

Gilligan's Dog Team Saint Patrick's Day 2002

The run started out great. I was training for the Denali 300 and had my new sprint leader that I'd been working on since Dec in lead of a 13 dog team. We were running from Big Lake to the Nome Sign - about 22 miles. Got there in less than 2 hours looking so good that I decided to push on to Flathorn Lake - about 8 more miles - before turning around. Went well - pretty country - had a ball.

Things went so well that I decided to put Tern, my old leader that quit over thanksgiving (getting ready for the 2002 Copper Basin 300), in lead on the way back to see if she could help in the Denali, that was my first mistake! She led for almost 1/2 hour - just enough to miss a turn and get me completely lost. At this point the Iditarod race trail is like a highway, about 8 feet wide and heavily used - when Tern quit I was on a trail that was about 4 ft wide - but it was that twilight time when you lose depth perception and don't see well with or without a light - and I was tired - just didn't notice. But the trail kept getting narrower - until finally even I realized that it wasn't right. Figured that I had to be south of the main trail, so I found a snowmachine track going north (it went left anyway ;-), and off we went.

We had a great twisty run through the trees and finally came out on a wide trail that felt right. However there were no trail markings - after several miles of no markings I figured something might be wrong when I saw a narrow trail crossing at 90 degrees, with markings! Stopped the team and the permanent marks on the trees said historical Iditarod trail - not the race trail, but the historic trail - pulled out the GPS (why did I wait so long?) and found out the trail I had been on went north not west to the parking lot. Turned the team around and went west down the historic trail - knew it was the wrong trail, but figured it would meet the right trail somewhere (is this like dating?) - either that or cross the Burma road (last road crossing as the race leaves town).

Beautiful run - passed several lakes with name signs - it's an odd feeling to be 20 miles off the road on a trail through the swamp - come up on a lake and there is a sign like "Fox Lake" there! Eventually got back to a wide trail that looked familiar, figured I had met the race trail as planned and sure enough hit the Burma Road. Now this road is dirt and while plowed in winter it is runnable by dog or snowmachine. The race trail actually runs down the road about 50 ft or so instead of directly across. Dogs took the turn to the left, north on the road and at the next bend ran up onto the trail and off we went. It is snowing pretty hard now so I'm looking real hard for the next left turn trail system at Aurora track and the parking lot. The trail doesn't look familiar, but I write it off to the dark, snow, and the fact that I really don't know this trail that well. After almost an hour I get the GPS back out - and the silly thing tells me I'm going west! It can't be true! Now I know why flying instruments is so tough - cause I knew I was going east - took me several minutes to believe it and turn around. As soon as I do everything falls into place - I had even crossed the little Susitna River and never known it! Another hour and I'm back at the Burma Road, more than a little confused - run North about 50 ft and there is the correct trail to the right, just like it should be.

This should be the end of the story, but no - now my leaders know that I'm confused, so every time I stop they come back to consult on the trail. This ties the whole team up in knots that a boy scout never saw. If you heard a sonic boom about 1 am Sunday morning - that was just me hollering N O one more time. Anyway I found the turn onto the Aurora system - but there is now 2 inches of blowing snow - snowing hard - and everything looks the same. Missed the turn to the parking lot again - and poor Balu, the sprint leader - has now figured out that if I don't want to consult, then the trail must be to the right - and proceeds to take every right turn he finds.

Now I'm really lost, but the GPS (don't you just love them) caught my outgoing trail and I kept turning left until I found a trail that went back and hookup with the system. We finally got the parking lot at 3am - after about 80 miles of running. If it hadn't been for the GPS I might still be there.

All's well that ends well - right? The good news is that the dogs ate like starving sled dogs - a very good sign and they actually ran for 10.5 hours and about 80 miles - bodes well for finishing the race.

However the adventure wasn't done yet - while Big Lake got 2 inches of snow Anchorage was getting 2 feet. When I finally got home (nothing had been plowed - thank heaven's for trucks with 4 wheel drive) I had to dig out the dog houses before I could even unload the team. And the poor dogs that didn't get to go didn't get their dinner until 7 am. About 8 am everything is unloaded and I fall into bed - figure I'll dig the house out when I get up.

Mother used to tell me about the morals of folks that went out to play and didn't get home until most decent folks were at work, but that's another story.

Eric

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