

The Journey Continues

April 7, 2008

Believe in your dog team and your dog team will believe in you. – *Frank Turner*

One of the nice things about being on a learning curve is that every year I learn a little more and get a little better. Every year I can honestly say “This is the best team I’ve ever driven”. Even though we finished Iditarod in 68th, just like 2006, we shaved two days off our finish time. Every year as the season winds down I look at this marvelous dog team, trained and ready with nowhere to go. A spring race, like the Taiga 300, is a gift giving us one more chance to go play before we shut down for the summer.

The race started at noon Tuesday (to avoid weekend traffic on the trails) at Wolverine lodge on Lake Louise with a 65 mile loop coming

back to the Lodge. It was designed to be run without a handler and since my faithful crew all had day jobs I was here alone. It was a funny feeling as I harnessed and bootied my team not to have Lexi, Leslie, and Bonnie nearby. John and Zoya, the race organizers, keep things simple; we started directly from our trucks, which were parked in random order. I was the 4th musher to arrive and picked a spot in the front row closest to the lodge. Just before the race temperatures had been running between plus and minus 20, but a front moved through and the race started at at nearly 40 degrees.

Preparations went smoothly. John counted us down while I was walking back from my leaders and said I could go any time as he left to count down the next team. I stored my leader hook, put on my parka and quickly caught my sled. Instead of taking the small trail straight ahead to connect to the outgoing trail, my brave and brilliant leaders decided to take a sharp left and follow the main snowmachine trail which ran in front of the truck directly to the lodge. In doing so they wrapped the snubline holding the sled to the truck around the top of the sled, threatening to pull the sled on its side and spill my drink cooler before I even started. I was all I could do to hold the sled at a 45 degree angle to vertical while I called “gee”. Platinum and Dash never even looked back. They knew a major trail when they saw it and there was no way some silly musher was going to tell them differently.



Two rows of dog trucks parked for the start of the Taiga 300. Eric's truck is in the front row at the far right. Eric's sled and lines are almost visible in front of the truck.



Trail leaving the start line (stakes) to a gap in the trees. Platinum knew the main trail went to the lodge and he was right, but that wasn't the trail we wanted.

I looked for John, but he had left. I looked for any other race official, but I was an Iditarod veteran. I was supposed to know what I was doing and the officials were watching the rookies trying to qualify in case they needed help. There was a gentleman I hadn't seen before watching the start and I quickly signaled him I needed help. This guy must have been part mind reader and part genius because he got my leaders, followed my hand signs (you couldn't hear for the screaming dogs wanting to go), and saved my neck. To whomever you are, a hearty "Thank You". Once Platinum and Dash saw the stakes they followed them and we were off. Meanwhile I'm thinking this is not an auspicious start to a race. I found out after the race that several teams had problems with the start and I wasn't alone, just the first.

A quick trip off the lake, through the trees, across the road and we were on the groomed 14 feet wide snowmachine highway to Eureka. We started with good snow, occasionally going to ice where overflow / melt water had frozen, but as we went west the snow thinned and bare spots appeared. The bare spots grew larger until we had football field length sections of trail over tundra, moss, and occasional branches where they were doing trail work, shades of the trail leaving Rohn this year. There were three teams ahead of me at the start and I caught two of them. We were traveling at nearly the same speed. I would pass them and then they would catch and pass me (dogs like to chase). This continued for 20 miles until we turned north into the hills.

Hills are not our forte and we were passed by several teams during the various climbs, but the views from up on top were gorgeous. Finally we crested the last major climb and started back down to Lake Susitna which connects to Lake Louise. The dogs finished strong, but we were the 12th team to arrive (with a 6:42 run) and because of the start differentials we would be the 14th team to leave. I knew we were not a 14th place team and fully expected to climb to the middle of the 18 team field before the race was



Team catching us during one of the climbs. Note the beautiful view behind us.

over.

Chores were quickly performed and I crashed in a corner of the lodge for what was left of our mandatory 8 hour rest. That was a major mistake. The night before the start I slept in the same location and got a reasonable rest, but Tuesday night was race night and some fans were thoroughly enjoying the hospitality at the bar. With all the noise I rested, but could not sleep – with the warm temperatures I should have slept outside with the dogs.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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April 8, 2008

This race is run without drop bags at Maclaren Lodge. That meant we had to carry all the supplies for 256 miles of trail on the sled. It also meant we had to figure out exactly what we needed so we wouldn't run short, but not have to carry a lot extra either. Luckily it was all flat river trail. My new Hans Gatt sled has a bar on the back to carry straw for camping and I used this to haul a drop bag for Maclaren. It worked very well.

If the start was fun the restart was even more exciting. In the 65 mile run the teams had not spread out appreciably and several teams left within a minute of each other. Our out time was 3:16 AM. After the adventure getting started yesterday afternoon I ask for help to get off the straw. This time we took the main trail the dogs wanted to take yesterday, but in the opposite direction. John told us we had 22 miles of lake running, then 34 miles down the Tyone river to the Susitna, 15 miles on the Susitna, and 42 miles up the Maclaren River to Maclaren lodge for 113 total miles.

I had Platinum and Thyme in lead as we came into Maclaren yesterday, but Thyme kept walking back into the team when it came time to leave, so I moved Mocha into lead with Platinum and off we went into the night. It was about 30 degrees and overcast. We quickly caught and passed the two teams that had left ahead of us, night running on fast flat trails was right up our alley. It was also becoming obvious that this was not the team I started Iditarod with. They were much stronger and more focused. This was the team I finished with, thoroughly rested and ready to rock and roll. This was fun!

As we continued west and the sun came up we encountered wet spots on the river, some of which had frozen and some had not. The trail around the ice typically went through brush and willows on the side of the river. Mocha was getting distressed and dragging Platinum to the left, then he would drag her back to the right. After 30 minutes this had not resolved itself and I moved Ginger into lead with Platinum. Ginger is only 22 months and readily yields to Platinum on trail decisions. I was very pleased with the way the dogs handled the ice and rerouting and frequently told them so.

About 8:30 AM we started to pass the first teams that were camped alongside the trail. At first I eagerly counted each one as my standing increased, but I realized that it was all run rest



R Northbound Dogs going down the Tyone river to the Susitna. Platinum and Ginger are in lead with Dukat and Sisco in wheel.



Glaciation coming out of a side canyon on the Susitna River

cycle and my dogs would not likely run 113 miles through the heat of the day either. I was determined to take advantage of the cool morning to go as far as the dogs were willing before camping. Just after 9 AM we turned off the Tyone onto the Susitna. This junction marked the halfway point for the run. We passed two more teams and about 10 AM the dogs told me they were starting to get tired. I pulled off into the next camping spot and shut them down for two hours. Sure enough, while we were camping two teams passed us.

The Maclaren River is a large braided stream (wide and fast moving with several shallow channels separated by gravel / sand bars). After a few miles of easy running the river filled the canyon floor and we crossed back and forth over ice bridges, sometimes with open water on both sides. I could see where the trail had been rerouted to keep us out of the worst of it as the warm weather melted the existing trail and bridges. If we got wet, it wasn't more than a foot deep, but I still appreciated the effort.

After coming in 14th on the first run I had backed off and was following Joe May's advice to run my team to the best of their ability and when I got to the finish line look around and see who else as there. Imagine my surprise when I pulled into Maclaren lodge at 6:12 to find only two teams parked there. Everyone complemented me on a how good my team looked coming in. John even said if the little girl in lead (Rosemary) turned up missing he had nothing to do with it ;-). I told the vet that I was amazed to be in third place and he said he expected me to finish higher than that. I was floored, but just maybe I should sharpen up and start racing. Wow! Dan Kaduce was in the lead about 2 ½ hours ahead of me, but Karin Hendrikson was only 14 minutes ahead. Could I catch her?

At 2:12 AM, after our mandatory 8 hour rest, we hit the trail for a 30 mile loop through the mountains. It was a real shame to run this at night because this is great country. We started East on the Denali Highway and after 11 miles (climbing over Maclaren summit) turned north on snowmachine trails to come back to the lodge). With the hills I really didn't expect to catch either team in front of me, and I was right. They both expanded their lead (Karin was now 45 minutes ahead), but this race wasn't over yet. During our



R Northbound Dogs resting on the Susitna River.



Open water beside the trail up the Maclaren River



Team passing open water on the Maclaren River.

4 hour mandatory rest after the 30 mile loop Vern Halter told me he thought Karin's dogs were getting tired and I might catch them. He also said that if I ran straight through on the trip back if Dan had a problem I could catch him too. The next team behind me was over 2 hours back and third looked pretty safe if I didn't burn out my team in the process.

I've never run more than 80 miles without a rest, but the team looked strong. Coming up we were running into the heat of the day, but we would leave at 10:22 AM Thursday, run through the heat of the day, and by the time the dogs were getting tired it would cool off. We would get the normal pick up as the sun goes down, the soft snow we were running in would thin and become ice in places. This team were trail hardened Iditarod veterans, I have never driven a team like this before. It just might work.

We were just about to the Maclaren canyon where we crossed back and forth over the ice bridges when Throttle quit pulling. She wasn't

tight on her neckline, which meant she was keeping up ok, but she didn't have anything extra to help us down the trail. I thought if I carried

her for a couple of hours she could come back and finish. She is a black dog and it was 40 degrees with the sun shining bright. I didn't really want to pack her through the tight turns and ice bridges in the canyon, but promised her if she could keep up I'd give her a ride as soon as we were through. Thirty minutes later I did and packed her for 2 ½ hours to near the half-way point.

Just after we turned back onto the Tyone River I passed Karin, moving into second place. Now could I hold it, or would I have to stop to rest the team. We had never run more than 90 miles without stopping and this run was 113. We went down the trail with the snow thinning slowly, then we hit the over flow. With the warm temperatures more snow melted and things were wet / icy. Platinum took us through the rough spots like they weren't even there. As the sun set he picked up the pace. Just before 10 PM we hit the lakes with their hard fast trails and Platinum and Ginger picked up the pace again. As we got closer they alternated between a fast trot and a lope. They knew they were going back to the truck and still felt great after 100 miles of trail.

At midnight they finished the race in second place, coming in at a hard lope after 113 miles, banging their harnesses and looking for more. This team just blew me away. It was awesome! Zoya commented again on how good my team looked. At the banquet after the race you could have knocked me over with a feather when John awarded me the Vet's Choice award for excellent dog care.

My next challenge is to get the team into this kind of shape going into next year's Iditarod.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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Throttle resting in the sled as we travel through the heat of the day.