

## The Journey Continues

May 7, 2008

### Skwentna to Rainy Pass

When we arrived in Skwentna, Jewels' wrists were a little swollen, but he was moving fine. I wrapped both Jewels' and Lycos' wrists as part of the preventative plan (both dogs had just recovered from injuries). After our 8 hour rest Jewels was still a little swollen. He looked good when I walked him, but the trail to Finger Lake is typically moguled and this year it had a couple of inches of soft snow on top. These conditions are tough on wrists to begin with and, with Jewels not improving much after an 8 hour rest, he was behind the curve. After discussing it with the vets I decided to drop Jewels. I shortened the gangline from 15 dogs to 14 and we left just before 9 AM, an hour later than I wanted.

It quickly became apparent that Lycos just wasn't moving right. I couldn't pinpoint the problem, but I suspected his back was bothering him. I kept watching him, hoping he would warm out of it. About 30 minutes down the trail he was still moving awkwardly and I turned the team around to go back to Skwentna to drop him. Going back to the checkpoint is a risky move. The dogs remember that they rested there, and are used to out and back training runs. The dogs can expect to stay for another rest, or get fed again (always a favorite). It is easy to damage attitude when you ask them to turn around and leave again without stopping. I was proud that my dogs turned back around like nothing happened and left Skwentna the second time with as much enthusiasm as they had the first.

Dropping Lycos put a real hole in my front end, leaving Platinum as the only mature leader who had seen the coast with me in 2006 – and that year Platinum didn't like crossing ice and would not run against the strong coastal winds. Oh, well, that was why I bought Blaze. She and the other girls would just have to do the job. Something about faith and crossing bridges when you come to them.

I have a real love / hate relationship with the trail to Finger Lake. From 147 feet at Skwentna we climb to 1000 by Finger. The trail starts off easy, running up the river (just a little overflow this year). Then it crosses a swamp and begins a series of easy climbs interspersed with swamps and lakes. As we go north the snow gets deeper. For the lead team this is an easy run. For the back of the pack, we start to see craters and ruts caused by all the traffic ahead of us. In 2006 the ruts got up to 4 feet deep as we went north, this year they are running two to three feet. I hate watching the dogs try to run first on one side of the rut, then the other, then split with the gangline hanging over the hole. But the trail isn't wide enough for the sled to go beside the rut. I have to hit it square to avoid tipping the sled. The tug lines are short enough that drags the dogs down to the bottom. It isn't quite wide enough for the dogs to run side by side and I cringe everytime.

Then there were the craters. I had seen them before in ones and twos, but these were ubiquitous, about 6 feet across and 2 to 3 feet deep, some with gradual sides, and some steep enough to catch the front of the sled as we left. This is another hazard for the team and I am glad I dropped Jewels and Lycos. I slow the team down and press on.

It is above freezing, hot for the dogs, and by 1 o'clock they are starting to fade. Going back to Skwentna has added an hour to my typical 6 hour run to Finger Lake. The dogs look tired and I don't want to ask them to do a 7 hour run after yesterday's long run to Skwentna. I'd just

decided to give them a break when I see a straw bed from a previous team and tell the dogs to turn off the trail and park it. If we rest for 4 hours, we will leave here in the late afternoon. We can blow through Finger Lake and go all the way to Rainy Pass to make up the time.

With the short rest I give the dogs two cups of dry kibble to get something down them quickly and most of the dogs eat it. Rosemary is thin, she quickly lost the weight I put on her after the quest 300 and I will have to watch her closely. I make a broth to give the dogs 2 hours later which is supposed to be when their desire for water is strongest to help digest the kibble, but few dogs want it. There is a warm wet snow falling and everything is getting soaked. I lie down under my tarp for a short nap. At 4:30 we pull the hook and head for Finger Lake. It is still snowing wet heavy flakes.

It isn't very often you get insight about the mushers behind you, but we turned a corner and there was a cameraman set up to capture teams coming down the trail. I stand up a little straighter to make good footage for him and wave as we go by, but he ignores me. The second time this happened even I figured out he is looking for someone specific. It has to be Rachael Scdoris and Joe Runyon. Who else would be behind me and have a camera crew following them down the trail. Sure enough, when I stop to snack the team Joe and Rachael pass me and we play leap frog down the trail.

I am leading when we come to Finger Lake, following the cameraman on his snowmachine. Of course he went directly to the lodge. The Iditarod trail crosses the lake and follows the opposite shoreline coming to the lodge from my left, but I never saw it in the fading light. A minute later Joe and Rachael follow me. To say this confused the volunteers would be an understatement. We were headed straight for the parking area, so they parked us. Ten minutes pass before the checker and vets make their way over to us. I had intended to blow through Finger and go on to Rainy since we had stopped just 2 ½ hours earlier, but the dogs have settled into checkpoint mode. Trust is everything in Iditarod, so I change plans and stay 5 hours, leaving just after midnight.

Doing Happy River at night, now there is a thought to curl your toes. Leaving Finger Lake the trail becomes more challenging, winding through the trees with sharp little bumps, drops, and turns. Then about 10 miles out, you see the entrance to the steps; make a 90 degree turn to the left and the whole world falls away. At night, with only your headlamp to separate known from unknown, there is little warning. There was a trench down the first step. We hit it square and I rode it down with both feet firmly on the brake. As the leaders enter the 180 degree right turn to the second step you have to get off the brake or you are drug off the trail into the corner. Free to run, the dogs pick up speed quickly. Halfway down the second step Blaze has had enough and dives off the trail. Somehow I stop the team before we drag her backwards. After I discuss the wisdom of that particular choice with her, we continue. There is a flat spot here to regroup (where I repacked my sled after becoming intimate with a tree in 2006), then a slight climb and down we go again. I could see a slight notch in the crest of the trail and knew it would be fun, then the whole bottom fell out. The trench was deeper than I was tall and barely the width of the sled. Both elbows scraped the sides and before I could say "Oh, no" we turned left down the last step and practically fell to the canyon floor. Wow! I was glad my doctor wasn't there to check my blood pressure.

What most people don't know about the steps is that what goes down must go up. A steep climb follows to regain that perilously lost elevation. After that the rest of the trip to Rainy Pass that

was so treacherous last year, was a simple, if somewhat challenging, trail. We pulled into Rainy at 4:55 AM after a 4:37 run in 83<sup>rd</sup> position.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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