

Prairie Bilt Sleds



Owners: Jim & Mary Ann Miller
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Founded: 2000

Lucky are the people who can take their passion and their sport and turn it into their livelihood. Lucky indeed are Jim and Mary Ann Miller.

The couple has 22 dogs and they enjoy mushing, a sport of hooking dogs to a sled and gliding across the frozen countryside. But it's not just any sled. It's a specially-designed by Prairie Bilt. Mary Ann says, "Jim and I love the dogs and the sport, so we thought it would be cool to create a business to support this market."

Jim had a shop in Page, North Dakota, where he manufactured and repaired farm equipment. Mary Ann says, "Both of us saw a need to produce top quality mushing equipment and wanted to put our experience to use in this field." She says their experience to produce the equipment comes from over 25 years of racing cars and motorcycles and constructing these types of racing vehicles. The experience to produce the fabric components was gained from a family owned business in the clothing industry.

So the Miller's combined their love of mushing with their hope of building a remote cabin for weekend mushing trips along the Sheyenne River. "Now we live AND work here!" Mary Ann marvels. "It's where we belong; it's an ideal place for our dogs; and it's more of a lifestyle change."

Prairie Bilt Sleds is six miles from Luverne. It's 15 miles from Cooperstown and 10 miles from Hanaford. The Millers make about 30 sleds a year. They also sell mushing gear on their Web site,

prairiebiltsleds.com. The business really took off in 2000, when two of their sleds were used in the Iditarod. "Once our quality of work was seen, it really opened doors for us," Mary Ann recalls. "Now, people say if it's good enough for the Iditarod, then it's good enough for me."

One of their customers was musher Vern Halter. He wasn't getting the quality of sleds he wanted, but he knew a lot about the Iditarod and the trails. Miller says, "When we send the first sled, he faxed us a nice letter. He said the sled was in his living room because it was a work of art. He was enthusiastic about showing it to other racers, and our standard of quality spoke for itself."

Building sleds to Jim's exacting standards didn't come cheap. So, the Millers got a loan from the Credit Union in Page. The 4,000 square foot facility has a machine shop and sewing room. Prairie Bilt currently employs one person to sew the sled bags that carry the mushing equipment. A friend of theirs is moving to the area to help sew, which will enable the Millers to grow the business. Mary Ann says, "Importing people is what this area needs. It's a challenge to advertise and find someone who wants to work in a sled shop in the country. They need to have a passion for it, like we do."

Over the years, they have developed many sleds and products and have worked with many people, mainly in long-distance and mid-distance mushing. Some of the popular sled designs are the "Easy Rider" and the "Nitro" series sleds. Other very popular products include the development of the "Rex Runner" aluminum runner and the "Fast Trax" runner plastic, which simplified the changeability and gives drivers many choices of the slide plastic, according to the conditions.

The Millers went to Nome, Alaska, to see how their sleds withstood the rigors of the race. "It was a perfect year to go to the Iditarod," Mary Ann says. "The trails were difficult; there was very little snow; and it was extremely cold. We meticulously looked over the sleds, searching for components and hardware that might show signs of fatigue or failure. We were very pleased with our product!"

Jim and Mary Ann don't plan to race in the Iditarod. It's expensive (\$30,000) and grueling (1,149 miles). They're just happy to build quality sleds, test their equipment with their dog teams, and share them with people who love dogs and the sport of mushing as much as they do!

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