

The Journey Continues

February 19, 2008

Only the unknown frightens men. -- *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

I have had a fascination with the Yukon Quest 300 ever since they started the race as a Quest qualifier in 2000. I've never been sure if it was a "because it is there" fascination, or a simple "deer in the headlights" effect. Most likely it is a mixture of both. When we added the race to our plan in November it was all anticipation. As time for the race approached there was more Colonel Custer "What am I doing here".

This year the Quest starts in Fairbanks and the 300 was supposed to run from Fairbanks to Circle then out onto the Yukon River for a loop to make the full 300 miles. That means it goes up over Rosebud, a frequently underrated climb, to Mile 101 of the Steese Highway, up over Eagle Summit, where they evacuated teams by helicopter in a blizzard in 2006, to Central, which was running the mid-50's the week before the start (this is interior Alaska in winter, if you don't specify it is always below zero), through Birch Creek, one of the coldest parts of the trail, to Circle on the Yukon River. The climb up Eagle Summit from the East (Whitehorse start) is legendary with teams losing the race and even scratching because of the difficulty (photos of mushers on all 4's trying to climb up to their leaders are common). Everyone I spoke with agreed they would rather climb up the East side than go down it – which was what we faced this year.

Steve Walker from Truckee, CA and Jan DeNapoli (and two friends – Lena and Georgianne) from Two Rivers, AK offered to be my handlers for the race. Jan is a long time Quest fan / supporter / handler / board member and knows the race well, poor Steve had no idea. Due to a misunderstanding in scheduled events I needed to attend, Steve, myself, and the dogs drove up Wednesday instead of Thursday. It was tough getting everything ready, but a real blessing in the long run. We had been cold in Anchorage running -10 to -15F. As we passed Denali National Park the temperature dropped to -40 and stayed there! I'm sure glad I don't actually speak dog because I'm sure their comments were unprintable. Jan had dog houses with straw ready for them, but the whole team was making comments about bad places freezing over. Luckily they had three days to get used to the idea before the start of the race – and Jan's place was a little warmer than town. I'd heard of the famous Fairbanks ice fog, but meeting the creature face-to-face was unforgettable.

Vet check and the various meetings went without a hitch, but there were lots of stories about broken down dog trucks. Frank Turner had two vehicles quit on him due to the cold.

I hadn't had time to pack the new sled bag I had for the sit-down part of the sled and one thing lead to another (Jan's truck broke down) and I missed my start time. I didn't intend to be competitive so this was just a matter of pride, a foolish thing for a musher anyway.



Eric (bib 56) and team at the start. It is minus 40 degrees and the ice fog is mild compared to some locations.
Photo courtesy of Jan DeNapoli

The 300 mile race starts downtown at 5 PM, 6 hours after the 1000 mile race. We were told at the drivers meeting Friday that the trail over Rosebud didn't have enough snow to be safe for 30 teams (1000 + 300 drivers) so we would truck from Chena Hot Springs to Mile 101 on the Steese. At the start they gave us an extra 3 hours for the drive because the Steese Highway was closed by severe drifts until the DOT (Dept of Transportation) could plow it in the morning. Hmmm.

After much soul searching the race team was Platinum and Dash in lead, Blaze and Ginger in Swing, Basil, Rosemary, Thyme, Mocha, Throttle, and Frodo in team, and Sisco and Dukat in wheel.

Running dogs in minus 40 is different than I expected. I was well dressed and, while not warm, I was not uncomfortable. At least for the first hour. This part of the Quest trail is notorious for overflow. After last year I didn't trust the Northern Outfitters in those conditions. Jan loaned me a pair of bunny boots and I wore them all day Friday to meetings and taking care of the dogs. That is a lot different than driving a team. My feet sweat profusely and my socks were soaked. Evidently bunny boots are supposed to be worn loose, but I fit them snug and likely impeding circulation – either way my feet were cold. Picture me, dressed like the Michelin Man, stopping a fired up team to take my boots off, insert handwarmers, and put them back on. The hands come out of the heavy beaver mitts with two handwarmers in each. The clock starts and it is a race against time to see if you get the boots off, handwarmers inserted, back on, and hands back in the rapidly cooling mitts before they freeze (either the hands or the mitts). You can't stop halfway to warm up because your feet freeze – that is what 40 below is all about. I won the race, but my hands and feet were very cold. Putting cold hands and feet in insulated covers doesn't warm them up, so I walked in front of the team, and back to them, and back in front – after 20 minutes I generated enough body warmth to make a difference and we were off down the trail.

I normally munch as I drive down the trail, trying to keep my calories up. At minus 40 this involves taking the hands out of the warm mitts, opening the sled bag with the snacks, extracting a snack, pulling the face mask down, taking a bit of frozen whatever without cracking a tooth, pulling the face mask back up and plunging the hands back into the mitts. For the next bite repeat the process – guaranteed to help you eat less ;-). One of my great accomplishments was learning to do this one handed and keep the other hand warm.

After 6 hours we crossed the Chena Hot Springs Road (over half way to Chena) and pulled off into a nice camp spot (still 40 below). Frank Turner likes to talk about sleeping on top of his sled at those temperatures, clothed in all his arctic gear. Eventually the cold wakes him and motivates him to boogie down the trail. It is a lot easier to get up that way, than to motivate yourself to climb out of a nice warm sleeping bag. This was only a short stop enroute to the long break (12 hours) at Chena, so I tried a variation. I spread my space tarp on the snow with the sleeping pad on top, walked until I was warm and laid down. The motivation to get up sure worked. Thirty minutes later I was up walking to get warm and try it again. The second time I decided, by default, that the dogs had enough rest (they had a half bale of straw, fur coats, synthetic over coats, and blankets) and off we went. The northern lights were putting on a great display, calling us down the trail.

It started to warm just as we left, minus 30 felt good. Then the winds started. Gentle at first, but building to 40 to 50 mph. The trail was blowing in and hard to find, markers were being

knocked down. We were just out of Chena when Platinum went left around a shack and it looked like the trail went right down onto the river. I stopped the team, brought them part way around, and reconnoitered. Neither of us was right. The trail went to the right of the building on a buried road. Turning the team around again we got into a massive tangle. Minus 20, 40 to 50 mph winds, chill factor in the "Oh No!" category. I wear thin open weave anti-contact liner gloves in the mitts so I don't touch metal with bare hands. They work well in calm weather. Today my hands quickly resembled icy claws. I had to get me and the dogs out of there. When we left the start I was stressed about missing my out time (among other things) and Bonnie reminded me this was supposed to be fun. I was doing pretty well, but the old fun-o-meter was just about pegged out just then.

I got everyone straightened out, put a third handwarmer in each mitt (previously warmed inside my bibs), gradually warmed my hands and said a quick thank you prayer for safe delivery. I don't think we were in real danger (I could have put the mitts back on and laid down with the dogs for shelter, or walked to warm up) but it was as uncomfortable as I've ever been running dogs.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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