogs. When he arrived in Tolovana, his face was black with frostbite. Men rushed out from the roadhouse. They loaded the medicine onto another sled and helped Shannon into the warmth.

The first part of the relay was done. But there were still hundreds of miles to cover, and an enormous blizzard was making its way toward western Alaska. Meanwhile, the crisis in Nome was becoming graver by the hour.

“The situation is bad,” Nome’s panicked mayor announced in a telegram to leaders in Washington, D.C. “The number of diphtheria cases increases hourly.”

By now, the entire country knew of Nome’s plight. Newspapers and radios reported news of the epidemic. People across America prayed that the
Final Musher

At first, the mushers were lucky. Seppala made it over the dangerous Norton Sound without mishap. Meanwhile, the medicine had reached Nulato days earlier than expected, because Nome’s leaders had added more mushers to the relay. There were now 20 mushers involved in the race to save Nome.

In Nulato, Seppala strapped the medicine to his sled and immediately turned around to head back across the treacherous Norton Sound. Seventy-eight miles from Nome, in the village of Golovin, the exhausted Seppala handed the cargo to another musher, Charlie Olson. Olson traveled 25 miles to the village of Bluff, where the crate was loaded onto the sled of the final musher, Gunnar Kaasen.

The lifesaving cargo was just 53 miles east of Nome. But the monster blizzard had closed in, bringing powerful winds, blinding snow, and a windchill of minus 70 degrees. Five miles into his run, Kaasen’s path was blocked by huge snow drifts. Kaasen had no choice but to leave the trail and go around the drifts, hoping that his lead dog, Balto, would be able to find it again. It was up to Balto to sniff through several feet of snow and try to pick up the scent of the trail. The minutes crawled by as the dog searched through the snow. Kaasen’s heart raced. His body ached with cold. If Balto failed, it would mean disaster for Nome and for Kaasen too.

Suddenly, Balto lifted his head and broke into a run. The team was back on track. But the danger wasn’t over yet.

For the next 20 miles, wind beat mercilessly at Kaasen and his dogs. The musher was losing his strength. Several times the sled flew off the trail, dragging the dogs with it.

At last, at 5:30 a.m. on Monday, February 2, Kaasen and his team pulled onto Front Street in Nome. He staggered off the sled, stumbled up to Balto, and collapsed, muttering, “Fine dog.”

Within minutes, the medicine was in Dr. Welch’s hands. And by the next day, it was clear that even the most seriously ill patients would recover.

News dispatches went out over the radio and telegraph announcing the victory of men and dogs over the worst that nature could throw at them. The dogs became heroes around the country, as did Kaasen and Seppala. Nome had been saved.

Today, Balto’s body is preserved and on display at a museum in Cleveland, Ohio.
“He Could Eat Anything”

A classic author writes a gripping story about a sled dog named Buck

The Call of the Wild (1903) by Jack London is a famous book about sled dogs. In this excerpt, London uses powerful descriptive language to evoke Buck and his world.

His muscles became hard as iron, and he grew callous to all ordinary pain. . . . He could eat anything, no matter how loathsome or indigestible; and, once eaten, the juices of his stomach extracted the last least particle of nutriment; and his blood carried it to the farthest reaches of his body, building it into the toughest and stoutest of tissues.

Sight and scent became remarkably keen, while his hearing developed such acuteness that in his sleep he heard the faintest sound and knew whether it heralded peace or peril. He learned to bite the ice out with his teeth when it collected between his toes; and when he was thirsty and there was a thick scum of ice over the water hole, he would break it by rearing and striking it with stiff fore legs.

His most conspicuous trait was an ability to scent the wind and forecast it a night in advance. No matter how breathless the air when he dug his nest by tree or bank, the wind that later blew inevitably found him to leeward, sheltered and snug.

And not only did he learn by experience, but instincts long dead became alive again. . . . And when, on the still cold nights, he pointed his nose at a star and howled long and wolf-like, it was his ancestors, dead and dust, pointing nose at star and howling down through the centuries and through him.

“Together We Can Do So Much” Consider the following quotation by Helen Keller: “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” What does this quote mean? How does it relate to the central idea of “The Race Against Death”? Answer both questions in two to three well-organized paragraphs. Be sure to use text evidence.

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