

The Journey Continues

May 8, 2008

Rainy Pass to Rohn

What is it about Rainy Pass? In 2006 I crossed over in a blizzard and they closed the trail behind me. Last year I let the blizzard intimidate me and spent almost 33 hours waiting for it to get better. This year it is Déjà vu all over again. We got in at 5 AM and I am dead beat. It is all I can do to feed and straw the dogs. I grab my sleeping bag and stumble, exhausted to the new cabin they built for mushers to sleep in. It is pretty nice; there are wooden bunk beds with foam pads and room to hang my wet gear by the stove. There is an open bunk and I collapse in glorious luxury.

After a great nap I check breakfast at the lodge (bagels, coffee cake, cereal, and fruit) when Bonnie Foster comes up. I knew Jim and Bonnie were flying to Rainy with Mary Curtis the previous day, but it was supposed to be just a day trip. Turns out the weather got bad enough they couldn't fly out. Lee and Claudia Nowak were stuck there also. For 4 days! Bonnie had to use a radio phone to call friends to go feed their dogs. I remembered a passing comment about refugees at Finger Lake and Bonnie said they had the same problem – 35 people on a day trip stuck for 4 days. No toothbrush or change of underwear and the closest store was 150 trail miles. Shades of Gilligan's Island. Thank heavens I was traveling by good old reliable dog team and not one of these new, untrustworthy, modern contraptions ;-).

Between the exhaustion and visiting old friends it takes me 7 hours, instead of the planned 5, to get out of Rainy. With the winds so bad planes couldn't fly I know it will be an interesting trip over the pass, and I am not disappointed. In 2006 we left the trenches behind us at Rainy. In 2007 there wasn't enough snow to make a trench, but this year they just kept coming. And the craters. Except for the fact they were confined to the trail, it reminds me of shell holes in a war zone. As we bump down the trail I figure the wind will blow the snow off the top of the pass and things will get better. Right.

The trail is alternately blown in and blown clear depending on how the winds hit it. Every now and then the winds whirl around just right and I can't even see the dogs. After the fiasco where Blaze dove off the trail on the steps, I've got Platinum and Dash in lead. Platinum, who wouldn't run into the wind in 2006, is maturing into a solid leader and just getting it done. After about 3 hours we crest the pass and start down the other side. I expect the winds to die off, but no such luck. The trail is completely blown in. Many markers are missing. Platinum and I work



Eric's team climbing to Rainy Pass

together to keep us moving down the trail.

A helicopter comes by with a video camera mounted on the side and I know Rachael and Joe can't be far behind. We crest a small rise to see the ice bridge has fallen into Pass Creek, my

nemesis last year, and we have 10 feet of open water to cross. Platinum and Dash balk, turn left, run parallel to the stream, then try to go back up the pass and tangle in some brush. While I'm untangling my team Joe Runyan hits the same stream and his team stops dead. Joe has to get off the sled and drag his leaders through the water and I don't feel so bad. If it can happen to a past champion at least I'm in good company. While Joe is getting his team across Rachael comes up and with her vision problems can't see well enough to stop before the teams tangle. They work to untangle, meanwhile I've got my team out of the willows and would you believe it? There is a much smaller, but still intact, ice bridge down here, Platinum and Dash eagerly cross and I even get the sled over without getting any wetter. Tracks in the snow say I'm not the first team to cross here.

We are still in front of Joe working our way down through some challenging sections when we get to the climb just before the Dalzell gorge. It is a large flat slope and there is no sign of the trail. The dogs start up the middle of the slope and we are soon floundering in two feet of soft punchy snow. Platinum and Dash look for direction that I can't give them. I know we are off the trail, but don't remember where it goes. But I bet Joe does and he can't be 10 minutes behind. Sure enough he climbs up the left side, near the crease where the slope breaks to go steeply uphill to the left. After the race I talked Gene Smith who went right instead of left and got lost here. He got caught in cruddy soft snow up to 3 feet deep for almost 3 hours before the valley got narrow enough to funnel him onto Dalzell creek and back to the trail. He had to go up a creek bank that was high enough and steep enough he had to lift the dogs up one by one. He said he thought he would have a heart attack before he got the sled up there.

This trip down the Dalzell is the stuff of legends. One harrowing second after another. Sharp drops, tight turns through the trees, crossing open Dalzell creek on small ice bridges heading straight for a rock face. No time to think or plan, barely time to just do it. The trail was fast and hard and the dogs were having a ball. If I couldn't keep up, that was my problem. We rounded a corner and Sisco went left around the tree while the team went right. I'm on the brake trying hard to stop this runaway freight train. Sisco's neckline snaps and he is being drug backwards by the team. Just before he is crushed into the tree, I get the team stopped. Disaster averted. Whew!

We come over a small rise with a steep drop to find Joe Runyan wrapped around a tree just off the trail. Rachael couldn't stop and overlapped him by 2/3 of her team. I'm on the brake hollering whoa to no avail. By the time we stop we overlap Joe by 1/2. Three teams side by side on a trail maybe 4 feet wide. I start to take my dogs off the line and tie them to trees back by the sled to get them out of the way. The film crew comes by and helps Joe drag the sled off the tree and back to the trail. He is almost off the tree, pointed in the general direction he wants to go, gets on the sled and they count 1,2,3 – the camera guy pushes the sled off the last little bit and Joe is off like an unguided missile. I pull my remaining dogs off to the side and Rachael quickly follows. The cameraman helps me put my team back together and off we go.

Rachael crashes several times, you have got to admire her courage, and apologizes for slowing me down as I wait for her to recover. The only reason she isn't waiting for me is I'm behind her – she doesn't know I've crashed 4 times myself – and I can see the trail. I'm waiting for Rachael to recover from the last crash when a snowmachine comes by in a hurry. The helicopter filming Rachael has crashed. No details. He is the first responder and has a satellite phone with him.

We make the last turn and roll out onto the Tatina River. Surprise, instead of glare ice there is a couple inches of packed snow and a well marked trail. As we pull into Rohn just after 6 PM, everyone asks about the helicopter. Later they brought the crew into Rohn and the Iditarod Air Force flew them to Anchorage. They said it was more of a very hard landing than a crash, but it sure got their attention.

I walk past Joe getting water for the dogs and he comments about how challenging the Dalzell was. The 1989 champion said it was tough. I

remind him he was used to being at the front of the pack where the trail isn't as worn, but it makes me feel a lot less wimpy. I was pretty trashed in Rainy, now I'm completely beat. Normally I sleep on the floor of the warm cabin, but we have a large crew here, plus the film crew. Between the race and the crash there is no room and it's absolutely crazy. I opt to hang my sopping wet bibs and parka (from the snowstorm before Finger Lake) in the cabin to dry, put my rain suit (with these temperatures I just might need it) on over my soaked fleece underwear and sleep in the unheated, but very quiet tent. The tent has no floor, just straw spread over snow / ice. At 10 degrees this works great, at 34 degrees it is just wet. I'm tired enough I don't even care.

We got in at 6:15 PM after a 6 hour 15 minute run. We should leave at midnight. At the drivers meeting nobody warned us that the Dalzell was particularly bad this year. The last two years were a challenge, but nothing like this year. But they did warn us about the trail leaving Rohn. If it is anything like the Dalzell I really don't want to run that at night and decide to stay until daylight. In hindsight it was a poor decision. I was running with Joe Runyan. If I left with Joe and kept up (which I was doing), I could learn a lot just watching how he did things. My final thoughts as I drifted off to sleep were that I could make it up later and catch him. Silly me.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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Going down the Tatina River towards Rohn. This year we had snow on the Tatina.