

The Journey Continues

May 13, 2008

Rohn to Nikolai

I wake up to the sound of the wind howling. Rohn is nestled in a small forest of tall evergreens. It is protected, but the wind howls in the tree tops and you know that is what you will face when you leave. Two years ago when it was like this I spent several minutes looking for the blown out trail on the river and I worry it will be like that this year. Joe May, the race judge at Rohn and 1980 champion, looks me straight in the face and says he doesn't think there is enough snow left to blow.

I don't bootie the dogs. Typically you don't if you expect ice so the dogs have better footing. If you make the wrong choice, it's easier to heal sore feet than a pulled shoulder. Besides, Joe says, it's 40 degrees out there. At 8 AM. Dogs run cooler without booties.

We leave Rohn, drop onto the river and Joe is right. No snow, but for once the traffic ahead of me helps. The trail is well marked with scrape marks in the ice from the brakes and stools from the dogs. It zigzags from gravel bar to gravel bar as we cross. Crossing the second bar the sled just isn't pulling right. Shoot! There is no plastic on the right runner. The pin that holds it in place was knocked out and the plastic slid off and is on the trail behind us somewhere. I could swear we had it when we left Rohn. Thank heaven I carry spares. The grooves in the runner to hold the plastic are full of cruddy ice, but my faithful Leatherman makes short work of cleaning them up and 20 minutes later I have new plastic on the runners and we are back on the trail.

Within the hour we have climbed off the river and up the mountain side. We alternate from thin snow to no snow. As we slip and slide across a small icy lake the trail passes a stump lying on its side frozen in the ice. Some dogs go to the right, some to the left and the whole team stops. I get them loose, pray the snowhook holds in the ice until I get back to the sled, and the dogs pull me right over the stump. The bottom of the sled is a plastic sheet and ride over just fine, but my drag catches and pulls the bolt right through the ¼ inch plastic arm holding the drag. Now what? I put it back on, put a hose clamp on to hold it, cross my fingers, and half an hour later, off we go again.

When you are running on bare dirt your drag



No snow of the trail leaving Rohn. The top of Egypt Mountain is in the background. The trail goes to the left of the mountain.



One of the Farewell Lakes with wet ice. The trail is visible down the middle of the photo.

(actually a piece of snowmachine track between the runners that we can stand on) works better to control speed than the brake (carbide tipped steel to dig in and stop the team), which can catch. But my fix will not take the punishment. The dogs have excellent traction on the dirt and are feeling good after 14 hours of rest. Control is a fond illusion. Thirty minutes later it is a moot point as the fix to the drag brakes and I have to take the whole thing off. The trail is pretty rough. It frequently crosses small bumps drops off the bank onto the ground below. These drops can be up to 4 feet and nearly vertical. When the ground is covered with snow to cushion the blow it can rattle your teeth. When there is no snow...

About an hour later we come to the post river glacier. Actually this is a small stream that comes down the hill, hits a large (LARGE) rock and flows into a little lake at the base. It flows most of the winter, forming an icy mound that has taken some people over an hour to negotiate. There is someone camping by the rock at the base. He tells me that Iditarod rerouted the trail through the trees around the rock this year. But last night all he heard were angry comments about the ancestors of the people that put in the unmentionable trail as musher after musher tried to untangle their team from the trees. At daybreak he rerouted the trail up the ice. Platinum naturally wants to follow the scent of the previous teams, but I call him left around the rock and up the ice. He and Rosemary dig their claws in and climb straight up while I ride the runners. When we get to the top I stop and tell them how good they did and how I forgive them for trying to separate life from limb back in the Dalzell. Platinum gave me this very professional "what did you expect?" look and off we go again.



Just before Bison Camp (half way to Nikolai) showing increasing snow on the trail.

Coming down out of the mountains without the drag is thrilling, but nothing we can't handle. Then we come to the Farewell Lakes. Remember Platinum didn't like crossing big ice in the Yukon Quest 300 two weeks earlier. These are large lakes with meltwater over clear ice. There are pictures of teams crossing these lakes with the driver just along for the ride. The trail is well defined by the scrape marks from previous teams. Occasionally I see a set of scrape marks leaving the trail and sometimes Platinum follows them, but a simple "gee" or "haw" and he comes right back on track. I love watching Platinum mature into a strong leader.

After the Farewell Lakes the trail goes through rolling country until we get to Bison Camp (halfway to Nikolai). Bison camp is nestled in the last little hole, semi-protected from the wind. I had intended to stop either here or at Sullivan Creek, but the dogs are running strong, even in the 40 degree heat. We had almost 2 hours not-quite-rest when I stopped 4 times to fix the sled. Let's keep going, there are several places to camp

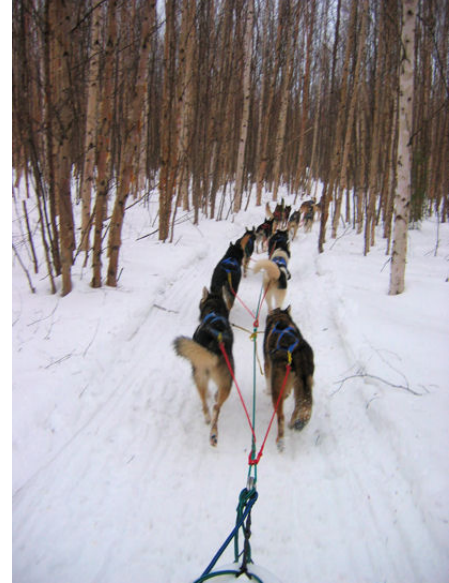


Kansas, otherwise known as the Farewell Burn.

between here and Nikolai if the dogs get tired. We climb out of the little bowl and the whole world changes. The country becomes flat, the trail straight as an arrow. It is like we clicked our ruby slippers and were in Kansas.

As we go north we find more snow and by the time we hit Sullivan Creek (just over half way to Nikolai) things are pretty good. The dogs keep running strong and I keep going. It is an odd feeling, I have never gotten to Nikolai in the daylight before, and I really don't know what it looks like.

We leave the burn and start seeing small woods, with the trail winding tightly between the trees, alternating with clearings. Evening is coming and the dogs always run stronger in the evening. The team has been moving well, but now they really come to life. Pretty soon they tell me there is a team ahead and if we hurry we can catch them. OK – off we go. This is one of the fun parts of mushing. The dogs have run for over 8 hours with about 2 hours of short breaks early in the last 10 hours, and now they want to run and have fun. These kids are incredible. We catch and pass the team (in Nikolai the driver commented on how good my team looked and how she appreciated the boost they gave her dogs as we passed).



Team running through the small woods as we approach Nikolai.

I'm wet and tired, but feeling pretty good when the soles of my feet start to burn. Dang they really hurt. I worked up a bad blister in my right heel wearing bunny boots that were snug in the Quest 300. It hadn't finished healing yet, but this feels different. It will just have to wait. We'll be in Nikolai in an hour and take care of it then. Denial is a river in Egypt, right?

The dogs always seem to like Nikolai (or maybe they pick up on my enthusiasm at a warm meal and a dry place to sleep with the steps, the gorge, the buffalo tunnels, and the burn behind us). Either way they start to lope, alternating between that and a fast trot, loping more and more as we get closer until they come into the checkpoint at a run. Everyone is impressed, me more than most because I know we did it essentially straight through. I think I might just have a real dog team.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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