

Arrowhead 135 January 2016

This is my journey of the Arrowhead trail. 135 miles of mostly snowmobile trails in northern Minnesota. The race requires a nice list of required gear to take along. Most racers (like me) pull a sled. The sled will weigh anywhere from 25 to 40 pounds. Sixty hours to finish. Aid stations are about every 35 miles. Drop bags are left around halfway point at an aid station, but they can only contain food, and will be stored outside in the cold. You have to apply for the race, and then be chosen. It is my honor to have been chosen for the second time.

I love this stuff. There is no getting around it. The summer races and training are now for me to prepare for long winter nights, surviving out in the cold. The love I have for these races starts with the people. They are as tough as they come and their hearts are bigger. The way that they have let me into their lives usually makes me tear up. To think that this old man from the warm state of Ohio is so welcomed up north is something that I am thankful for every day. The list of friends grows each year but they started with Chris Scotch, Helen Scotch, and Roberto Marron. Chris and Roberto, I was lucky enough to share trail time at Tuscobia (my first winter race) so they had to talk to me. Helen was of course one of the race directors so she was forced to talk to me as well. I was so intimidated by the others that it took me a while to meet more. I mean really, what does a 54-year-old winter newbie walk up and begin to talk to Sue Lucas about? I could go on and on about this but I hope that EACH ONE of my winter friends know how much I love them and how much their friendship means to me. Let's get to Arrowhead now.

The plane took off from Columbus. It's Saturday afternoon and the race does not start until Monday morning. Nothing exciting happens on the four plane rides, and I get into International Falls around 11 pm. Same hotel as last year. The hotel is close to the start and the familiarity of the room helps. The owners are so nice to me. Really good people. Sunday I get up and get my gear ready for the gear check in the morning. I pack my sled and pull it to check in location. [Ok, I was there last year. I remember where it was.] It would be nice if someone would explain to me how I got lost getting there and going back. Thank goodness, a local pointed me in the right direction. No problem with gear check in. I see a few familiar faces but the enormity of the task in front of me is weighing on my mind. I go, eat lunch, and then start a final prep of my sled and gear. All looks pretty good. Pre race meeting starts at 5:30 pm. I walk there again with no issue. Now all my friends have arrived. Legends of the race are there and I know some of them. I just have a great time. I win a bike prize in the raffle but thankfully,

Story by Kirk Ridenour

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Mark Scotch trades me for something I can use. The time ends too quickly and I head back to the room. On the way back my legs starts to feel sore. Are you serious? What kind of new mental hell is this the night before the race? I put it out of my mind, complete my prep work and go to sleep. One note of fun: I decide at the last minute that extra insoles for my shoes weigh too much and that I only need three pairs of socks. No gaitars. This is where my good friend Sue would question my ability to dress myself.

I sleep well. I wake up early and I am ready to go. I arrive at the race site early. Many friends are there, and you can tell most are pretty nervous. Mostly small meaningless conversations. They help pass the time and get us to the start line. I did muster up enough nerve to talk to Jason Buffington. He not only has done the Iditarod on foot, but he also finished second in the 350-mile race. Just a great guy. Time is up, and we head to the start. The start is so cool, as Ken the race director yells, "Release the hounds". I miss actually this hearing this for the second straight year. The race has started and I already need to pee. I pee often during this race. It is very annoying. I cannot really remember the start except that I am with Jon Paradowski for over 9 miles. I really like Jon. He is one of my many Canadian friends and spending time with him on the trail is fun. The first nine miles is an easy packed trail. Then the trail turns to mush. We have to find paths to walk through. This is the way that the trails will be most of the race. I call it slogging. You step down # inches or more with each step. Racers move all over the trail to try to find a good path. It never really works, but mentally you think you are gaining something. I mostly hug the right hand side of the trail. I am with different people at times during this first part, but start to pull away from most of them. Eventually, I find my friend Jason Davis, and we go on together. We are going to spend a lot of time together for the balance of the race. It is getting later and I think we are late to the aid station. At least later than I want. I press on ahead of the group I am with. I will see them plenty during the race. The highlight of the first section is passing two bikers before the aid station. I get there in a decent amount of time. I buy a newspaper to put inside my shoes to dry and change socks. I should note that my dress for the first section was regular socks, light running pants, light base shirt, a regular long sleeve shirt, regular running shoes, and a headband. I only wore gloves part of the way. At that aid station I add only a fleece top. Yes, I got cold, but I all but eliminated sweating. The race hasn't really started yet. We are in for a bit in the next section. After 45 minutes, I get up and leave with Jason.

The first 5 miles of the trail is great. Easy and packed. This section is 38 miles so that leaves only 33 miles of crap. Twice in this race we are on nice packed trails, then cross a road and proceed into mush. I wish someone could explain it to me. As we enter the mush, I tell myself "This is the way it will be for the rest of the race. Enjoy any packed snow you get and forget feeling sorry for yourself." We are getting to some hills now and are sledding every chance we get. The rules allow for it. Jason and I take to using our trekking poles to sled even more on some flat sections. This works for well over half of the race, but later in the race we are too tired to do this effectually. We have also picked up my good friends Randy Kottke and Michael McDuffie. We stick together in one form or another to the next aid station. Randy is so funny.

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He does not train for these events but he is tougher than hell. He is the only one I know that mostly just walks in the middle of the trail and does not look for packed snow. He also has a backpack setup that has a light and a radio. He amazes me. The night drags on. We think finally we are getting close to the aid station. Jason and Michael have gotten tired and have dropped back. I am pushing on pretty hard and I know at this point that there is no way Randy would let me go. I find comfort in that fact. We push what I believe to be five more miles than we thought, but finally we see the lake we are to cross. One mile to the aid station. It is cold and windy on the lake. My legs are freezing. I take a look back at Randy, put my head down and take off. There is a racer that has over a quarter mile lead on us as we start across the lake. I pass him easily. This is a good point to talk about my speed. I have a walking speed that is a lot faster than most. I spent 4 months working on my walking speed. I can be really fast when I want to be, but my goal is 135 miles, not 75 fast miles. I get into the aid station. My drop bag is here with more food. The aid station is pretty full. Lots of people (bikers and runners) not going on. I spend over 2 hours here trying to dry out and rest. Neither works. My socks, shoes, and insoles are all wet. Nothing will be dry the rest of the race. I lay in a bed to rest but I am so worried about Randy and Jason leaving me I do not sleep. I finally get up and start to get dressed. Two other really good friends have arrived, Alex and Dominique. Dominique is really ready to go on and Alex is on the fence. Alex and I talked for a minute about why he should continue the race. He said it helped him decide to move on. Clearly one of the highlights of the race for me. If the next section is like the last one, I do not believe I can finish. This is as low a moment as it gets for me. Thank God for Randy and Jason. Jason is ready to get out the door before I am. Randy and I are out after a bit, maybe 20 minutes later. They got me out of the aid station and they helped me finish.

It is still morning when we leave. I hear the trail is a bit better but this is the real hilly section of the course. I lose Randy as he gets caught up in infatuation but I will still see him plenty. I hit the first really steep hill. It is so hard to describe climbing these hills with the sled. I had fresh legs and stopped four times just to make it up to the top. Legs on fire now. I just keep moving. We now have a long, flat section. I move pretty fast. My goal is to catch Jason. It takes a bit, but I find him. He is just in front of Matt Long. I will get to know Matt as the race goes along but for now he is a new face. He has finished this race numerous times. The real event of the day is when Jason says he got no sleep, and needs to rest in his bivy sack. I stay with him and try to dry out my socks and shoes. I end up burning my insoles, socks, and a bit of shoe. They call this a good try. Eventually, Matt, Jason, Randy, and I end up together after dark. These were some great times. Lots of laughing, sledding, and just talking as the miles went on. We finally go down this big hill with a curve. Matt says that now we will do some slight hills, cross a swamp, and then another slight uphill to the aid station. He thinks an hour maybe an hour and a half at the most. It is well over 2 hours before we get to the aid station. The four of us are in different zones by the end of this leg. We are not close to each other. Not much talking. This is work and even though we are tired, we are focusing on the task at hand. My feet are very wet and I am a bit worried about frostbite. This is where you have to take care of yourself. No one else can help. The swamp comes into view then the uphill and then the aid station.

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The first aid station was in a store where you could buy stuff. The next one was at a resort. This last one is in the middle of nowhere with a teepee. You are not allowed to lie down inside. You couldn't anyway as the ground is wet. I change my socks and finally put on a base for my bottoms. At some point, I put on my coat during the night, but I do not remember when. I have had gloves on most of the day and night. Jason dropped behind, so Matt, Randy, and I are there. They want to leave before I am ready. I start off behind them drinking some hot chocolate. After I finish, I quickly catch them. We are headed to Wake Up Hill. The last downhill of the race. Of course, to go downhill, we first have to climb the last uphill. It is a tough one, but we are fresh. Wake Up Hill is a long and twisting sled ride down that you cannot see the bottom of as you start. Randy and Matt sled down. I walk until I can see the bottom, and then sled down. One of the race snowmobiles is at the bottom. I almost run into it before I can stop my sled. That is it. No more hills. A gentle flat 23 miles to the finish and we are done. What could happen?

Randy and Matt are having problems with their setup. They stop a number of times. I want to press on. Get this over. Then Matt tells me to "keep going" and he will catch up. I press on by myself for a bit. I do not see them behind me. We have over 20 miles to go but I have seen the last person I will see before the end of the race. My real race has begun, as this is the race within myself. I have so enjoyed the journey so far, but here, before me, is the test I came for. I start walking fast. It was early morning on the second when I went on my own. 1:30 - 2:00 am. The first couple of hours are great. I needed some alone time and my head is clear. Then around 4:30 am, it hits me. I can hardly keep my eyes open. I know this is the tough time of the race, but I cannot keep going like this, as I am all over the trail. I lay down on my sled to rest for a bit. I close my eyes. It is colder this morning than yesterday. I start to get cold. I do not care and remain. I start to shake but continue to lay on my sled. I stay until I am cold to the bone and cannot take it anymore. Then I get up and start to go again. I am cold for the next hour or so. It is a smart racing move and I love the confidence I have in myself to be able to allow myself to get cold out here. I put on some music to pass the time and block out some of the pain in my legs. Finally, I see a shelter. I look at my distance card. Less than 10 miles to go. I press on. This area is pretty swampy and not much tree cover. I am lucky to finish early, as the later finishers will have a much tougher time in the wind and snow. I am very confident. I was told 6 miles before the end you would see the lights of the casino, which is where the race officially ends. I see a bunch of light. Two hours and I will be done. I keep pressing on.

I have not seen a person or a trail marking in hours. There are some marks in the snow and I keep convincing myself that these are the markings of previous runners but finally I must admit to myself that I am lost. The last time I knew I was on the trail was about 8 miles back at the shelter. Why didn't I check to make sure I was on the right path then? Why are there no markings out here? Why do all the maps out here on the trail never mention Arrowhead? I have to develop a plan. I must make sure I am heading in the wrong direction before heading back. I try not to panic. This is my Arrowhead. I have enough time. All I need to do is make sure that I need to turn back and then head back to the shelter. What is ten extra miles? I have

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picked up my pace some but not too fast for my journey. It is alright. If I have to turn around I will and walk those 10 miles again. I am well past the crying. I believe now I have already passed the test I was looking for.

Then it happened. I see an arrow marking. It's burnt orange. I swear I remember someone saying this is the color of the Arrowhead trail. I do not get my hopes up. Then I see a race mark. Then another mark. There was lots of crying now, as I couldn't be happier. The marking took me off the trail and onto private land. Anyone who has finished the race will have fun with this next part. My vision of the end of this race was that we were going through the woods and then we would come to an opening. Maybe, after I had crossed a road. At that point, we could see the finish line but we needed to go around this lake for three miles. I needed to find the lake. That is where my 3 miles started. Most of you are probably wonder how in the hell I made it this far with this sense of direction. Me too!

As soon as I was off the trail, I looked at my watch: 48 hours and 20 minutes. If I could find the lake in 40 minutes then I could break 50 hours. After running a ways, I took my coat off. I was drenched in sweat. I had been running or fast walking for half of an hour. I decided to walk until the top of the hour. I needed some strength after I saw this lake. I finally see some orange snow fencing. No lake. I had made it up to the fence but the fence seemed to be a big circle with no exit. I am running hard now desperately trying to find the start of the last 3 miles. Then I see it, the finish line and it is close. Instead of trying to figure out what is going on, I sprint to the end for a time of 49:02. I fall to the ground exhausted. I have not eaten or drank anything in hours. People have to lead me around as I am in a daze. I get to the recovery room where the announcement of "Another Arrowhead finisher" really hits home.

The rest of that day and the next is filled talking to finishers before and after me. It does not matter the time or the place. Reaching inside yourself to finish or to take it as far as you can that day is what is important. I can say for sure I gave Arrowhead the best I had to offer. Can I do it again? I sure want to.

I used to write these race reports for my grandmother. I stopped when she passed away. This one I writing for my mom. Just because she wanted me to.