

Iditarod to drug test on the trail *BY TODD L. DISHER Frontiersman*

WASILLA — In a rule change that directly affects the event's three-time reigning champion, the governing body of the Iditarod Trail International Sled Dog Race will impose a strict drug testing policy on mushers starting in 2010.

Rule 29 now allows race officials to test mushers with or without cause, individually or as a group, and on a fixed or random schedule for the presence of prohibited drugs or alcohol.

The Iditarod Trail Committee Executive Director Stan Hooley said the rule change comes in response to a request from mushers.

“(The Iditarod Official Finishers’ Club) said to us, ‘We want you to implement a drug testing program to make sure no unfair advantage is gained. We are interested in the safety and the integrity of everyone in the race,’” Hooley said.

But for Lance Mackey, the musher who has dominated the sport for the last three years, the rule change is purely political.

“Some of the people who are pushing the issue are the people who can’t beat me on the trail, so they are trying to beat me off it,” Mackey said.

Mackey survived a battle with throat cancer in 2001 and openly admits to using marijuana for what he says are medicinal purposes and with a doctor’s approval.

“I have no taste buds and no real appetite,” Mackey said, as one of the purported benefits of marijuana is to improve food consumption. “It also helps me pay attention and focus on what I’m doing.”

It’s that last part that irks fellow musher Ken Anderson. Anderson said he understands if Mackey uses marijuana to maintain his health, but if it really does help him stay focused, then it offers an unfair advantage.

“I guess that is a little bit troubling, that he was getting a leg up,” Anderson said. “And, that was against race rules.”

Anderson is referring to the rule that has been in place banning substances like marijuana even before the rule was recently changed. However, what the past rule lacked, Hooley said, was enforcement.

“There wasn’t a protocol in place for (drug testing) that would stand up,” Hooley said. “You need to have professionals in place to carry out a program like that.”

After the request from the IOFC, Hooley said the rule became formalized with an agreement with WorkSafe Inc., a company that does drug testing for companies around the state. By offering WorkSafe a race sponsorship, the committee was able to get a contract for the tests at a reduced rate, he said.

The urine samples can be taken anywhere along the trail and flown to the testing facility in the Lower 48. Hooley said the turnaround time from sample taken to results should be about 48 hours, and the results will indicate levels of both illegal drugs and performance-enhancing substances.

As to why marijuana was included on the list of substances prohibited, Hooley said the committee was following federal guidelines. Alaska state law allows possession of up to 1 ounce of marijuana, but “by federal standards, marijuana is still an illegal drug,” Hooley said.

What’s more, marijuana is not eligible for the therapeutic exemption clause in the new rule. Hooley said marijuana only requires a physician’s recommendation, not necessarily a prescription. Also, there is no regulated dispensing system that controls the dose because the federal government does not recognize marijuana as a medicine, Hooley said.

“Is marijuana considered performance-enhancing? I think most scientific folks would say no. But, it is an illegal drug that is not dispensed by the FDA through a prescription,” Hooley said.

For his part, Mackey said he would not seek the therapeutic exemption even if it was offered, saying he does not want to use his medical marijuana card as a crutch. However, he said he still does not understand the reasoning behind the ruling.

“It’s a dog race. They are the ones performing to get us to Nome. It didn’t jeopardize their performance last year,” Mackey said. “I finished with 15 of my 16 dogs and with a 12-hour lead in the toughest conditions the Iditarod has ever seen. It didn’t do anything to hinder my outcome.”

Asked if this means he used marijuana on the Iditarod trail last year, Mackey hesitated, but said yes.

“I wasn’t dependent on it everyday. There was a little bit here and there. But it is irrelevant,” he said.

What people don’t understand, he said, is the effect cancer and the following chemotherapy and radiation treatment had on his body, and how marijuana alleviates this pain.

“I do not condone kids using pot. This is something I have had to deal with because of my medical history,” Mackey said. “I don’t know how to explain this. It seems like it is one of the reasons I’m still breathing.”

Looking forward, Mackey said he is going to run a clean race in 2010 and likes his chances of becoming the first musher to win four Iditarod races in a row.

“I’m pretty confident. If I come in 50th this year, of course people are going to start pointing fingers,” Mackey said. “But if they think my success in the past has been based on my marijuana use, they have more problems than me.”