

The Journey Continues

January 14, 2008

You buy them books, send them to school, teach them gee from haw, but in the end they are still dogs. We've been training hard for the Knik 200 with the goal of running the race in two 90 mile legs, rather than breaking each long run in half as we did the last two years. I had intended to have the dogs do a couple of 90 mile runs before the Knik, but we all know where the road paved with good intentions leads. We did have several 8 hour runs (60 miles) and one 10 hour run (70 miles) on the 4-wheeler and that would have to do. If you think it takes all day to load the dogs, drive to the track, run for 10 hours, drive back and unload you are underestimating ☺.

I always give the dogs running a race a few days off prior to the start and work with the dogs that are not running. I had four dogs just ready to come off injured reserve (Dukat – right front, Lycos – right front, Dijon – sore feet, and Strider – sore feet) and wanted to take them for a short run Friday before the Knik and again Monday after before putting them back in the team. That left 13 dogs to race over the weekend and I chose Basil to sit this one out. When I loaded the four injured reserve dogs for a quick 4 mile run, along with Keiko, Worf, and Rom, Basil was begging for a chance to come along. She wouldn't get to run the race – why not. I took my new Hans Gatt sled so the Knik wouldn't be the first time on the runners – 4 miles isn't much, but it beats zero.



My new Hans Gatt sled. The trail dragger seat is hidden behind me.

Running 8 dogs is a nice break. They load fast, run short, unload fast – the whole process was done in 3 hours. I turned Basil loose to run to her house and grabbed Strider to lead him back to his house. As I walked into the back lot Basil and Platinum were going after it. I have no idea who started it, but I stopped it in my best parental voice. Of course Platinum and Basil both have bites on their legs. Platinum could probably run, but I need him for Iditarod and if he injured himself because he was favoring a sore (bitten) leg it could be much worse. So here I am the night before my first race of the season with only 11 healthy dogs and three of my best leaders, Lycos, Platinum, and Dijon, out of action. I still had Dash and Blaze with Mocha, Rosemary, and Thyme to fill in. That is why I want more than one good leader.

The race team was Mocha, Blazer, Dash, Picard, Rosemary, Throttle, Jewels, Thyme, Ginger, Sisco, and Frodo. I questioned whether Frodo could do the 90 mile run, he is just a year old, but if he was having trouble I would rest going in and drop him in Skwentna. Ginger is the other yearling, but she is an incredible athlete and having no problems on any of the runs. At the drivers meeting they warned us the snow was thin at the start, getting better as we went west.

I'm staging right beside Bob Bundtzen and he confides it will be his first time on the runners this year. Later I found out that Zack Steer hadn't been on a sled yet either, so I was in good company. The trail committee worked hard, but there is only so much you can do with frozen

ground. The first several miles, when the dogs are pumped up and really want to run, were a thin layer of mixed snow and dirt spread like powdered sugar over frozen ground, rocks, and tree roots. I had Blaze and Dash in lead, thinking I'd have more control. Both dogs know the trail from running the race before and did a nice job staying on the right trail, while I'm playing pinball on the back of the sled.

You should never use anything for the first time in a race. I had four miles on my new sled, but... Last year Hans bolted the back stanchion of the seat to a mount on the sled runners. Gerry Willomitzer told me that during the Quest and Iditarod he broke three of the mounts. This year Hans changed the design so that the rear stanchion drops through a slot and is held down by an arctic bungee. On the shakedown cruise Friday at Beach Lake it worked fine. On these rough trails we hadn't gone a mile when the first side popped out and started to drag. On good snow trails I'd have let it go, but it caught on every bump and root and I was afraid it would break (or, shades of last year, break the runner), so I stopped and put it back in the slot. That became a pattern for the next 180 miles. After a few miles we got enough snow that I could set a snowhook and hold the team and I stopped and tightened the bungee. That helped, but didn't fix the problem. The slot the stanchion rested in quickly filled with snow and packed into ice. I dug out my knife and cleaned the slot. Off we went only to repeat the process again and again and again. Lesson number one – fix the mount!

In the photos on his website Hans shows a sled bag on the seat, but he said that really didn't work and most folks just tied a cooler there to sit on. A quick review of the start on Iditarod insider showed Zack Steer doing just that. I bought a couple of straps to run under the sled base and over the cooler and even got a rubber mat cut to the size of the cooler top to be more comfortable. The straps had no give and kept slipping off the top. I'd stop and put them back and they would slip off again. Not as bad as the seat stanchion, but definitely added to the frustration. Lesson two – fix the cooler mount!



Photo courtesy of Donna Quante
My team at the start of the 2008 Knik 200.
Photo by Donna Quante

As we went west we settled into a routine. Blaze and Dash seem to be running well together. We hit the Nome sign at two hours, about as expected, and I stopped to snack the dogs and work on the sled. The snow is getting better and the sled riding smoother – this is fun.

There is about a ten foot drop off the bank onto the Susitna River. Last year it was almost a leap of faith, but this year the trail committee worked hard to build a ramp and it was just a fast steep drop. I caught my breath, said a quick prayer of thanks and headed up the river. At the drivers meeting they told us there was jumbled ice on the Su, but I've never driven that and didn't know what to expect. The trail is going around blocks stacked one on top of the other where the river had frozen, thawed enough for the ice to start to move, and then refroze. Repeat this several times and the broken pieces of ice stack like pancakes. Now imagine a four year old who isn't very hungry eating that stack – cutting pieces off, pushing them around, maybe on their sides and generally scattering them over his plate. Now drive a strong happy dog team across the plate. Hmmm.

At first we ran beside and around the stacks and I marveled at their beauty, then there was no way around and pinball Rogers and his insane team of dogs screamed through the mess. Alright I screamed and the dogs ran, but the effect was the same. With no control on the ice I made the first bounce pretty good, the second was ok, the third was marginal, and we went downhill from there. Thank heaven I only had 11 dogs instead of the 12 I had planned. With 8 it might even have been fun. I rolled the sled three times, slamming into the ice hard enough to badly bruise my forearm on the last. Just as I wondered how long this would go on, Jim Lindau passed me and said we were through the worst of it. After the race I was talking to the Yukoners and they said this was nothing compared to the Yukon. Our blocks were maybe a foot thick, on the Yukon they are the size of cars. I spent a lot of the race dreading the return trip through that ice, but there was no other way home.

Blaze took this moment to decline to lead with Dash. She started wondering off the trail and trying to go directly across the jumbled ice. I replaced her with Rosemary, but she didn't like the conditions. Thyme and Mocha were not particularly effective with Dash for some reason. I moved Dash back and put Blaze back in lead with Rosemary. The spark just wasn't there. I moved Mocha up with Blaze and off we went. Just as I'm starting to relax Mocha reaches over and starts bugging Blaze while they are running. I speak to Mocha, but she does it again and Blaze is now running as far from Mocha as she can get with the neckline between them.

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but I wasn't feeling nearly that generous just then and questioned not only her ancestry, but also her progeny. OK, I had wanted to try Ginger in lead for some time. You don't normally make a dog's first experience up front a stressful situation in a race, but I needed help so up she went. It was like my fairy dog-mother came down with a magic bone. Ginger is driven to run, but submissive and let Blaze show her how to lead. Blaze was comfortable in that role and running strong. Every time I stopped it was another story. Ginger had no idea how to hold the line out and was bugging every dog she could reach. Almost every stop was a tangle, but as long as we were moving it was sweet.

At 6 hours into the run we past Luce's, a landmark about ½ way (distance) to Skwentna. I knew we were slow with all the problems I'd had and would get to Skwentna in less than 12 hours, but I couldn't see doing much over 10 hours straight. I'm debating whether to stop and camp when I downed the last of the drink in my cooler – when I rolled the sled I must have spilled half of what was in there. That decided it – I didn't want to make this a bad experience for the dogs and needed to hydrate myself. A two hour camp was in order. By the time I had the dogs and me fed and cared for it was 2:45 before we got back on the trail. Now it is full dark and getting cold fast. My thermometer is reading -20, but the dogs are in cruise mode and running like a fine Swiss watch. The sky is crystal clear and the stars are too many to count. This is one of those magic nights mushing dogs and I thoroughly enjoy it. Three hours and 15 minutes later we pulled into the Skwentna roadhouse for our mandatory 6 hour layover. I probably could have made it in one run, but with all the time I'd lost we were not competitive and having a good experience for the dogs was more important.

I moved Ginger back into the team to rest so Blaze could rest without being constantly annoyed, cared for the dogs and up to the roadhouse for some sleep. It took longer than expected to get out because when I was hooking up to go Frodo's harness came apart in my hands. He got bored during the night and chewed through it in three places. I found the spare harness for him, but by then he had eaten three of his booties. This is the dog I was worried would be too tired to finish.

Moving Ginger back into lead with Blaze we headed back down the river to home intending to do it in one run.

The closer we got to the jumbled ice the more nervous I got. It wasn't fun the first time, and now I'm tired. My forearm still hurt from the first passage. No stokes of genius, no magic carpet, no other way home. Even if you don't like the music you still have to dance. I kept wishing I could get the dogs to just walk through this stuff. About 2 miles out I started slowing them down with the drag – w a l k – w a l k I said slowly, trying to force a calm lightness into my voice that I didn't really feel. Suddenly we are there, bouncing off the ice, but slower and much more in control, and then it was over. Anticlimactic. I stopped and thanked each dog. Whew!

About the Nome sign, 20 miles from the finish Ginger said she had enough and didn't want to lead anymore. Her first time ever in lead, she had gone 125 miles in a race. What a girl. I'm looking for another soft girl to lead with Blaze and Throttle came to mind. Throttle really isn't a leader, but does well when she wants to. Blaze and Throttle hit it off well and took us home strong. We did make the run home without camping. The dogs were tired, but ate like starving sled dogs – a sign that I had not over run them at all. We finished 25th, not as good as last year, but look what I learned. I found a new leader, Ginger, with lots of potential, and older leader, Throttle, that deserves a second look, running mates for Blaze where she can show how good she is, and confidence in doing long runs with this team in the Yukon Quest 300 and Iditarod. At the finish banquet I talked to Gerry Willomitzer and Sebastian Schnulle (they both have the same sled) and got several ideas to solve those problems. All in all it was a very educational experience and bodes well for the future.

Keep 'em Northbound

Eric

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