

AH 135 2019 Race Report

I'm writing because I like to put my memories down, and posting because there are probably some who like to read it. But 2019 AH 135 was almost more notable to me for what it wasn't than what it was. First, it wasn't unsupported, which was a decision I made the night before. I had made the goal of going unsupported at the finish line last year, and I knew I would regret switching to supported. And yes, I do regret the change. But I'm ok with that, I will in a better position next year to try. Just having another finish under my belt gave me a lot of experience and confidence that will help when going unsupported.

Second, I had almost no issues that caused me to struggle during the race. My shifting got screwy, but I adjusted cable tension which solved that for the most part. I crashed going down a hill and snow packed into my rear brake, after which it was unreliable. Sometimes I could get it to work, other times not, so the big downhills were tricky since using front brake is a quick way to go down hard when descending on snow. But neither of these issues created any real difficulty, and I never felt in doubt about a finish during the race. That sense of "I might not be able to do this" is not actually something I want to avoid, my aim is to place myself in a race where a finish is not a given, so the switch to unsupported will help get me back there. Oh, and my Garmin messed up and distances were again totally unreliable. I will be getting rid of my Garmin Touch and switching to etrex 30 for next year, very unhappy with how unreliable the unit was, even after being replaced by Garmin last year.

Regarding the race itself, it was much more relaxing getting ready this year, since it was more about taking a step back from unsupported, rather than cramming tons of gear on to complete it without restocking. I still brought way too much gear, more than last year when temps were even colder, but that was fine. Travis and I biked the mile to the starting point, dropping gear off in a friend's truck to take to the finish line. I learned from last year and brought a bottle of water in my pocket, which I chugged right before the start so I wouldn't need to stop to drink for a while. I had spent about ten minutes looking for a friend who had tire pressure issues, which distracted me from taking my outer coat off. That meant about 15 minutes after the start I had to take that coat off, and then 20 minutes later I had to take my wind shirt off, but I'm proud I didn't just push through longer without taking layers off, I arrived at Gateway without getting layers wet with sweat. The first section was mostly eventful for an absolutely gorgeous sunrise and snow dog that I regrettably didn't stop to take a photo of. Speaking of photos, I didn't take a single photo all race long, something I need to change next year.

Arriving at Gateway, I was only going to fill a bottle and immediately leave. But once I was inside I changed my mind and had a small bowl of chicken soup, and then put my still frozen headgear back on and headed out. It's easy to get sucked into the checkpoints, so I made it

my goal to spend less time at the stops this year. Leaving Gateway I felt strong, the trail was very fast for bikes, and I just kept a steady pace. It was easy to start looking ahead and thinking how fast I could be this year, to get overconfident, and then you hit the hills. It was my second year, I really should have known better, but I was still shocked at the size and slope of those hills. The extra weight on the bike really hurt when pushing up the hills, and picturing myself pushing up the hills with the additional weight when unsupported gave me a reality check for how hard those guys have it. By the time I got to the Elephant Lake the wind was blowing ice crystals into my eyes and I was much more wiped out than I expected. Instead of the short stop I desired, I headed into Mel George's ready to dry off gear and eat all I could hold. A big bowl of wild rice soup, two grilled cheese sandwiches, a little pecan pie, lots of chips, etc, really was a huge lift to my spirits, those volunteers there are the best! My gear wasn't soaked, but it was nice to dry off the back of my jacket which always builds up some ice, and my face gear. I had new gear I could have just put on, but I saved the second set for later in case it was needed. It was there an hour and 20 minutes, longer than my 45 minute goal, but I was happy to be under the almost 4 hours I spent there last year.

Coming out of Mel George's I was feeling pretty good, I watched carefully for the right turn since my garmin wasn't working, but with the little bit of fresh snow the turn was very obvious this year. About 10 miles out I met a biker walking his bike back, I asked if I could help, but he said he was finished. He had a flat and couldn't get his spare tube to work, I regret not trying to see if I could fix it. The hills stack up through this section, and I started to feel the pace pushing back at me. I have been putting in good miles on the bike, so my leg muscles never gave me any issue, but my right knee needs surgery and something about the hills at AH cause problems. I also haven't been going to the gym because of my knee pain, so my overall fitness has suffered greatly. I found my lungs couldn't keep up with what my legs wanted to put out, and I just felt physically exhausted. Last year I had a lot more reserves overall, even though my legs were weaker. It hammers home the nature of the race that legs aren't what gets you to the finish, overall fitness is just as important.

Without any gps info I had no way of knowing when Surly checkpoint would arrive, but I had a print out from Chris that at least gave me some idea of distances between shelters, etc, which was so much better than nothing. My stomach started acting up at some point along the way, and I stopped eating or drinking much at all. I knew the danger of that, and forced as much drinking as I could, and the Scratch in my drink meant I got some calories as well. But I knew I was on the lower edge of my water and calorie requirement to get the job done. I spent longer than I wanted at Surly, an hour and 20 minutes again. Still less than last year at Surly, but not by much. This stop was more about resting and getting my body ready, rather than drying gear and getting warm. I had dry gear I could have just put on and pack the icy stuff, but my body couldn't handle the last 24 miles without a break. In hind sight, I probably should have stayed another 30 minutes, because after I left and started up the big hill out of Surly I realized just how exhausted I was. It was here I realized how hard I was pushing myself and appreciated the nature of the event. I was at my limit, at times I would slowly roll to a stop and

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hang my head, unable to keep moving. I knew I was going to slowly grind out the finish, but it wasn't a steady ride and took longer than expected. I missed the sunrise of last year, I remember that fondly, the beauty of the swamps and pine trees with the sun coming up giving me fresh energy. I suppose the answer to that will be to go unsupported, which will slow me down and prevent a nighttime finish next year.

Finishing AH was certainly a great feeling, and it was really fun to push myself and get a "fast" finish. I finished 17th this year, ahead of the 25th place last year, which is nice I suppose but not really something I care much about. I also finished in exactly 22 hours, which was well under my goal of under 24 hours. The temps ended up higher than expected, which combined with low wind Overall the race was simply what it is meant to be, a long slog through frigid temps and difficult conditions, challenging your body and your mind to tolerate discomfort and endure to the finish. I find it an experience worth seeking out, and am thankful for the chance to compete in this wonderful race.

What I love as much as the race itself, is the friendships and connections made being involved in AH. It was great spending time with Travis, who endured much more than I could have in his attempt to finish unsupported this year. I regret not joining him in that challenge as planned. I love the whole process, seeing friends at gear check and pre-race meeting, discussing other events, connecting with people I have known only online, and eating breakfast at Fortune Bay while being so hungry that simple biscuits and gravy seem to be the food of the gods. So many wonderful people are involved in this race, from the race director to the many volunteers, all great people and so fun to be around. It is truly a privilege to be there, and I respect so much the effort that goes into supporting us racers and keeping the event going smoothly. Mostly I appreciate my wife tolerating this hobby of mine, it takes me away for countless hours, the gear is not cheap, and it distracts from other priorities in life. I'm thankful for a family that supports my adventures, and for all the encouragement, support, and advice I've received from countless friends. Thanks much to Mark Weber for the use of his -50 sleeping bag and other gear, Thanks to Patrick for covering at work, thanks much to [New Moon](#) for the help in keeping my bike ready for these events, and thankful for all my biking friends who train with me and help me stay motivated to get out there biking in cold weather.