

The Journey Continues

May 16, 2008

Nikolai to McGrath

When I waited for daylight to leave Rohn, we dropped to 87th place. With the strong run to Nikolai, we had the 34th fastest time even with the stops to fix the sled, we moved up to 82nd place. Even in the back of the pack, this racing stuff is fun. We had run almost 12 hours to get to Nikolai. I estimate we lost 2 hours while I fixed the sled. If I don't count that we should rest 10 hours to be equal run rest. That sounds too much like luxury since we will 24 in McGrath anyway. I plan to leave at 4 AM after 8 hours rest.

Job one is to take care of the dogs. Nikolai has hot water for all the mushers and chores go quickly. Rosemary has lost all the weight I put back on her after the Yukon Quest 300 and I worry because the dogs have not been eating well. Tonight turns the corner and everyone eats like starving sled dogs. I get a pound of kibble, half a pound of beef and half a pound of lamb down each dog.

John Runkle is there again this year with a full toolkit, and quickly drills a second hole in the plastic bar that holds my drag. I reattach the drag to the sled and now it's time to take care of myself. Nikolai open the school to mushers and fans. After 4 days on the trail we have bathrooms with hot and cold running water, flush toilets, and a warm room with wrestling mats on the floor for sleeping. No Holiday Inn ever sounded better. It's well worth the long three block walk from the checkpoint.

My feet still hurt. When I take my boots off they are white and wrinkled. The troops in World War I would quickly recognize this as the beginnings of immersion foot, which can become quite serious. Northern Outfitters boots will dry themselves as you wear them in below freezing weather. I sweat profusely and that is why I wear them. But in the 40 degree weather we had all day they just hold the moisture. My liners are soaked through and that is the problem. I set everything out to dry, set the alarm for 2AM and quickly fall asleep.

When I get up, my boot liners are still pretty wet. The school has a dryer they let us use – there is a delicate cycle and with more than a little trepidation, I put the liners (open cell foam) in there. Forty minutes later all is well. I ripped the left leg on my bibs just above the knee coming down the Dalzell. Leaving Rohn the rip went from 1 inch wide to half way around the leg. I carry



The Kuskoquim River approaching McGrath



McGrath checkpoint

duct tape, but it isn't enough. I gather up my stuff and walk down to the dog lot to fix breakfast for the kids. I ask at the checkpoint about duct tape (it's 4 AM and nobody else is up). Somebody says they have some at home and off they go. These folks at Nikolai continually go above and beyond the call of duty. The duct tape arrives and I walk back to the school to warm the bibs so it sticks better. Now I'm styling with a silver garter belt on my left leg. Mother would be so proud. 9

Between drying my boot liners, fixing my bibs, and general exhaustion we are running two hours late. Finally at 6:25 we leave Nikolai for McGrath. Even with all the delays I've moved up two more positions to 80th. The checker misses my out time and reports it as 6:00. It is 25 degrees and overcast with a soft punchy trail. They got snow in McGrath and it is taking 6 ½ to 7 hours for the trip. I'm hoping the trail sets up a little with the cooler temperatures and we do better. The team is working well and we settle in for a long slow slog.

I've still got Platinum and Rosemary in lead. Basil and Blaze have been running together, but we had a couple of tangles. Basil blamed Blaze for the problems and told her to stop. Blaze started to pout and didn't want to run with Basil (I don't blame her), so I separated them. Picard and Sisco have been running wheel since Willow, so I moved Sisco up from wheel to run with Dukat, Picard two up from wheel to run with Blaze, put Frodo and Throttle in wheel, and left Basil to run by herself.

The dogs move steadily down the trail and we pull into McGrath for our 24 at 12:30 PM in 79th place. Wait a minute – that means we did the run in 6:05. For crying out loud, I have the 6th fastest time from Nikolai to McGrath. Dang! To put this in perspective it took Lance 6:28 and Jeff 6:37. Yeah, the trail set up faster for me, but this team keeps impressing me.

We are fast enough that there are no checkers outside. I ask one of the spectators to run and get a checker to sign us in and start the 24 hour clock. Because of the large number of mushers the only place to park is the one Jason Baron just left. He scratched here because his dogs were sick. The spot has been raked and I don't think much about it at the time.

I get the dogs parked and fed. Thyme is thin and the vet warns me that if she loses any more weight, or it turns cold, I'll have to drop her. Platinum is a little dehydrated and she wants to recheck him before we leave. I got too excited in Nikolai and overfed the dogs in a single meal and we have some diarrhea to deal with. My plan for the 24 (actually 26 with the start



Those Northbound dogs resting during their 24 in McGrath



My new Hans Gatt sled in McGrath during our 24.

differential) is to feed the dogs 4 meals and get 16 hours of sleep. I don't think the dogs need a 24 yet, but I sure do.

This time I stay focused. I sleep for 5 hours, get up feed the dogs, take a showers (you really start to appreciate the simple things in life), eat, and go back to sleep for 5 more hours. The last time I get up early because I just can't sleep any longer, but I got 14 hours of solid shut eye. I ate 5 meals and the dogs ate 4. Platinum has fully recovered, the dogs are on a great eating schedule, the diarrhea is moderating and I get some metronidazole to help. I'm feeling great and we are ready to kill dragons before breakfast, or at least move sharply down the trail to Nome!

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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