



Dear Fellow Alaskans,

I was lucky to have had parents who loved the outdoors. Of course, with seven kids in the family keeping all of us indoors would have driven everyone crazy!

We spent summers around Jacksonport, Wisconsin,

cruising through the woods and along the shores of Lake Michigan. Being physical was just a part of growing up, it gave us kids a good base for knowing how to have strength, balance and not be afraid of a little challenge.

I felt at home in the woods and still do. Riding a bicycle gave me balance and taught me how great it felt to travel under my own power. Learning to jump from boulder to boulder along the edge of the lake gave me courage. Getting the guts to dive into deep water gave me confidence. All of these things helped me to ultimately feel comfortable on the back of a dogsled.

When I was just seven or eight, my parents arranged for us to get skiing lessons at Mt Baker in Bellingham, Washington. Skiing was the greatest treat. Being there gave me a love for the snow and mountains.

Having the opportunity to participate in school sports was another big part of my physical education. I loved both the individual efforts of swimming and track and the team efforts of basketball.

My mom and dad also believed that we learn early about the responsibilities of working. Growing up we also had chores to do around the house, helping with dishes, cleaning and yard work. I admit that keeping my room clean was not my strong point, but I did learn that everyone has a responsibility to pitch in.

Cherry picking in Wisconsin was one of my first jobs. It was hard physical work, but I wanted to earn my own money and I found the incentive to tough it out physically. As I watched others work, I was inspired and felt competitive to pick more cherries every day.

Growing up in this way, I had a fighting chance to fit in when I moved to Alaska before the age of twenty. I knew people here were tough and I wanted to live up to the reputation of being an Alaskan.

I've been a dog musher for more than thirty years now, and because the dogs require daily care year round, it might be one of the best ways to stay in shape.

Living in the land that we do gives us a great chance to be active, and an active lifestyle is what keeps a person healthy. We have an advantage here in Alaska, where wilderness is out the back door, inviting us out. It is easy to stay healthy when hiking, fishing, berry picking and snow shoveling are part of everyday life.

Dog mushing is a great pastime for families or anyone who likes animals and the outdoors. It is a good way to learn to work together, understand responsibilities of animal care. It connects us with the ingenious spirit of the original people of Alaska, and helps us to appreciate the wilderness and fight cabin fever. Many people in the world are not so lucky.

Libby Riddles

First woman to win the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race