

The Journey Continues

April 22, 2008

Anchorage to Skwentna

The Ceremonial Start in Anchorage is always fun and this year was no exception. Trish and Dale Keefe of the Northern Restaurant Group catered breakfast for the crew and free coffee for all comers. There is nothing like showing up on the Avenue at 7 AM with a cold wind blowing and being handed a nice HOT Chocolate and breakfast burrito. Any day that starts like that has to be great.

My Idita-rider was Lee Nowak, Claudia's (last year's rider) husband. Luckily he has a great sense of humor, which I tested by rolling the sled on a tight corner this year.

While Saturday was just fun, the re-start Sunday was all business. When I left the starting line this time anything I forgot I would have to live without for the next 2 weeks. Details were checked and double checked. Did I have my beaver mitts? Raincoat? Spare gloves? Food for me and the dogs? The list went on and on, but I was ready and everything went smoothly.

I had hoped to be in the running for most improved musher, but life got in the way of training and the dogs were not as conditioned as I wished. I think the problem was more mental than physical, but I would have to refocus my attentions from racing to dog care. Joe May put it very well: Drive your dog team to the best of your ability. When you get to the finish line look around. If no one else is there you won. I let go of all ambition for a high placement and just worried about the dogs. Of course being me I had to do this more than once as we went down the trail ;-).

Lycos had jumped out of his dog box onto the icy parking lot at the track in December and hurt his back and shoulder. He wasn't 100%, but if I watched him closely he should get stronger during the race. Jewels injured his wrist two weeks earlier, but looked like he recovered also. I would have to algyval and wrap his wrists every time we stopped (I would do Lycos as a precaution also).

The excitement of the restart is particularly stressful for the dogs and I wanted to save Platinum and Blaze for later in the race. I finally chose Dash and Thyme to lead with Mocha and Ginger in swing, Rosemary running alone in first team followed by Lycos and Blaze, Platinum and Jewels, Throttle and Basil, Dukat and Frodo, and Sisco and Picard in wheel. Normally I run Sisco and Dukat together, but they have some passing

problems. I think the egg each other on. I expected to be passed



Eric and Idita-Rider Lee Nowak heading to the start line



Eric checks and double checks his sled for the Willow restart.

by several teams so I split them hoping to mitigate the issue (it worked). That only gave me 15 dogs to start, but I've been told that races are won by the dogs you leave behind, and I believe it is better to start with strong dogs you know and trust than fill in with weaker dogs that you have to worry about. In hindsight I should have followed that more closely and left Lycos and Jewels at home and started with 13.

The weather was warm (above freezing) with the sun breaking through scattered clouds. It was hard on the dogs but made the restart very fan friendly. We had a much larger turnout than I remembered from the last two years. It was fun to drive past folks doing high fives and trying to catch snacks they were passing to us. One group offered me a beer, but I had to decline because I was the designated driver ☺. The team was moving very well and got lots of compliments, which always makes me feel good.

After an hour we dropped onto the Susitna, having passed one team and been passed by two others. Now I could relax. The trails on the river are like driving the interstate highway. The weather stayed hot and about 3 hours into the run Dukat was suffering from the heat. He was having trouble keeping his line tight, so we pulled over for a 5 minute break. When we left he still wasn't tight so I pulled back into a shady spot and dug out some fish snacks. They were thawing fast, but still a good cold treat. After 15 minutes the dogs had cooled off and we continued down the trail. At 7:30 PM, after 4 hours and 44 minutes on the trail we pulled in Yentna and for the first time I didn't stop. It was 77 miles from Willow to Skwentna. We had run 90 miles in the Knik 200 and 80 miles in the Yukon Quest 300. I figured the dogs were up to it, but I would watch them in case I was wrong.

As the sun went down it started to cool off and the dogs picked up their pace. Thyme got tired of leading and I moved Blaze up with Dash. About 8 PM Dash got tired of running in front and I moved Ginger up. The dogs looked good and we pulled into Skwentna at 9:47 PM after 8 hours and 50 minutes of running. Skwentna has hot water for the dogs and I quickly feed the team, removed booties, spread straw and left them to sleep while I went up to the checkpoint (Delia's old cabin) to get some Tang, something to eat, and some sleep. With the warm weather the sleeping room upstairs was not as crowded as last year, but it was awful warm to someone dressed for outside. Nevertheless I quickly feel asleep.

I planned to leave in 8 hours for Finger Lake.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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