

## *Highs and Lows*

As I mentioned in the Tustumena story, after the race the dogs got sick, then I got sick. Finally a week ago last Sunday everybody felt better and we went off for a 40 mile run to see if we were still in shape. The trail was slow - corn snow, and the temperature about 40 degrees. You know how you just have one of those days - well this was one of them. The dogs just really didn't want to run - willing to go, but not to put any effort into it - kind of a slow plod down the trail. Leaders didn't really want to lead and tangles developed. It took me 5 hours to run the 40 miles. I watched my pretty fair Tustumena team totally fall apart.

Now I've got a pretty well mannered team - most mushers do. Fighters are not tolerated because there is too much at risk. Regardless, a couple of Jr High shoving matches broke out - you know the kind. One kid says "Oh, Yeah" and the other says "Yeah!" and they push each other around. Well these shoving matches ended up having two good dogs with bite wounds that needed stitches, laid off for 10 to 14 days, and probably won't get back in shape for the next race on March 12th.

I had president's day off and we ran again, this time just 12 miles - took an hour and a half! And this was my race team for the Two Rivers 200. If somebody had offered me \$1.50 I'd have sold the entire lot right then.

Then Tuesday I took Lilly, my hard driving blond leader to the vet for x-rays to see why her right knee had been bothering her. The x-rays showed a severely calcified right hip. This is where a good vet is worth her weight in gold! It was the third time I'd had Lilly in and why Sandy x-rayed that hip I'll never know, but if she hadn't I'd have given Lilly the rest of the season off and run her next year and never known the damage I was doing. Lilly has run every race I've run for the last 5 years, most of them in lead - I'm going to really miss her. But Lilly needs to find a good retirement home.

By this time I'm more than just a little down - then Thursday night something happened. Bass is running lead with Keiko, one of my yearlings and essentially everybody decided to become a dog team again! Bass and Keiko are driving hard and I couldn't stop them - couldn't even slow them down. The whole team is full of themselves and just flat having fun ripping up the trail. I watch in amazement as some of the dogs start to dip snow, break up the rhythm, and then instead of dropping back to a walk they step up to the line and off we go again. 14 miles in 1:04 - now that's not fast for Martin or Jeff, but it's a darn near a personal best for me - and far faster than we've run for two years! All of a sudden I've got my dog team back and Bill Gates couldn't buy them!

So mushing is a funny thing - I've felt the highest highs and the lowest lows I've ever felt while driving dogs. Typically I show up at a race with 12 to 14 dogs. Thursday night I showed up at the track with a team - the difference is dramatic. I've had a couple of runs where the dogs formed a team like that and then let me join - the high is just incredible. This is why we drive dogs.

Eric

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