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# Pushing through the pain

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LANCE MACKEY MAY be the toughest athlete on the planet. And while he's not one to brag, he will tell you a few stories. Like about the time in 2001, when he was 30 and racing the Iditarod for the first time. It was the goal of his new life, after he'd kicked the drugs and cut back on the booze. The race was in its final days, and even though he wasn't anywhere near the leaders, he was certain to finish, which meant he'd receive the belt buckle that all rookie Iditarod mushers get when they reach Front Street in Nome.

He'd spent the entire race with what he thought was a bad toothache. The pain was so bad, in fact, that it forced him to pull his 16 dogs to a stop and cry in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness. At a checkpoint early in the race, he had bitten into a pork chop and felt a crackle and pop. The tooth fell out. Problem solved, right? He kept mushing.

Turns out, problem not solved. Turns out he'd soon learn he had throat cancer. Turns out he was being taught the most difficult lesson for any athlete to accept: When he needs his body the most, it will fail him. Except Mackey refuses to learn. Years later, sitting in a roadside restaurant outside of Fairbanks, he's thin as a spine and missing more than just that one tooth. He's lost a finger. He's down to one good arm. The skin on half his face is scarred and stretched to the limit. He can't produce an ounce of spit. Thanks to racing in subzero temperatures for days on end, his ears, toes and remaining fingers are permanently frostbitten. His back is tender, his right hip clicks, his right leg cramps. He struggles to get out of bed every morning, much less climb onto his dogsled and mush 1,000 miles in the Alaskan wilderness.

And yet next March, Mackey could become the first man to win five straight Iditarods.

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THERE IS TOUGHING it out -- playing through the flu or a sprained ankle -- and then there is what Lance, as the locals call him, does every day. Even for a group of people known for being wildly, fiercely independent and rugged, the stories about Lance are endless.

Like this one: Lance's salivary glands were taken out during his cancer treatment, and as a result he always carries bottles of water. During the Iditarod, he loads up his sled and stuffs a few bottles in his parka. When his pockets are empty, he pulls off the trail and reloads. At one point during the 2008 race, his mouth was as dry as cardboard, and he didn't want to waste time pulling over. That's when an idea hit him: Why not eat snow? He leaned over, scooped a handful and shoveled it down. But without spit to help melt the snow, it filled his mouth and he couldn't breathe. He tried to yell, but couldn't. He tried to chew, but couldn't. He started to see spots of light, and in his panic he had but one clear thought: *So this is how I'm going to go?* Just before passing out, he yanked off one of his beaver-fur mittens and shoved his fingers into his mouth, picking out chunks of snow until he could finally inhale. "Closest I've ever been to dying," he says now.

Lance likes that story. It shows that he's tough, competitive, resourceful, stubborn, brave, maybe a bit naive and, in the end, a winner. He triumphed over his body, which is what he does every day. When he's standing on his sled at the Iditarod's starting line in downtown Anchorage each March, Lance looks beefy and bulletproof, wrapped in five layers of warmth. But in a black sweatshirt and jeans, he looks old for his 40 years, a fragile 5'9", 180 pounds. When he stands for too long, his body gets sore and he needs to sit. If he sits for too long, he gets stiff and needs to stand. His shoulders are slightly stooped, his walk slightly labored. He doesn't complain. His smile, though, reminds you that for Lance, nothing is easy.

His teeth are tinted brown, as if he brushed them with ash, the result of radiation treatments. The mere act of grinning tightens the topography of his neck, providing a sickening glimpse at each vein and muscle. His mouth is hugged by a goatee, which looks best when rimmed with icicles. His eyes are slim and sweet and glacier blue, in the shadows of dark circles, which make him look exhausted. "I fake it pretty good," he says. "But my body is a wreck."

The Iditarod subjects its competitors to a fairly unimaginable cocktail of bitter cold and sleep deprivation. Mushers race at all hours, in the prolonged darkness of March. There are parts of the course where the snow obstructs the trail, and others where there is no snow at all, like windswept Farewell Burn, a stretch of tundra that's sometimes as barren as Arizona. They race over frozen patches of the Bering Sea and pray that the ice doesn't crack. They hallucinate, hear things, begin to smell like a mix of dogs and sweat. The best mushers finish in nine or 10 days.

Lance comes from the first family of Iditarod racing. His father, Dick, helped found the race, in 1973, and won it five years later. Kathie, Lance's mom, placed fourth in the Women's North American Championships in 1970, when she was seven months' pregnant with Lance. His brother, Rick, won the Iditarod in 1983. But for much of Lance's life, he rebelled against mushing. He was an angry kid, mad that his parents divorced when he was young. By 18, he partied a lot, sometimes downing a bottle of whiskey a day. He loved raising hell because, as he says, "I was good at it. Hey, let's go to the top of the mountain and jump off. Pound another beer, shoot a shot of whiskey, do another line -- let's go!"

He dropped out of high school, left home and spent 10 years as a commercial fisherman in southwest Alaska, where shifts are monthlong stretches of defying death on the high seas. Once, Lance caught an iron-cast hook, big as a horseshoe. It pierced his hand, nearly ripping through. Despite the blood and the pain, he didn't quit his shift. On those boats, you don't let your body win. You just keep going.

His was an itinerant sailor's life: He got married, divorced and married again, this time to Tonya Leite, a friend from high school. They lived in a tent on the beach. He gave up drugs, cut back on his drinking and, in 1999, quit the grind of fishing. Now, he was landlocked. So, feeling constrained and untested, he decided to join the family business.

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HERE'S ANOTHER STORY: A few days after his tooth broke during that first Iditarod in 2001, Lance was still on the trail when his throat started bothering him. The pain and the swelling kept getting worse. Upon crossing the finish line in 36th place, he fell into Tonya's arms and said, "I need to go to the hospital." Doctors removed what turned out to be a softball-size malignant tumor, along with his saliva glands, right molars, a slice of skin on his throat and chunks of muscle on his right arm. With staples sealing a 10-inch gash on his neck, Lance began three weeks of radiation, which ate at his gums and jaw and damaged the nerves in his toes and fingers, particularly his left index. Twelve teeth needed to be yanked, so Lance had to be fed through a tube in his

stomach. This went on for almost a year.

That made Lance edgy, irritable and generally a pain in the ass. Because the longer it took to treat the cancer, the less likely it was he would race in the next Iditarod. Too dangerous, doctors said. A simple scrape from a tree branch could slice an artery in his throat. And if he raised his right arm above his shoulder, it might rip the thin skin on his neck like Christmas wrapping. He'd bleed to death. His bones were deteriorating. His fingers and toes were so fried from radiation that prolonged exposure to subzero weather could accelerate frostbite, perhaps resulting in amputation. And his left index finger was aching to high hell. Why take the chance and suffer so much pain?

As he wrote in his autobiography, *The Lance Mackey Story*: "One of my reasons for living has always been 'Don't tell me I can't,' and from that time in the hospital, my goal was to defy anybody who said *can't*." When he was released from the hospital, he was unemployed and had six figures' worth of medical bills and unpaid taxes. But all he focused on was racing. He begged and borrowed throughout Alaska to pull together enough money to train for the race. He was impossible to turn down. Even his doctor chipped in.

In March 2002, Lance and his 16 dogs left Anchorage for Nome. Still unable to chew, he had to feed himself through a tube just above his belly button, and he didn't have the patience to take the time to do it right. Out on the trail, Lance would undress in subzero weather, expose his stomach, pour Ensure -- a pink nutritional supplement -- into a syringe, connect the needle with the tube and squeeze. Within minutes, he'd feel a strange, cold sensation, then massive bloating, followed by the chilly rumble of icy bile up his throat and out his mouth and nose, painting the snow pink like graffiti. About a quarter into the race, he was puking almost every meal. That dropped his weight from 180 to 145. So he withdrew near the halfway point.

Lance hates that story. His body won, and he vowed not to let it happen again. He spent the next few years racing more than ever, finding ways to compensate for his failings. When the trail gets too bumpy or curvy, moments when another racer might be forced to use one hand to hold on, Lance trained himself to let go of his sled rather than overextend his damaged arm. He'd simply fall off, and his dogs would instinctively stop and wait for him to climb aboard again. The only thing he couldn't account for was the pain in his left index finger. "Ever smash your finger with a hammer so hard that you piss your pants?" Lance says. "It was that kind of hurt. All the time." Finally, during the Copper Basin 300 in 2006, Lance called Tonya from a checkpoint and said, "I want it removed." He visited a surgeon, swallowed hard, and woke up a few hours later with a bloody bandage on his left hand. That afternoon -- against doctors' orders, of course -- he ran his dogs. "I had lightened my load," he says.

Entering the 2007 Iditarod, Lance was optimistic. After scratching in 2002, he raced again in 2004, finishing 24th. Then came a seventh-place finish in 2005 and a 10th in 2006. He wasn't just some rogue racer anymore. He'd developed his own strategy, running his dogs a little slower at the start, about 12 mph versus the sprinters' speed of 15, establishing a cruising speed of 10 mph through the middle of the race and finishing at 8 mph instead of the usual 6. Lance even identified the perfect body type for his dogs: They need long legs and a thick coat; must have an appetite for fatty lamb and beaver, the food that Lance thinks helps dogs perform best; and must be able to run for 12 hours on two to five hours of sleep. Lance also prefers dogs that run with their tails down, because, Tonya explains, "he doesn't like to stare at their asses for 1,000 miles."

And guess what? That year, Lance won his first Iditarod. Fans on snowmachines -- only "Outsiders" call them snowmobiles -- followed him down Front Street. Tonya was jumping at the finish line, and Lance was already crying when they hugged. Within a few minutes, a TV reporter handed him a phone. "Lance," the reporter said,

"it's the governor."

He grabbed the phone. "Yes, sir!"

"Ma'am!" said the voice on the line.

"What the hell?" Lance said. Wasn't Frank Murkowski governor?

"Lance," the reporter said, "it's Sarah Palin."

In his three subsequent wins, Lance has made sure to get the governor's name right.

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IT'S A WARM June night, closing in on 10 p.m. in Fox, a tiny town in the heart of Alaska. The midnight sun hangs above, in no rush to set. Three years ago, Lance and Tonya bought an unfinished house here. Three years later, it's still unfinished, with no drywall or kitchen cabinets. Nails jut from the floor, and only recently did the house get running water. Being the greatest dog musher in the world doesn't make you rich. Lance's purse from the 2010 Iditarod was $50,400, and with sponsors that provide some gear, limited medical care and dog food, he's now just $7,000 in the hole. "I don't worry anymore," he says. "We used to live in a tent, for chrissakes."

Lance is roaming his vast yard, to the chorus of howls, as he feeds his 99 racing dogs. He and Tonya run Lance Mackey's Comeback Kennel, which sells and leases dogs to other mushers. If he doesn't like the way his customers care for his dogs, he often takes them back. When he was growing up, surrounded by racers, Lance was always more interested in the dogs than the sleds. And when he finally decided to race, he bought a pup as careless and reckless as he was. He called him Zorro because he had rings around his eyes -- kind of like Lance after a bar fight. Lance loved Zorro's energy and build. Zorro grew up to be his lead Iditarod dog and fathered 17 dogs that also ran in the race.

In 2008, while mushing the 408-mile All Alaska Sweepstakes in the middle of the night, Lance saw a light behind him, just outside of Nome. It was a snowmachine, booking at 60 mph. With the vehicle a mere 10 feet away, Lance jumped off into the snow and the machine collided with his sled, dragging the line of dogs. After the collision, Lance sprinted out of the trees. Somehow, his dogs were unharmed. Except one: Zorro. The machine ended up on top of him. Lance screamed and cussed and, after clearing the dog, drew a ski pole from a bag and, as he says, "started beating the living s -- out of the guy's snowmachine."

He laid Zorro on the sled and finished the race that night. The next morning, Lance paid $10,000 to have the dog medevaced to Seattle. When Lance arrived at the hospital the following day, the vet told him that Zorro didn't have much of a pulse. He had a broken back, a ruptured spleen and internal bleeding. Lance walked into the operating room, prepared for the worst, and saw Zorro lying motionless. But when Lance called his name, the dog did the damnedest thing: He stood, wagged his tail and tried to walk. Lance dropped to his knees and hugged him, as he is doing on this June evening, his four-fingered left hand ruffling Zorro's fur. As Lance recounts the story, his eyes get glassy, his breathing heavy and slow. "He's the best dog I've ever had," he says.

Zorro recovered, but he's 11 now and can't run the Iditarod again. He's gimpy and sore and has given his life to the race, just like his owner. "People ask, How long does it take you to recuperate?" Lance says. "Look at me. I'm still recuperating."

How long can Lance keep racing? He's not sure. He won't quit when he stops winning. As much as he likes

crossing the finish line first, he doesn't really compete against other racers. He competes against his body. And it is in the failure of his body that he finds his success.

Still, Lance has a premonition of how his story will end. He thinks the trail will get him, one of these days. And he's okay with that. During a race, in the woods, surrounded by his dogs, with a smile on his face -- that sounds good to him. He just hopes that when death comes, it comes quickly. After all, Lance says, as he fills the dish of a hungry husky, "I can pretend to be so tough only so long."

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