

The Journey Continues

June 15, 2008

McGrath to Cripple

In 2006 we left McGrath after our 24 like our tails were on fire. The dogs were pumped enough, Lavon Barve said they looked like a Fur Rondy team, and then advised me to slow them down for the first 50 miles. I've got the bug bad and I'm making plans to race, completely forgetting my vow coming into Finger Lake. Typically it is 5 hours to Ophir. If I run 3 hours past Ophir and camp I might be able to get from there to Ruby in 2 eight hour runs, rather than the 4 five hour runs it would take me from Ophir. Cutting rest just a little would really move me up in the standings. I might even catch Joe and Rachael. This could be fun!

With the start adjustment we leave McGrath just before 3 PM in 84th place. It is hot and the dogs are just a little flat. I blame the heat. We start

down the river, and then climb a long hill followed by a short sharper decent. I stop to let the dogs dip snow and Sisco throws up. Rosemary is fighting bad diarrhea, so I move her out of lead and put Mocha up. Either Mocha doesn't feel well herself, or she doesn't want to run with Platinum, so I put Dash up. I put Rosemary on Imodium and she responds. I keep thinking about running in the heat of the day and how I over fed them in Nikolai. I've forgotten about parking where Jason Barron's sick dogs were in McGrath.

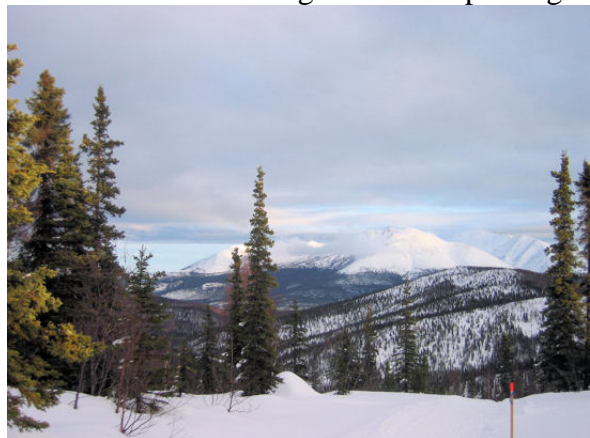
Dash leads for half an hour then she starts to come back into the team. I move Basil into lead with Platinum.

A little more river running and we are in Takotna. The vets check Sisco. He isn't feeling well, but is still working hard. They clear him for the short run to Ophir where we will check him again. Leaving Takotna we climb past some gorgeous homes. Log cabins high on the hill with incredible views. We drop down the hills and into mining country. It always surprises me to see a road with large steel bridges over the creeks in the middle of Alaska. It is all summer operations and as quiet and empty as a cemetery now.

Sisco still isn't feeling well. He has more diarrhea and throws up again Just outside Ophir. This isn't a good sign and I may have to drop him. We passed some teams taking their 24 in Takotna and pull into Ophir at 8:00 PM in 77th place. With Sisco feeling so poorly and several others not doing well I decide to stop in Ophir rather than blow through. I want the vets to take a good look at Sisco. They do and his lungs sound clear (we worry about aspiration pneumonia when they



Trail to Takotna.



View from the top of the hill between Takotna and Ophir

throw up while running). He isn't running a fever. The vets give me some medication for the diarrhea, which I still blame on over feeding in Nikolai.

It is 28 degrees in Ophir. We really appreciate the cooler weather. All of my meat and fish have thawed. I'm concerned about feeding it to the dogs who aren't feeling well anyway, but it smells ok. I feed the team, but only half of them eat. Well I fed them heavily in McGrath, maybe they aren't hungry. My blinders are working fine and I still don't get the message that I have some sick dogs.

Plan 2. I'll rest 5 hours in Ophir, and have the vets check Sisco before we leave. That will put me on the trail about 1 AM. Cripple took the fast teams 10 hours. If I can get there before noon we will run straight through. If not I'll stop at noon and rest, then blow through Cripple and rest short of Ruby. Then blow through Ruby and take out 8 hour mandatory on the Yukon in Galena. Sounds like a plan. The race bug has me bad.

I'm so wound up I don't rest well. Up at 11:30, snack and bootie the dogs. The vet says Sisco looks good to go and at 1:23 we pull the hook. Basil doesn't want to leave Ophir, so I move Rosemary back into lead with Platinum. She isn't sure she feels good, but she is a tough little girl and does it anyway.

The trail to Cripple is flat to gently rolling with some river running. There is only one trail with little traffic except the race and the snow is good. You could almost run this on autopilot. As the night wears on we pass several teams camping

and I am feeling pretty good about this strategy. At 6:30 we cross the Inoko River for the third time. This is the halfway point to Cripple. If the

team holds its speed we should get there about 11:30, if they slow down we should still be there about 12:30. Give them a nice long rest and run to Ruby in one shot. Everything is looking good and I'm in race mode. About 8 AM the sun comes up and the team starts to fade. Mike Suprenaut passes us with sled problems. I give him a hand and we'll see him again in Cripple. Sisco and Rosemary are still fighting diarrhea. More Imodium helps Rosemary, but poor Sisco has hit his 4 pill / day limit. He is not feeling well, but still working.

I watch stress build in the team. Nobody wants to lead. Basil does for a little bit, then quits. I move her back and she snaps at Mocha. I move her way back and she snaps at Picard. Picard is my mellowest dog and never gives me any trouble, so something is bothering Basil. I let her run alone in the odd spot (15 dogs). I settle on Blaze and Ginger in lead. Blaze ducks off the trail twice, but Platinum needs a break. Dukat starts to neckline (hanging back and letting the team pull him on his neckline). That is the last straw. I don't know what is wrong, but something is bothering my team. My mood starts to sour, I give up race mode (again) and look for a camping spot.

As we come around a corner there is a set of used straw beds angling off the trail. I call the team onto the beds and shut them down. We should only be 3 or 4 hours from Cripple. A rest now,



Beautiful day on the trail between Ophir and Cripple

until 4 PM, blow through Cripple and try to make it from here to Ruby in 2 runs. I melt snow and fix a warm meal for the dogs. Everyone eats, even Sisco. That is a good sign. With the alarm set for two I quickly drop off.

Two-thirty and it's hot. Fifty degrees. The sun is shining brightly through a beautiful clear blue sky. It is so quiet you can hear the snow melt. But it's much too hot to run, particularly with a team starting to fade anyway. Good grief.

The sun won't set until 7. I set the alarm for 4:30 and roll over. Gene Smith passes us just before I doze off, but his team is moving slowly and doesn't look very happy. Mocha, Rosemary, Dash, and Ginger are sitting up, bored, and wondering why we are not moving. Everyone else is glad for the rest.

Six o'clock and we are on the trail to Cripple. Blaze doesn't want to lead and I have to keep working with her to get the job done. Dukat is necklining again. He is a dehydrated. I clear out a space in the sled, load Dukat into a "straight jacket" bag for hauling dogs so he doesn't climb out and load him in the sled. He isn't very happy about it. I'll have the vet in Cripple take a good look at him, but probably drop him there. Sure wish I knew what went wrong. I'm starting to get a little depressed. I don't know if I'm picking it up from the dogs or vice versa, but it has to stop. I put a Harry Potter audio book on the walkman (I'd been saving the walkman just for this problem) and it helps.

Darkness falls and we get an incredible northern lights display. We pull into Cripple at 10:15 PM after 4 hours 15 minutes. If I wasn't worried about the dogs I'd keep going, but I want the vet to take a good look at Sisco, Dukat, and Rosemary. I plan a short rest and start chores. The vet gives Dukat a through exam looking hard for a reason to drop him, but can't find anything. Basil has started a huffing cough. Another through vet exam. Her lungs are clear. No sign of allergies. It must be some throat irritation, possibly related to her debark. Rosemary is thin, but eating well. If she doesn't lose any more weight she can continue. We change Sisco's medications for the diarrhea. I feel good about the exam, but it has taken an hour of my rest time.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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