

CONTENT WARNING: THIS STORY INCLUDES TESTIMONY ABOUT THE KILLING OF QIMMIIT (DOGS).



IT WAS COLD, colder than usual for the time of year. Some 45 kilometres to the northeast, the Ikpiarjuk (Arctic Bay) airport would tally the low of minus 31.8 C as the coldest April 18 of the last 20 years. But the sun was shining, a clear indication that the darkness and true chill of winter had been washed away by the embrace of an early High Arctic spring.

Here, at the frozen mouth of the Iqalulik river on the northwestern corner of Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island), a small camp began to take shape. Not so slowly, a mix of well-worn white canvas tents seemed to pop out of the equally white sea ice, joined by others of bright orange and yellow.

As the tents went up, organized activity flurried around them. Plywood, blankets, sleeping bags and stoves were pulled from their resting places deep inside the qamutiit (traditional Inuit sleds) and placed inside the tents. A small number of saw- or shovel-wielding campers ventured out to where the sea of snow drifts was undisturbed, seeking the best snow and ice for drinking and cooking water. Another group, also gripping saws and axes, chopped whole frozen Arctic char and seals into small, manageable portions for dogs. Those too young to help out kicked a soccer ball through the snow.

Minus the occasional laugh of a child, enthusiastic conversation inside a tent, or muffled hum of a small generator, the camp was quiet. There was an energy

The sun had just started to sink below the horizon when this racer neared the finish line on Day 2.

there that caused everyone to occasionally look up and gaze north, straining to see as far as they could in the direction they had come from.

In a moment, that tension was released, cut free by the buzz of snowmobiles racing toward a point on the northern horizon punctuated by two royal-blue Qikiqtani Inuit Association flags. Beyond those was a speck, the size of a distant star, only inverse in colour.

While the camp watched, the speck multiplied into a blur of a dozen bounding objects. As the distance continued to melt away, a team of 12 qimmiit (dogs) pulled a darkly clad figure with a white pinny emblazoned with a bold, blue number two into view. It was David Oyukuluk from Ikpiarjuk, the first of the qimuksiitiit (mushers) to cross the finish line in the first of six legs of the 2022 Nunavut Quest, the territory's preeminent dogsled race.

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MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY. DATA CREDITS: PLACE NAMES: INUIT HERITAGE TRUST; IMAGERY: LANDSAT8 MOSAIC – APRIL IMAGERY FROM 2000 – 2018, NASA





The qimmiit used for the Nunavut Quest have barely changed over the last couple of millennia, just like their deep bond with Inuit (LEFT). Racer Joshua Haulli (BELOW) approaches Camp 1.

loving me, and I was trying to tell them to run, [but] they couldn't," recalls Uyak with a laugh. "They were just really happy; they didn't know what to do."

It was, and continues to be, a lot of work, says Uyak, who is also a Juno-nominated musician. He feeds the dogs every two days when he's not running them and every day when he is. Their food is mostly what he hunts, whether that's seal, walrus or whatever is in season. He doesn't run his team during the summer, but once there's enough snow, typically in November, he'll run them until June or July. To keep them active, Uyak tries to run them at least 10 kilometres three days a week, which he tracks using a fitness app intended for running, hiking or skiing.

It has been a long learning process, involving getting advice from community Elders and his father — and a lot of practice. For the longest time, Uyak didn't feel quite right calling himself a qimuksiqtu (singular of qimuksiqtu), a title he accepted only after being called it by one of the community Elders.

Over time, his team has grown to 15 dogs and two puppies, whose names are given to them when they're born based on their appearance or how he'd like them to act. It's a bond no different, he says, than that of dog owners who love their pets so much they consider them a part of the family. "We just keep them outside."

But unlike dogs kept as pets, qimmiit are working dogs, and they're treated as such. "We try to keep them a little bit wild," says Uyak.

The Canadian Inuit Dog (the official Canadian Kennel Club breed name) has remained relatively unchanged over the last 2,000 years. As one of the continent's oldest

Indigenous dogs, they dispersed east across the North American Arctic alongside Inuit, a bond that was passed on to and spanned countless generations until the middle of the 20th century.



SOMETIME AROUND 1966, three dogs lay motionless on the ice in the hamlet of Ikpiarjuk. They were 16-year-old Moses Oyukuluk's best lead dogs. From what Oyukuluk was told, the community dog catcher had shot them because they were loose (in the newly established communities, unlike in traditional camps, dogs needed to be tied up at all times). It was a loss that ultimately led to Oyukuluk giving up his team.

What happened to Oyukuluk was not just a one-off. In the 25 years following the end of the Second World War, the killing of qimmiit across the region and beyond contributed to tearing apart the fabric of Inuit culture.

More than two decades ago, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association and the Makivik Corporation of Nunavik urged the Canadian government to open a public inquiry into the killing of qimmiit between 1950 and 1975.

In 2005, after years of requests, the federal government capitulated and ordered the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to launch a thorough self-investigation. A year later, the RCMP's final report concluded there was no organized sled dog slaughter but rather the killing of some dogs for reasons of public health and safety. Out of disappointment and disbelief, the Qikiqtani Truth

Commission was born from a need to set the historical record straight.

For the next seven years, the Inuit-led and sponsored inquiry painstakingly gathered historical documents and conducted interviews with more than 345 witnesses — including Oyukuluk — to document this period defined by an onslaught of colonial acts in the Arctic, among them the killing of dogs but also forced relocations, residential schools and the establishment of permanent settlements.

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A year after Oyukuluk's dogs were killed, he found himself building houses in the community they had been relocated to. He said it felt like they had no choice but to relocate. "They had notified us that if we don't get education that we would never get a job," said Oyukuluk through a translator during his Qikiqtani Truth Commission testimony in 2008. "This is when our life started to go downhill."

Over the next 30 years, Oyukuluk would go on to start his own business, eventually rebuild his dog team and, in the winter of 1999, join four others from Ikpiarjuk to plan a dogsled race to celebrate the upcoming creation of Nunavut. The North Baffin Quest, as it was called, would



be open only to teams of Inuit sled dogs, the would-be official animal of the new territory.

The rules were simple: there was no registration fee, anyone could race, qamutiit must be between 12 and 14 feet long, dog teams needed to consist of no fewer than 10 and no more than 12 dogs, and teams needed to use a traditional fan hitch to secure the dogs to the qamutiik.

The race, which was intended to be a one-off, was so popular that the organizers met with the participants, who suggested it become an annual event with rotating routes. The Nunavut Quest was born.



THE PATH AHEAD on Day 3 was obscured by a wall of wind and snow. Near-whiteout conditions had replaced the sun that had brightened the first two days of the race. The race was postponed for the day.

With no teardown or setup, the pace of the camp slowed to a crawl. A group of youth seized the moment to fly a kite through the swirls of wind, an optimistic but short-lived endeavour. Others used the hiatus to stop at the tents with generators to catch up, warm up and charge their phones. For many, this is the essence of the Quest: an opportunity to see friends and family. Similar opportunities present themselves in the time spent before and after the race, among people from neighbouring communities that may be only a 45-minute flight apart but, given

limited airline schedules, might involve a flight through the territory's capital at a cost of more than \$3,000.

In a clearing between tents, a group of qimuksiit and support team members huddled around a snowmobile that had sprung a coolant leak; among them was Uyarak, who watched them carefully pour ground pepper into the

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coolant, a quick fix for a tiny leak. While the Nunavut Quest, like any race, is an opportunity to earn bragging rights, for Uyarak, it's much more.

"The bigger part for me is to get together with all the guys who are mushers and Elders and organizers who will be telling stories of how they used to have dog teams and how they used to live," he says.

"Of course, I won't get to live exactly like them, but at least I'll get to understand where I come from."

Whether racing or just out for a day trip, Uyarak admits he thinks about the events of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s pretty often. "I remind myself it's a part of our past," he says.



Clockwise from RIGHT: Children play during downtime at Camp 2; Terry Uyarak is hoisted on his qamutiik after crossing the final finish line; a team of qimmiit rest as their qimuksiit celebrates.

It wasn't until August 19, 2019, that Carolyn Bennett, then Canada's minister of Crown-Indigenous relations and northern affairs, took to a podium inside Iqaluit's Frobisher Inn and apologized to the Qikiqtani Inuit for the two-and-a-half decades of colonial policies and practices that profoundly changed their way of life. It was testimonies like Moses Oyukuluk's, and hundreds of others as part of the Qikiqtani Truth Commission, that ultimately culminated in the federal government's formal 2019 apology on that grey August day.

As part of the apology, Qikiqtani Inuit Association received \$20 million, with nearly \$3 million of that going to qimmiit revitalization work, including \$100,000 each year, for the next six years, earmarked for the Nunavut Quest.

Like the territory it helped usher in, the Quest has grown and changed over the last 22 years. Four rules have turned into 23, and the event has become both a celebration of traditional dogsledding and an outlet for its revitalization.



A THICK, WHITE CURTAIN of snow on Day 10 obscured Uyarak's view as he raced toward two waving blurs on the horizon. As the distance closed and the curtain lifted, the red, white, yellow and blue of the Nunavut flag became clearer, as did the Canadian flag opposite it. He was there, the finish line, Iglulik, home.

In that moment, Uyarak was overcome with emotion. There, waiting beyond the flags, were cousins, uncles, aunts and his wife, children and father. It was an event he wished his mom, who had passed away the previous year, could see. "She would be very happy to see me arriving," he says.

As he pulled in, a mass of children sprinted toward him, just as they had done several times already for other racers. The second wave of greetings came from the fluorescent-sign-wielding crowd, a mixture of friends, family and Iglulikmiut enjoying the festivities. As always, it was followed by the ceremonious lifting of the qamutiik and racer. This flurry of celebration typically lasts only a few minutes before the racer is free to spend a bit more time with loved ones, potentially light a celebratory smoke and then work on getting the ice-crusted dogs chained up for the night.

It would be another day before the official results were announced, giving the racers and support teams time to regale friends and family with stories from the past week. Among those was a retelling of the four days of weather delays and the resulting day that racers loaded





up their dogs onto their qamutiit and moved camps by snowmobile to make up for lost time.

By 6 p.m. the next day, the lot in front of the community centre was littered with snowmobiles, and the hall was packed with competitors, their families, race officials and Iglulikmiut of all ages. The night proceeded with the usual pomp and circumstance: speeches, certificates and of course the announcing of official times, a cumulative total of all the legs, in reverse order. One by one, the racers were called up, their results starting with a time of 45 hours, 28 minutes and 20 seconds, then whittled down to the winner.

Uyarak had completed the 500 kilometres in 30 hours, 23 minutes and 20 seconds, garnering a fourth-place finish, a one-spot improvement over his earlier Quest results and plenty to be happy about. He was preceded by Lee Inuarak of Pond Inlet and David Oyukuluk, who finished first on day one. Reigning champion Jonah Qaunaq won his third Quest in a row with a time of 28 hours, 43 minutes and 55 seconds.

Sometime before the audience filed out, floors were cleaned and a long night of square dancing began, it was announced that the 2023 race would begin in Iglulik and end in Ikpiarjuk. Uyarak says if he's healthy and his dogs are healthy, he'll do it. Plus, he will have a new dog, a post-race gift from Moses Oyukuluk, who knew Uyarak's mother while they were both in a southern hospital. He'll also have the advantage of not travelling to the start community by dog team before the race begins.

Uyarak would again like to come in the top five this year, but more than anything, it's about spending time on the qamutiik with his dogs.

After 10 days of racing, Terry Uyarak embraces his daughter at the finish, as the snow falls. He takes his children on dogsled trips in the spring, when it's not too cold, using the outings to pass along his knowledge to the next generation.

"I wanted to own [a team] just to keep the traditional values of having dog teams alive in ways that we're forgetting," said Uyarak of why he decided to take on his first six dogs. "So I give that lesson to my children one day, or to my peers."

Although his children's ages limit them to dogsled trips in the spring when the sun is bright and the temperatures are warm, that hasn't stopped Uyarak from already passing on what he knows to the next generation.

Now 36, he is over a decade older than the median age of Nunavut's population, the youngest in Canada and one that is ripe with passion. "If we continue to show our support, I think it could be a big thing here," says Uyarak. Seeing young Nunavummiut start their own teams and come to qimuksiqtiiit like himself with questions "reminds me of when I started," he says.

But as he has experienced, the process for up-and-coming qimuksiqtiiit comes with a steep and sometimes disappointing learning curve — a lesson that a young musher learned the hard way during the first night of the 2022 race when a wandering dog chewed through his team's harnesses, scattering them across the sea ice. It was a blow that forced him to drop out.

In the midst of an event where the clock is everything, Uyarak passed along a simple but deeply meaningful message to the young racer: "There will be time." ❄️