

Tustamena 200 – January 2004

It was a good race. The last two races (two years ago) I had problems keeping the team moving and while I finished the Denali 300, it wasn't pretty. This year I had planned to run a conservative race with the goal of finishing with a happy dog team and I did that. I had planned a 40 hour race, and if I hadn't lost two hours dealing with problems would have made it, so I feel pretty good.

I drew number 17 and thereby started ahead of Cim Smyth who won the race. Needless to say Cim passed me early and fast. One of the drivers at the banquet told the story that he was peddling hard going up a hill trying to maintain the teams speed and Cim passed him, going up the hill still riding his (Cim's) drag to slow the team down!

I'm a little leery about the front of my team - I started the season with 6 strong leaders, one is out for a bad right knee, one is in heat and doesn't want to work, Balu is coming off an injury and only started running again 1 1/2 weeks ago. 7 of 9 and Ensign are both having problems of undetermined origins. Keiko is just a yearling. Only Base is 100%.

The Caribou hills country is beautiful - heavily explored for oil and gas and some timber harvesting has occurred. So the trails are old seismic lines and old logging roads - mostly 10 feet wide and well groomed. Felt a little like driving down the highway. The trail starts at sea level and climbs to over 2000 feet at the top of the Caribou hills.

On top you are running on windblown snow with no real trail - you're above tree line, running at night - partly cloudy with the moon shining through the clouds. The trail was marked through a shallow valley – absolutely beautiful night for a run. The teams ahead of me had broken up the trail some and it was a long (about 13 miles) soft punchy trail. That means that the dogs feet were sinking into the trail as they ran, and the sled runners were sinking also, sometimes all the way to the toboggan base. Think about pulling a sled on beach sand! Base had been running a strong lead since the start, but about 1/2 way through he decided that this wasn't fun - he worked off the soft trail to new hard packed snow, but I was afraid of getting lost up there and had to call him back to the trail. I think that bummed him out a little, so I put Balu back into lead. Balu is the big goofy dog that doesn't have two neurons to rub together, but he loves to run. I lost about an hour messing around up there, but then we made good time, came down and got back on the roads. By the way, the trail map at www.tustumena200.com is a shaded relief map and gives you a good idea of where we went.

After that we made decent time, Balu got tired and I put Base back in lead with Keiko, one of my yearlings. After the Caribou lake checkpoint we had a mostly flat run to Lost Creek Lodge (about 72 miles into the race) where we had hot water, straw for the dogs, and our first drop bags.

A funny thing happened about 1 hour before we got to the checkpoint. I was watching the front of the team thinking something was going on when realized that I couldn't remember the last trail marker I had seen. Since they were spaced about every 1/4 mile I

should see one every few minutes. Just about the time I decided I had missed a turn and should go back and find it, Base stopped the team and turned around and looked at me. I swear I never said anything - I don't think I did anything, but somehow he knew that I was unsure. I called a come-haw, turned around, and he took off just like before! Possible he read my mind? That's a scary thought for someone who tries to keep a positive outside even when he uncertain inside!

We made that run, with about a 40 minute detour in about 10 hours - not fast, but the first 10 hour run we had done all season. I fed the dogs, gave them a four hour rest and tried to sleep myself. I was lying on the floor of the lodge in front of a table and some chairs (I was dead last so most folks had left and the volunteers were sleeping on the floor also). I didn't think I got any sleep, but at the banquet a friend told me that I had my hand on a chair leg and when they tried to move it I wouldn't let go - I was NOT going to lose my team! So I slept more than I thought.

After 3 hours I got up, booted the dogs, cleaned up the straw and lined the team out. After that hard ten hour run I wasn't sure what response I'd get, but Base lined them out and started talking to the trail, just like he hadn't run at all! What a dog!

Had an uneventful run to the half way point, except for being passed head on by Cim Smyth and Mitch Seavey. Looked like a freight train coming down the trail at me - nice teams moving fast and hard (someday...). We rested the dogs the mandatory 6 hours and started back. The half way point is at sea level again, so we had that long climb back to Lost Creek Lodge. Base and Keiko ran lead most of that trip. Just a good steady pace, sometimes it was snowing, but not too bad. I heard that further ahead it snowed hard enough that you couldn't see your leaders!

We rested 3 hours at Lost Creek on the way back, now the dog have run about 130 miles and only had 13 hours of rest, but Base lead them off the straw again and out into the night like a real professional. We had caught two teams at Lost Creek, both local drivers, but they left ahead of us. We followed their tracks back to the high country. This time the storm and the wind had repacked the trail and it was easy going - another beautiful night with the moon shining through the clouds, the northern lights came out for a short time, and a great shooting star showed the way. One of those magic nights that mushers dream about when the team is hitting on all cylinders, running smoothly through great country by moonlight! I did have a yearling getting tired and hauled him for a while - but he really didn't want to ride in the sled and I finally put him back in the team.

We caught the two guys ahead of us just before the last checkpoint and I thought I'd race them to the finish. Stopped just after the checkpoint to snack the dogs and tell them how great they were doing. When I went to go again my leaders (Base and 7 of 9) came back into the team. I put Balu in lead with Anakin (a new dog who was supposed to lead) but they didn't want to go either - the whole team was looking tired and I work for an hour to get them moving - finally but Base back in single lead (the first time he had ever ran single lead), moved my steady wheel dogs into swing and off we went. By now I'm and

hour behind the guys I caught, and I'm a little bummed thinking that I'd pushed the team too much. I'm real proud of Base though - he is doing a great job.

As we ran to the finish the moon set behind the clouds over the mountains - beautiful picture - I watched it happen and lo and behold I saw a great American eagle in reds and yellows in the clouds - incredible detail. Large head turned sideways, beak curved down. As the moon set it turned into a stern face - just eyes, forehead, and nose looking directly at me. I had to be hallucinating - mentioned what I saw to the lady at the finish a couple of hours later and she said "Sure you did, we all saw that, right?" Definitely adds to the enjoyment of the trip when you can create your own scenery! ;-)

About 2 miles out Base (still in single lead!) realized where we were and put the pedal to the metal and we finished strong. I was so proud. Some of the dogs didn't eat after the race, we wrote that off to race stress and being tired - got them home that night and two dogs threw up. They were tired, but they ran the last of that race coming down with doggy flu! It took almost 10 days to get everybody well again - so I look back on the performance with that in mind and it was very impressive. It explained my problems after the 4 corners checkpoint and the amazing thing is that they finished strong for me even getting the flu.

Eric

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