

Teen musher, leukemia survivor plans to compete in Junior Iditarod, Yukon Quest

Posted by [knagenga](#) December 02, 2008 19:26PM



Press Photo/Hollyn JohnsonJustin

Fink, 15, enjoys a moment with one of his dogs, Sissy, during a video presentation about his journey as a musher and leukemia survivor at a school assembly at Chandler Woods Academy. Fink explained to the students how he will compete in the Junior Iditarod and Junior Yukon Quest races in Alaska this February.

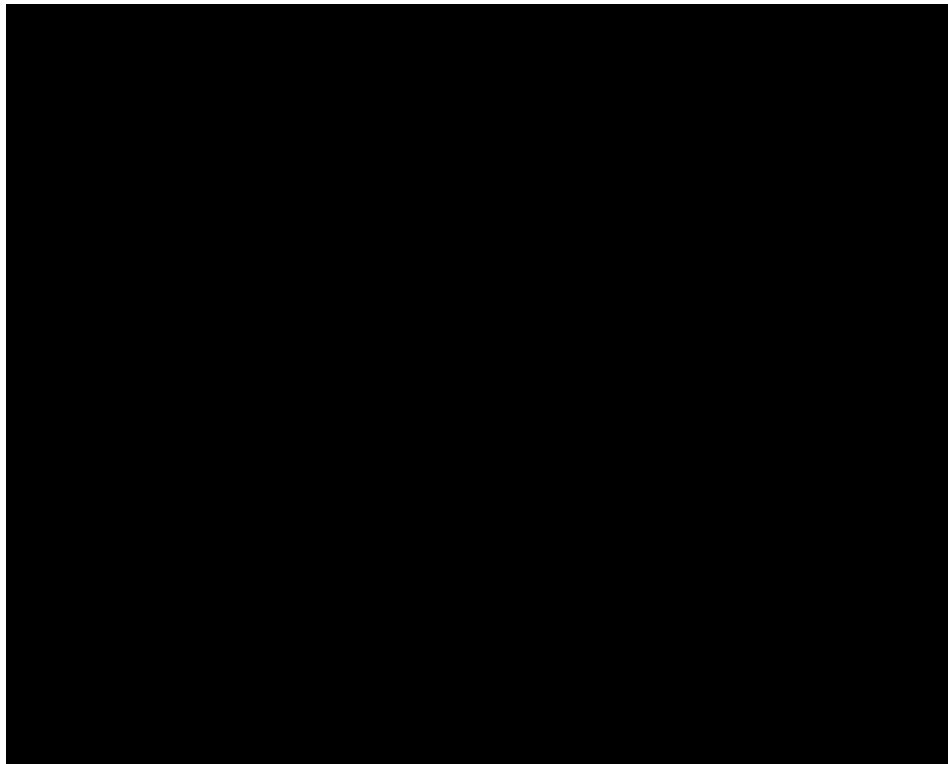
PLAINFIELD TOWNSHIP -- Sissy knows when it is bootie time.

The sleek, 6-year-old Alaskan Husky gladly lifted her paws Tuesday as Justin Fink, of Gladwin, fitted her feet with protective coverings.

The 15-year-old explained to a group of giggling Chandler Woods Charter Academy kids that they are not a fashion statement. They're the difference between a happy sled dog and one who yelps while trekking over ice and snow.

"It's just like razor blades," said the young musher of the unforgiving terrain the dogs run across.

Justin is slated to compete in two Alaskan sledding competitions in February: the 134-mile Junior Yukon Quest starting in Fairbanks, and the 174-mile Jr. Iditarod, beginning in Willow.



He placed in the top five in 10 races this year, including one in Marquette and others in northern Lower Peninsula locales.

Chandler Woods students were in doggy heaven during the visit from the Fink family. They brought 12 racing canines to the school for all to fawn over.

"I could just stay in here all day," said 12-year-old Mariah Wheaton as she stood in a cold kennel truck filled with curious critters. "They're so cute."

Justin's story is more remarkable than that of a boy and his dogs. He was diagnosed with leukemia at age 4 and has been in remission for six years.

"It definitely helps me get through things," Justin said. "I'm definitely a lot more appreciative of stuff."

Student Bethany Warwick, 12, said her favorite pooch was 10-year-old Owl. He was dropped from an Iditarod competition after suffering an injured back.

"He was fluffy and soft and squishy," Bethany said.

She also connected with Justin's story, since her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, she said.

"I think it's good that he got through it and is doing this now," she said.

Justin achieved Eagle Scout status at age 13, racking up 50 merit badges and four palms. His father, John Fink, is a racer and a proud dad.

His son will tackle "some of the toughest territory in the world to sled in," he said. Temperatures often fall 60 to 80 degrees below zero at night, with snow accumulation up to a foot, he said.

Justin works in tandem with his sister, 18-year-old Alycia Fink, who works "behind the scenes." Clipping toenails, treating injuries and fitting harnesses are among her duties.

"Trying to put a harness on a dog that's squirming and jumping up and down is kind of difficult," she said.

Justin's passion for his pups is clear. He tends to include them in conversations.

"The speed they go is amazing," he said. "When the dogs do what they do and they love it so much, it's amazing to be able to watch them do it.

"Yes it is, isn't it!" he directed toward 5-year-old husky Gloria. Justin feels great responsibility toward his four-legged friends, which have been known to haul him 22 mph down slim, icy trails.

"You have 10 other lives to worry about," he said. "If there's anything that happens to them, it's all my blame."

E-mail the author of this story: localnews@grpress.com

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