

## The Journey Continues

February 25, 2008

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along." -- *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

We pulled into Chena Hot Springs for our mandatory 4 hour stop, took care of the dogs and I settled in for a nap. At the end of our four hours I signed out and blessed my handlers and the new procedures. Since we had to truck, my handlers were allowed to take care of everything until I restarted at Mile 101. This is living in the lap of luxury! In one hour, while I rested, they unharnessed the dogs and loaded them in the truck, unpacked the sled and loaded the contents, cleaned up the camp, and then woke me. I like this quest stuff ;-). Steve drove to Mile 101 while I rested / slept in the back.

We arrived about 8PM to howling winds and -20 degree temperatures. From the beginning it was apparent that a normal schedule would have me running over Eagle Summit in the dark. The new trucking just made that inevitable. I'm having real second thoughts about the wisdom of this (I could do it, but I might break the old fun-o-meter in the process). I'm standing in the control room talking to the race officials and comms guy when a report comes in from a volunteer team that just drove a truck over the Eagle Summit road. White out conditions, blowing hard, zero visibility – they recommend nobody try to drive over the summit until daylight. The race judge told me that meant no vehicles, dog teams were ok.

Frank Turner, who has run every Quest but one, was there scratching due to an earlier injury. Frank recommended that rookies wait until daylight. Just as the sun comes up the winds tend to die down – ok, not here as much as most places – the skies should clear, you could see where you were going, and this is actually beautiful country. It would be nice to see it.

We parked the truck with the nose into the wind (to give the dogs more shelter), had some dinner and I looked for a place to sleep. There were two cabins for mushers and I found a space in the first one. In the middle of the night I woke up cold. I got up and stoked the fire in the small stove and went back to bed with memories of Don's Cabin swirling in my head. The next morning I found out that the second cabin was insulated, the first one wasn't. Next time I'll know!

In the morning we had breakfast, fed the dogs (ok my handlers fed the dogs), repacked the sled, harnessed, bootied, and drove off into the next adventure. For my first trip over Eagle Summit I wanted my most experienced leaders. Bass and Lycos are at home so I have Platinum and Blaze (who has done three Quests) in lead.

This is mining country and tailings cover much of the area. The country is notorious for overflow (thus the bunny boots that are giving me such grief). Shortly after the restart we diagonally cross a small creek that has overflowed and froze to glare ice. Platinum and Blaze lead the way and I feel much more confident. We cross two more areas and then come to a section of glare ice the size of a house. It is not level. Springs on the sides have built up areas. There is a small island (three dog sized) in the middle. The stream cuts from right to left and the trail goes diagonally across. Nothing marks the trail but scratches in the ice. Platinum and Blaze start across. Many of the dogs are slipping on the ice. My leaders try to go upstream and I call

them back to the trail. They slide down the small slope to the island and 4 dogs stand there cowering in willows with room for only three. Shoot.

I almost set a hook in the ice (luckily nobody wants to go anywhere) and slip and slide up to the leaders. I plan to set them on the right trail, but it is slightly uphill and nobody wants to leave the island. I drag them up, but they slide back down. I knew Platinum didn't like ice, but thought Blaze with all the experience she had was ok. No such luck. Dash doesn't want any part of it. Mocha and Rosemary politely decline. I'm working on options when Alyssa Quaile comes up behind me. Her leaders stop and bunch up behind my team – they don't like things any more than my guys do. I offer to lead her dogs across, then she can stop, secure her team and come back to help me get across.

We get her across and she is securing her team when another team (I think it was Andy Moser) come up and his leaders balk also. He gets them lined out and Alyssa waves from the other side – his team goes across. Watching two teams go, I get my guys off the island and they slip and slid their way across following the other teams. This is the base of the climb up Eagle Summit and off we go, Andy (?) in lead, Alyssa next, and me in caboose. Later I find out that 5 Yukon Quest teams scratched at Mile 101, at least one because of this ice.

The climb is arduous, but not technically difficult (the other side is much steeper and longer); it looks about like the climb up Belanger Pass in the Sheep Mountain 150. It is pretty country and I when I stop wheezing I admire the view. Next thing I know Alyssa is trying to catch a driverless team coming back down the mountain. I set my snowhooks and run to the front of my team just in time to grab the sled and stop the dogs with their leaders overlapping mine. After a minute here comes the musher (Andy?). He tried the climb last night in the storm and his leaders turned the team around on him – this is his second attempt and he is going back to 101 to scratch.

I keep going and see Alyssa off to the side of the trail. Stopping just past her, she tells me her leaders won't do the climb either. I hold her leaders while she untangles and ask if they will follow me up. We are not fast, but I've never had my guys turn around on a hill. She will try it. We huff and puff up the hill. Ok the dogs huff and puff – I wheeze enough to endanger all the snow that is left ☺. There is very little snow and the rocks stick out. I apologize to my runners and off we go again. The dog trail doesn't actually go over Eagle Summit, but crosses on a small saddle. As we reach the saddle I look back and the whole world opens behind us. I swear you can see past Fairbanks.

The top is flat and mostly blown clear. There are stakes put in the ground (I don't even want to know how hard that was to put in) with tires to hook into and stop the team to rough lock. Of course the dogs are 10 feet off to the side and I can't reach the tires. I look over the crest at the feared side of Eagle Summit and it's not that bad. It is as steep as anything I've ever come down and longer than I've done steep before – a huge wide open slope with about a foot of packed snow. There is a broad gentle u carved in the hill to the left, but that hides a vertical drop they warned us about. Off the crest of the U to the right is a knob and that is where the trail goes. We push over. I'm standing on the brake with both feet and not doing too bad. Then we hit the steep section. We are not going straight down the hill, but crossing it at a slight angle. That is much harder. On the brake I have speed control, but no steering and roll the sled halfway down. I give the trail more respect and disconnect 8 of the 12 tug lines, straighten the sled and off we go again. Blaze doesn't like this section and stops, balling up the team. The sled rides up on Sisco in wheel and I roll it to protect him. Luckily I was almost under control and moving

slowly – Sisco is a little shaken (I've never hit my wheel dog before) but uninjured. It was more of a gentle bump than anything else. I move Dash in lead with Platinum and off we go to the bottom of this first pitch. I stop and hook up the tugs. Alyssa has rough locked her runners and follows me down. We turn right, climb up over a small knob and drop onto the second long pitch. This is steep, but very doable. The wind packed snow is hard enough it breaks into big chunks and rolls under my brake and drag. A few minutes see us to the bottom and on an old mining road into Central. We've done it. We made Eagle Summit! Not with the style and panache I would like, but I think mother would put this one on the refrigerator door.

The trail comes into Central on one of the side streets. The dogs kick into a lope as we hit the plowed street. Alyssa had passed me on the trail, but I could see her about 100 feet ahead. The dogs got into chase mode and off we went. I don't think she knew we were there. Her leaders hugged the left shoulder, while Platinum chose the right. We are running at the same speed, then the dogs kick into a new gear. We are gaining on her and I let the dogs run. We start to pull abeam and I call the dogs up. Alyssa looks a little surprised as we pass. A T intersection and the trail goes right – Alyssa's leaders go left and she stops to turn tem giving me a clear victory. Nobody was there to watch and they missed a neat little race into the checkpoint.

The checkpoint at Central is great. There is a free meal for all mushers and I have the best hamburger I've had for a long time (or maybe it is knowing the rest of the race is flat with lots of river running that made it taste so good). My right heel is starting to bother me – I've worked up a pretty good blister and we are not done yet. Thyme is thin and doesn't eat well. Basil has lung sounds from congestion. I drop both dogs.

After a solid rest we leave Central about 8:30 PM for a long night run into Circle. The race marshal tells me Kokrines Cabin is open about 40 miles from Circle if we want to stop. We'll see how long it takes us to get there. It has warmed to about -25 and takes me 6 hours to the cabin. I go another hour and camp. It is only 2:30 from camp to Circle and I feel foolish when we get there, but as a rookie I didn't know. It is actually only 35 miles from the cabin.

Frodo worked too hard and lost his breakfast as we pull into Circle. He has done well and will make the Iditarod team, so I leave him there. I debate scratching in Circle – the race is taking longer than I had planned and my heel is bothering me enough it is painful to take the boots on and off. I remember Jim Lanier getting septic and don't want to risk my Iditarod. I've seen the trail, but doggone it I hate to quit.

After something hot to eat and a good rest we hit the trail at 8:30 PM intending to run straight through to Central. I'm the red lantern at this point, but not concerned. The dogs are running well. I'm stopping every 2 hours to snack the dogs and after the third snack I pass and slowly pull away from Dale Curry. About an hour later I pass Alyssa and now hold third place – the last paying position. We finally leave Birch Creek (we spent 6 hours on that silly creek each way). It is time to snack the dogs again, but there is a headlight about ½ mile behind me that I can't shake. I explain we are racing and ask them to understand.

We keep running and the headlight gains. About an hour out of Central Dale passes me, but can't pull away. I'm hot on his tail, but not too eager to pass – I think we have 20 miles to go, but it is much less. We hit the maze of trails at the airport on the road to Circle Hot Springs still right behind Dale. The race marked the trail from Central to Circle, warning us of turns, etc. But when they rerouted us back to Central to finish they didn't remark the trail to go the other

direction. Dale misses the turn off the Airport Rd and I catch it – I call him, but he has to turn his team around on the plowed road and I take the lead.

We are running down the trail when I come to a Y without markers. It is 6 AM. There is a cabin on the right side with lights on and someone outside doing chores. Blaze takes the right, knowing this is the checkpoint. We pull into this guy's yard and I'm looking for the trail. There isn't one. The gentleman tells me to go left passed his old truck, left on the road, and right on the first trail I see. Blaze is convinced this is the checkpoint and I should park and take care of my team. She tries three times to come back. I'm puzzling this out and see the trail cross the road just as Dale goes by in the lead again. We are off in hot pursuit.

This trail runs right along the Hot Springs Rd for a while. They brushed the road last summer and left the debris on the trail. It was groomed from Central to Circle and the sticks points down the trail going out. Now we hit them head on. They jam up under my brake and drag, stopping us dead. Blaze has had it and ducks off the trail to the right, curls up in the snow and goes to sleep. If I'm not going to stop in the checkpoint she will do it for me. Platinum doesn't really want to go. Dash is barking and I move her up, but we have lost several minutes.

Dave pulled into Central in third place at 6:20 AM. We followed him in at 6:42, losing 22 minutes to the sticks and minor mutiny. Even though we didn't win our little race, it was the most fun I've had with dogs for a long time and I was pleased. Alyssa followed us in at 7:26 to take the red lantern. For the three of us to pull in within 1:06 of each other after 300 miles of racing is pretty exciting and added a lot to the experience. These are good folks to travel with.

At Circle I asked Jan, a certified Physician Assistant, to look at the heel. I didn't do it earlier because I didn't want to run afoul of the Quest rules since Jan was handling for me. I had worn a hole clear through the callus and skin, but there was no sign of infection. She and the local EMT treated it with second skin, bandage and wrap. Since then I have it checked several times with the same result – no infection, healing slowly. As I write this it is sore with a patch about a quarter in size that is still weeping, but we still have 5 days until I leave for never-never land. I can run dogs on it now, so we are go.

Think good thoughts and I will try to get one more update with the team listed before we leave town.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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