

## *Don Bowers 300 - January 2005*

This was a different race for me. I'm kind of decompressing and recovering and feeling very mellow - no drive or energy left, but in a good kind of way.

The first decision for this race was how many dogs to take - it's a 16 dog maximum and 8 dog minimum to start - I have 14 dogs on the race team currently, but was going to only take 12. This is relatively flat trail, lots of it on swamp and rivers. You don't need a lot of dog power to climb the hills, and the more dogs you take the more work you have to take care of them (feeding, booting, checking feet, etc). As it worked out on the new trail, we had some tight turns through the trees and a smaller team was a real advantage. At almost the last minute my training partner talked me into taking 7 of 9, my 7 yr old female leader. She got tired and I dropped her after 100 miles, but she helped me get through the start and onto the trails (and I really could have used her coming back).

Trail conditions varied from 1 inch of snow over ice on the rivers and lakes where we started to 4 feet of snow at the 100 mile point at Trapper Creek. With the thin snow over ice you cannot set a snow hook. That means it's very tough to work on the dogs - changing leaders, undoing tangles, convincing the dogs to take a turn all become challenging tasks. The greatest risk is that the dogs pull the poorly set snow hook and run off without you (and the animal rights folks think we force the dogs to run - actually we slow them down and stop them more often than not). It's bad for you if the dogs leave you there alone, but sometimes fatal for the dogs - there is no one to protect them if dogs tangle and get dragged or worse. With the heavy snow the problem is that you can't pull off the trail to camp or snack the dogs - step off the packed trail and you are in up to your knees or better. The moose have the same problem and walk down the trail leaving deep footprints that the dogs can step in and hurt themselves. Also the moose don't want to get off the trail and turn mean and come after the dog teams (wolf packs).

The start here was clean and a nice run over the lakes and through the trees (even down a road) to the Susitna river, then to the Deshka river and finally about 22 miles into the race off the rivers and into the trees and then hills. About 30 miles into the race we hit the deep snow. Beautiful trails and nice runs. About now 7 of 9 was getting tired and I moved her and Base (my main leader) out of lead and put Balu (my #2 leader) and Platinum (a strong up and coming 2 yr old) in lead. With the lack of snow, the race was rerouted and it was 100 miles to Joe Mays where we could ship straw, drop bags, and drop dogs if necessary. My team has a lot of young dogs so I broke this into 2 50 mile runs with a 4 hour campout. We stopped about 5 pm and camped until 9. As I got up the sky was crystal clear and the stars were just amazing. Later the moon came up and drowned the stars with light. More hills, trees, and river running brought us to Joe's home and a mandatory 6 hour rest.

It was at Joe's where I had my first wardrobe failure. I've been running in Lobben's and NEOS all year - some real advantages, but I was disappointed in their warmth. My feet often chilled and it wasn't more than -20. I was tired and didn't notice when I took them off, but when I got up there were small pools of water in the bottom of my NEOS - I

sweat heavily and had soaked my boots. No wonder they were not warm! I dried them off, but need to solve that problem.

As we left Joe's I swapped Keiko (very promising 2 yr old) and Lycos (a strong fast yearling) into lead and off we went. We left before sunrise and had a perfect view of sunrise in Denali. The air was so clear and crisp that I swore if my eyes had been sharp enough I could have counted the needles on the trees. Absolutely beautiful - alpine glow to full light - this is the kind of stuff you dream about.

For the 300 mile race the next mandatory rest, straw, drop bags, and place to drop dogs was Yentna station, 120 miles down the trail. So I broke this into two 60 mile runs. That meant that the dogs had to run 10 miles past our first camping spot and they were tired. The dogs knew when we were getting close to the place we camped on the way in and picked up speed - it was a real letdown when I told them we weren't going to stop there and my young leaders had a crisis in faith. I moved them back into the team and put Base in single lead - luckily Base and I have a real bond he trusts me, and the team trusted him - and off we went. Ten miles later we stopped and I fixed them a warm meal and we rested for 4 hours. Back on the trail with Base in single lead.

Later we went past Deshka lodge and stopped there to check through. Last year we rented a cabin at Deshka for the night on a long run and the dogs remembered. One more time I told them no and off we went again. We are still on the trail back to Willow, but a few miles down that trail I turned them off and went up to Yentna. That was three times they expected to stop and rest and I told them no. Thank heavens for Base - he kept us going strong. Finally we got to Yentna and a mandatory 6 hour rest. It's good training for the team to know they can trust me to let them rest before they are completely worn out - even if I don't stop at known resting places.

I had been working on my hydration this race and doing well, feeling good, but ran out of sports drink enroute to Yentna. I had intended to stop and get hot water at Deshka lodge, the checkpoint was supposed to be at the lodge and I was going to ask the checkers to stand on the brake for 1 minute while I ran in. But the checkers tried to be nice and met us on the river. That meant driving up the bank to the resting place, setting the snow hook, walking into the lodge, getting the water, then trying to convince the tired dogs to leave. I couldn't set a hook on the river and didn't think it would work to ask the checkers to hold the dogs for ten minutes while I walked up - so I left without it. I really hit the wall going into Yentna - dehydrated, not quite hallucinating, but very close. Picard had a sore right wrist and I never noticed until I took his booties off at Yentna. I left him there to ride back to the finish, but another lesson about taking care of the care giver. If I had been in better shape I'd have noticed earlier and hauled him into Yentna.

The run back to the finish in the early morning was fun - we saw a moose cow and calf across the river from us (thank heaven they were on the other side). Then several Ravens played with the team, stopping just ahead and flying off at the last minute. Something to keep the dogs interested.

We finished the race in 3rd place (out of 4 drivers) but it was a solid group of mushers and a very respectable time (just under 48 hours for 264 miles). I had planned on finishing by 3 pm Sunday and beat that by three hours. This should qualify me for the 2006 Iditarod which was my goal for this year.

Eric

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