

An Old Man's Look at The ArrowHead 135 — 2014

When September 2013 came around I knew a decision had to be made — should I commit myself to the ArrowHead 135 on January 27, 2014? At the start of the race I would be 71 years old and many of the participants could be my kids or grandkids. I had finished the race in 2012, failed to finish in 2013, so this was my chance to finish more than half of my starts — a self-set goal with no rationale behind it. My wife (Sue) shrugged her shoulders so the race commitment was made. After all, as my son Sven would say, “Dad, just think of it as a pretty ride in the woods!”

Conditioning for the race could simply be summed up as being a lab rat/gym rat. I generally don't ride outdoors in the winter due to salt and slippery roads. In fact, I skipped the Triple D race in Dubuque this year because it was too close to the AH (1 week) and a Triple-D fall last year still plagues me.

December 5th was the start of conditioning. Deer hunting was over. Tahna Blue, personal Trainer at the Emma B. Howe YMCA in Coon Rapids MN, provided a training regime which included the New Leaf training program having me on stationary bike 6 days a week for cardio strength/endurance; upper and lower body weights three days a week; and, on my “free” day, an hour of a BodyFlow stretching class. After 6 weeks my heart became minimally responsive to the bike and I backed off from the gym to focus on the race. The body was ready. Fretting time for the mind was at hand.

Trying to match up the weather forecast with the spread of gear laid out in an extra bedroom was a challenge. My final prescription for survival from the skin outwards was:

Feet — heavy hand knit wool sock covered with a medium weight wool sock / 600 gram Cabela hunting boot / gaiters initially / pair of Neos Explorer overshoes / and toe warmers accordingly;

Lower body — hind end lubricant / UA shorts / bike shorts / nylon fishnet underwear (fondly called by some riders as the “chick magnets”) / SmartWool long underwear / polar tech tights / and Novara biking pants;

Upper body — wool fishnet top / SmartWool long underwear top / Patagonia base layer wool top / North Face biking jacket / and a reflector vest;

Head — a double wool layered biking hat with ear covering and bill / SmartWool balaclava / helmet.

Hands — SmartWool liner gloves / Dogwood Designs pogies / hand warmers accordingly

Lighting — front and rear tail light with a head lamp screwed to the helmet. The Li-ion batteries in the headlamp had to be changed at about mile 118.

Water — two 1-liter Nalgens in insulated covers each with two Endurolyte Fizz tablets; a Camelback with 1-liter buried under layers on my back for emergency use only (never needed it).

I walked part of the trail the day before and it was hard with no chance of it softening in the forecast. Tires were set hard at 15 psi and left as such throughout the race. The race was to be cold, in fact, the fresh breezes from the northwest would bring it to the point of possibly being bitter but, being a tail wind, it was just called “cold”. Frostbite would be an issue.

Monday 07h00 — I missed the start of the race because the dome light in my truck was on so undressing, finding the key to open the door, and redressing set me back 10 minutes. From the starting line, a vacant area at this time, I had to pass all of the runners (56) and skiers (2) and

sagging cyclists until I got into a comfortable biking pace (mile 7). Stripping an excess top layer, having some water and food, and removing eye-wear (iced up beyond use) I set out on the hard packed, freshly groomed State trail eating and drinking every hour. The water in one of my two 1-liter bottles was warm but cooler than when I started. I started the race with gaiters and my boots with the Neos strapped to the rear rack. At mile 18 (#53 crossing) the Neos went on and never came off for the rest of the ride. So many areas and small hills that I rode through this year were pushed in previous years so the ride was nice and the coolness wasn't an issue. The rocking trees always kept my attention knowing that when we hit headwinds the pleasantness could change.

Gateway General Store, our first checkpoint, was well received by all participants. The usually quiet store gets stormed by heat seeking participants clamoring to get clothes in the dryer and assessing what does and doesn't work. The GGS owners take it in stride being as nice/sweet as can be — wonderful folks. By this point 45 participants drop out from frostbite or exhaustion. Remaining racers are mumbling strategies to one another and trying to determine what improvements can be made.

The trip to MelGeorge got hillier as the route progressed with two monster hills (mile 62? and 67?) before getting out on the flats across Elephant Lake. Headwind. Coldest, bitter stretch. Nasty. Eye lids freezing shut and being jabbed by knife blades. Hurt. Slow progress in drifting snow. Nasty narrow trail along the lake to the MelGeorge Checkpoint. In at 20h55.

Warmth. Clothes sent to the dryers. Hot cider. Grilled cheese sandwiches. Hot wild rice soup. Wonderful volunteers. Why would you want to leave? 42 more participants drop. To leave MelGeorge is a commitment to finish because the third checkpoint is minimal. Friend Tom Lais had a cabin, offered me a bed, so I was able to sleep three one-hour segments from midnight to 03h00 — pretty good for an old body laced with race adrenaline. I went to the checkpoint cabin in wait for others to leave — a move I thought was smart at 25-30F below. I left with others Tuesday at 05h30. A mile out I sensed myself being over dressed on the legs so the other riders went on and I spread out my sleeping pad to stand on, took off boots and socks, removed the polar tech tights, got dressed again in the wafting breezes, and never saw the other riders again. Riding alone on squeaky snow is a pleasant experience — why was I hesitant at MelGeorges, who knows.

Lot of hills and bottomland flowages when temps were later reported to be in the -40F's. Definitely cooler microclimate in the bottoms. The chest was sensing coolness so I stopped and added a thin top layer bunched up inside the jacket. Good insulation. The balaclava was pulled up over the bearded chin. Hard pushes on hills caused the balaclava to be opened up (dropped below the chin) and fast downhills become refreshing. On some of the pushes my heart was trying to bust out of my chest so some hard swallows kept it contained. Rode a bit with Phil Jemielita but he was slowing down wanting to stop at the 100 mile shelter. I went on and met two of our rescue snowmobiles, mentioned to watch out for Phil because he could be passed by if in the shelter. Phil dropped out at the Ski Pulk Checkpoint with frostbite.

Ski Pulk Checkpoint — cussed by many but a joy to reach at 14h37! Less than fancy (2 fish houses) but with hot chocolate and knowing it was only 24 miles to go. One monstrous hill (Wake-um-up) and then 22 miles of flat black spruce swamp. Left at 15h52. 6 participants drop — 4 at Ski Pulk and 2 shortly after.

At this point of the race my body is flat-lining and it's hard to raise the core temperature. I purposely overdressed the upper body wearing my go-to Patagonia Nano-Puff jacket (new birthday present) under the biking jacket. At mile 25 the intensity of core heat became apparent so I stopped, removed the go-to jacket and went on — it did its job. Later, when the headlamp was turned on the beam was weak so the batteries were changed.

Black spruce, drifting squeaky snow, lurking Bog Trolls. Solitude. An occasional push was taken just to keep the mind and body straight == can't bonk out when so close. Hills near Tower were pushed EXCEPT FOR the last little hill at the finish line which took my remaining ounce of energy!

A FINISHER!!! You betcha. Tuesday, 19h54. 36h54 total — checkpoints suck up the hours.

Thanks to Ken Kreuger and the whole staff of volunteers for putting on a great race and again to the Gateway General Store for so kindly handling the mob.