

A Rookies Journey

February 20, 2006

We survived food drop! I knew this was going to be a big chore. I've heard stories about it for years, but I really didn't appreciate the magnitude of the task. We shipped 1540 lbs at a cost of \$667.60. We shipped about 900 lbs of Kibble, 100 lbs of Beef, 100 lbs of fish, 50 lbs of Lamb Sausage, 120 lbs of fat (Caribou Creek Oil blend), 1800 booties, and a partridge in a pear tree. Must have shipped my mind in there somewhere because nobody has seen hide or hair of it since. I mentioned that to Theresa Daily and she said that if I had completely lost my mind I was 100% ready for Iditarod. ;-)



Steve Walker and Al Ostrowski bagging the meat they had cut into ziplock bags for Food Drop.

Task number one for food drop is to figure out what you and the dogs will need along the trail, irregardless of changes in weather, routes, or trail conditions. Once you start the race you must survive on what you are carrying in your sled and what you've shipped in your drop bags.

Minimalists ship only what is absolutely required and figure they will just do without anything else. Maximalists will ship three times as much to cover all possible situations. Thank heavens Martin Buser and Ed Stielstra shared their drop bag lists at the rookie meeting to use as a starting point.



Empty drop bags sitting on top of 1,000 lbs of kibble in our living room.

Marti organized the booties. We are putting Gold Bond Blue foot powder in each bootie to try and keep the dogs feet healthier. Then the booties have to be grouped in sets of four (one for each foot) then in groups of 14 (because I'm running 14 dogs) with some spares in case a dog throws a bootie while running, or pulls it off while we are stopped. Later in the race I ship some extra "large" booties in case the dogs feet start to swell with the impact of running 1,000 miles.

Marti also organized my food. I need breakfast, lunch, and dinner for 14 days. To make it more interesting you eat more in the cold and your tastes change when you are cold and tired. Meals that you really like at home just don't even sound good on the trail. All the meals that need to be heated get vacuum packed in "Seal-a-Meal" bags so you can drop them in boiling water to reheat.

I took care of the dogs meals. Cheryl Eldridge and Alan Peck borrowed my band saw to cut meat and fish for their kennels and in exchange cut up the fish I had for my team. That saved a

lot of effort. I wasn't going to take any meat snacks, but Lexi Hill convinced me that there were micro nutrients in the meat that the dogs were missing, even in my high end kibble. Steve Walker came up from California and got in touch with Bonnie Foster who put him in touch with me. With my meals and the booties under control I thought we could finish the drop bags in a single weekend. Steve generously volunteered to help with the drop bags and brought Al Ostrowski, from Chugiak, with him. These two gentlemen cut up and bagged 150 lbs of beef snacks, 30 lbs of liver for water bait, and bagged about 60 lbs of lamb sausage and all my frozen fat snacks. While



Steve Walker and Bonnie Foster putting 750 lbs of kibble into double ziplock bags for food drop.

that was going on Jim and Bonnie Foster arrived and re-bagged 750 lbs of kibble in 2 gallon ziplock bags (double bagged, 32 cups / bag). I had expected to ship 850 lbs of kibble to the checkpoints and had worked my calorie consumption based on that, but had over estimated the density of the kibble and not bagged as many calories as I wanted. After everyone else left and I went to bed Marti and Andi (my daughter) stayed up and added kibble to the bags to make up the difference.

On Sunday everyone returned and Steve brought his wife and daughter to help out. It seems like such a simple task to grab a bag of booties, three bags of dog food, miscellaneous stuff and place them in the drop bag, but something always comes up and slows down the progress. Thanks to the help of all who showed up, by Sunday night the freeze bags (of frozen meat, fish, and my food) were sealed and back in the freezer. All I had to do was seal the remaining bags and transport them to Iditarod Food Drop on



750 Lbs of kibble in ziplock bags ready for drop bags. Due to my miscalculation Andi and Marti later added another 100 lbs to this pile.

Wednesday.

Of course then I read the rules just to check, and rule number 44 clearly states that we must ship a minimum of 60 lbs of gear and food to each checkpoint. I had planned to 24 in McGrath and was not going to stop in Takotna, so just shipped emergence rations (about 30 lbs there), but you never know where you are going to be pinned down by a storm and have to wait for it to clear. Thus the rule. So now I had to weigh all the bags and add kibble (after all if I had to wait out a storm this is what I would feed) to make the minimum per checkpoint. Lexi Hill offered to come help after we ran the dogs Tuesday (these are athletes and must maintain condition and cannot do it alone). We only had to add kibble to three checkpoints and finished about 11pm Tuesday night. Al came by and helped Andi and I load everything into Bill Borden's trailer Wednesday morning and we were off to Iditarod food drop.

With the wreck and food drop I was behind running the dogs and now it is time to catch up, of course the weather has not been cooperating. We have had rain on snow turning to ice. When Bonnie and Jim Foster went to go home after helping me Sunday their minivan (I have their suburban) had slid down my driveway and lodged in the snow at the side. Of course that is kind of weather is tough on our local trails. They held up amazingly well, but nobody is running 14 dog strings, so every run has to be done twice with two 8 dog teams. After a couple of 20 mile runs I felt the need for back to back 50's (run 50 miles, rest, and run 50 miles back). Lexi was going to take the second team and we thought we could run out of Knik and go someplace interesting (Eagle Song lodge, Yentna, Deshka Lodge – we would decide when we got to the Susitna River.



Sealed Drop bags stretching down the hallway waiting to go to Iditarod.

Saturday morning Lexi had a migraine and couldn't make the trip. That meant that I had to run the entire string myself. Immediately I changed plans to only run the race team and to run out of Willow, where I could safely run a larger team, rather than Knik which was supposed to be icy and not safe for large teams.

I was tired and not feeling well myself so it was 5:17 PM when I finally pulled the snowhook in Willow and headed down the trail. The dogs took off like someone set their tails on fire – a typical start for most dog teams – but settled down into travel (go all day) mode within the first two miles. I was really pleased because this can take over an hour and I use it as a measure of the maturity of the dog team. I had Dash and Lycos in lead and they knew this trail. I could have gone to sleep on my new recliner sled (I'll try to



The bank of the Yentna seen from the river on Sunday 2/19/06

get a picture for the next journal, but I have a seat on the back of my new sled). It was warm, 40° F, and I expected the dogs to fade in the heat, but they kept the smooth pace running past Luce's and Yentna without trying to stop. Almost 6 hours into the run I'm getting ready to find a place to camp when Lycos leaves the main trail on a side snowmachine trail that climbs up on what must be a small island about 5 feet above the river. It looks like a great place to camp (off the main trail so we don't surprise anyone traveling fast at night) and I stop for the night. The weather changed from warm to about 34° and had been trying to rain for the last couple of hours. I fed the dogs and the rain started and came down most of the night. Not as much fun as a dry camp, but good training for me and the dogs.

I gave myself a good 8 hours sleep and got up just before 8 am. Evidently I parked just around the bend from the last lodge in McDougal because when they got up they turned their dogs loose on the river. My dogs saw the loose dogs and went absolutely nuts. I took me two hours to feed everyone, bootie their feet, and start to pack the sled. When I reconnected the tug lines they pulled the snowhooks loose. Luckily I caught the sled. Then I had to turn the team around, away from the loose dogs (thankfully they never came up to the dog team) and back to Willow. That task accomplished, we were on our way. The rain had quit during the night and the sky cleared up. The sun rose to a beautiful clear day that quickly became hot for the dogs. I swapped Platinum for Lycos in lead to give Platinum some work and Lycos a rest.



Eric's 2006 Iditarod team on the last camping trip before the race on the Yentna river. Note the extremely wide trail.

Platinum is very right handed and between Yentna and Luce's the trail split. Now the trail is poorly defined on the river being basically a 100 ft wide path, but every now and then it narrows down for obstacles and that is what happened here. The main trail went left and down a 6 foot drop at about a 45 degree angle, while the smaller trail split off to the right to approach the obstacle. When Platinum got to the drop the snowmachine had made a sharp right turn and followed the ridge. Platinum paused for a second and



Snowmachines on the Yentna River approaching the dog team from behind.

followed suit. When I got to that point I saw an 8 foot vertical drop onto new, thin looking ice (Thank heaven Platinum turned!).

We followed this set of snowmachine tracks for a while, but I didn't see any way to get back down onto the river. I told Platinum to turn onto a crossing snowmachine trail, but it was soft going and Platinum refused. Now I had my work cut out. I led the team onto the soft trail and got them started, but the dogs punched through with almost every step. Dukat pulled out of his collar and was drug backwards for a ways. I stopped the team as soon as I could and went to put his collar back on but he wanted no part of it. When I insisted he barred his teeth at me, so I told him this was unacceptable and slapped him. We got started back down the trail (I'm trying to get back to the main trail we left and the gentle ride down) when Dukat slipped his collar again, and this time slipped his harness also and ran off about 10 feet down a better packed trail going the wrong way. I set the snowhooks, which were not holding well in the soft snow, and followed him. But after the correction I gave him last time Dukat wanted no part of me and kept going down the trail. By now I had Lycos back in lead and Lycos decided Dukat had found the right trail and pulled the whole team around. I couldn't risk the whole team for Dukat and just hoped

he would follow us when we left. I went back undid the tangle (post holing into the snow with each step), straightened out the team, and got ready to go on when Dukat, who was being ignored, started to come back. I waited patiently ignoring him and he came back to the team, allowed me to catch him and avert a potential tragedy. Whew!

After that we got back on the main trail and followed it back to Willow. Lycos started having

digestive problems, possibly due to the heat, the stress with Dukat and the wrong trail, or having a full meal just before running, or all three, so I swapped him for Bass. This was like doing a drunkards walk down the river. Remember the trail is about 100 feet wide. Both Dash and Bass wanted to run on their edge of the trail. So Dash pulled us all the way to the right side of the trail, then Bass would pull us to the left side. Then Dash pulled us back to the right. Two strong minded dogs and we went down the river like a snake. It wasn't very pretty, but we got there. As we left the river it wasn't a problem on the narrower land trails.

I'm only starting with 14 dogs, my plan from the beginning, but may rig for 16 so I can run Bass in single lead (and Lycos for that matter) and avoid some of this problem. I can always take a section out if it becomes unmanageable (and will before Happy River).

The dogs ran so well going out that I was seriously considering running from Willow to Skwentna non-stop. (The Willow restart has not been announced, but sure looks likely given the trail conditions). To check that out I was going to run to Skwentna and back Wednesday, but last night I took Lycos and Rom in for "just in case" checks with Susan Whiton, my vet, and she said not too. That since I hadn't trained for long runs all season one long run would not make a difference and that that was a classic rookie mistake. Of course the dogs would use the adrenalin from the start to run non-stop to Skwentna (and look real good doing it), but since I hadn't trained for it, it would take something out of them, un-noticed then, that would cause problems by the time I got to McGrath. She also said not to run long this close to the start – if the dogs didn't have the miles on them now (mine do) it was too late, and if they did all I would do is risk injuring a key dog. Since I don't have any spare dogs left to slip into the team, this made great sense to me. This is particularly true given the poor trail conditions in the area.

The current plan is to run the dogs between 10 and 20 miles each the Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday, and 10 miles after vet check on next Wednesday. The drivers meeting is all day Thursday, the banquet Thursday night (I am still trying to decide what bib number I'd like – I'm leaning towards running my age – 21! ;-)) and Friday is the open house.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric



Straw in plastic bags and boxes of alcohol fuel for stoves (heet) being collected at Yentna station for the Iditarod or the Jr Iditarod or both. 2/19/2006

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