

I just finished my first Arrowhead 135. Wow! What an experience. When they said they were collecting race reports, I decided that I would write one. Diligent preparation for an event like this is a major key to success, in my opinion. I found prior race reports from other athletes incredibly helpful as part of my preparation. Learning about and from the positive and negative experiences of others was key to developing a successful plan, and my hope is that someone else will find some value in my experience. I don't consider myself an expert, but I can tell you what worked for me, what didn't, and why. I hope you find that information useful.

GEAR CHOICES

I have been fatbiking in Duluth, MN for years and had a good idea of what clothing I would likely use, but I still felt a need to test my plan. Therefore, I was particularly dismayed by the warm winter we had for most of the time leading up to the race. The temperature finally dipped below zero the weekend before the race, and I took advantage of those few days. That allowed me to identify a new problem this year. My feet sweat a ton and then get cold. My feet sweating wasn't new. However, I haven't had an issue with feeling cold until now. I had to experiment with several sock options in my Wolfgars. None worked in isolation, so I tried adding charcoal chemical heaters. This seemed to solve the problem, but I had to hope this solution would hold up over the entire duration of the race. Three or four hours is hardly long enough to serve as a real test. What would happen to my wet socks 5 hours into the race? 8 hours? We were going to find out.

The other piece of gear that I adopted this winter is the Cold Avenger face mask. In the past, I found the slightly restricted breathing left me with a claustrophobic feeling. (I still feel that way in temps above -5). However, by and large that has changed and I have become a convert.

RACE WEEKEND

The forecast called for really cold weather, with temperature of -25 to -30 degrees at the start. Several friends have done this race in the past, namely Todd McFadden, Ron Williams, and Dave Schuneman. They proved to be amazing resources for all of my questions, and they all agreed the forecast is typically inaccurate. It will be colder out there than any projected temperatures, particularly in the lowland areas of the course. Veterans of the race tell you how unforgiving this landscape and course can be, along with the weather. It can be easy to dismiss

this as exaggeration. DON'T. Having finished the race in a "cold" year, I will tell you that the wise veterans are not exaggerating their tales. This race, in these conditions, does not tolerate mistakes. Mistakes, even minor ones, can have major consequences resulting in loss of fingers/toes from frostbite to hypothermia. People can and do lose digits to frostbite. I feel fortunate that despite making a few mistakes, I was able to avoid disaster.

To my surprise, on Monday morning it was only around 10 below zero outside. I dressed for the start. I chose wool liner sock, Defeet Woolie Boolie socks, and toe warmers inside my 45N Wolfgar boots. For the bottom half of my body, I donned Podiumwear Shorts (I feel that bibs in winter offer too much hassle to go the bathroom), a Craft wind brief (not for wind protection but for warmth), and Pearl Izumi Amfib pants. On top I wore a Smartwool 150 base layer with Smartwool arm warmers (I'm a big fan of wool arm warmers as a layer), a Specialized wool jersey (I wanted the 3 pockets), a Smartwool 250 1/4 zip, and my Mammut Ultimate Hoodie jacket. My head and face were covered with a Surly Buff, Cold Avenger mask, and 45N Stovepipe hat. Very light Smartwool gloves covered my hands inside my 45N Cobrafist pogies. I had a heavy fleece liner made for them so they are much warmer than the stock model, which allowed me to ride 90% of the race without gloves.

I had also practiced getting "sweaty" and then venting my jacket to dry my layers while riding. I know I sweat, so I practiced this often. Finishing dry was a goal of mine all winter, regardless of the outside temp. I was confident I could do this successfully with my layers, but I had to execute race strategy correctly as well.

I was concerned about being a bit overdressed and anticipated stopping relatively early to shed the 3/4 zip layer. As it turns out, I was only half correct. After fireworks and the "release the hounds" command, the race started! I planned to go a bit harder than "race effort" at the start to help me warm up. This would also help keep me out of a large pack. Though I am a really social person and LOVE to talk, I don't love riding in packs, in the dark with unfamiliar and nervous/excited riders. For the first hour, my average pace was around 10mph, which is beyond what I can hold for the duration this race. Somewhere around the time that I recognized this, we made the hard left turn onto the Arrowhead trail, only to be hit by a wave of cold. Whoa! Within minutes we all came to the same conclusion: -10 degrees at the start is a distant memory, and we will need to deal with the cold. Bike computers registered temperatures from -20 to -30 degrees. At that point, I was a bit wet but not concerned. The venting was working pretty well. I also decided to stick with that 1/4 zip wool layer a bit longer.

Two things happened to me on the first leg that served as warnings for the rest of the race. Within the first ten miles, I stopped to go to the bathroom. Shortly after my break, I noticed that I

felt cold from the waist down. My feet were kind of chilly, and my thighs felt cold. As anyone who rides with me often knows, I frequently stop for bathroom breaks in the first few hours of a ride, and that is just how it goes. About an hour after my first “nature break” I stopped for my second. When I tried to unzip my fly, I realized there was no need: it was already down! I had ridden for an hour in temps somewhere between -20 and -30 with my fly open and was wondering why my legs and feet felt cold. I am not proud of this absurd moment, but it was an important part of my day, as it forced me to focus and think smarter. Many veterans of winter ultras have told me: “When a problem arises, fix it now.” When my legs were cold, I should have assessed the situation right away. Fortunately, things improved. An hour later, I felt dry and warmer and was riding along at a comfortable and sustainable 8 mph or so.

I am currently nursing a shoulder injury so could not wear a hydration pack. This required me to change my hydration strategy weeks before the race. My plan included two 32oz Hydroflask bottles on my fork legs in Equinox bottle cozies (rated to -20). I tested this on the three very cold nights we had prior to the race and it worked successfully. I planned to use those two bottles to fill my 20oz Thermos bottle, which I would store upside down in a Revelate feedbag. (Side note: These are the Thermos bottles whose tops pop open. I highly recommend these for general winter rides of a few hours as they don't freeze if you keep the hinge dry, which is really easy). While the Thermos bottle is great for drinking, I did not anticipate the lid freezing so that I could not unscrew it and refill it. This had never happened to me, until it did at mile 25. I wasn't overly concerned and opened a charcoal hand warmer to add to the feedbag with the bottle. I drank directly from a Hydroflask and continued. Thirty minutes later, when I stopped to drink, the Thermos bottle was no longer frozen. Problem solved! I kept a hand warmer in the feedbag from that point on. I had several extra charcoal hand warmers with me, which I highly recommend. While they can't solve all your problems and shouldn't be relied upon for something major, they can really come in handy to get out of a jam or to prevent one.

I realized that thirty miles into the race I had had already experienced two issues. While not major problems, I took them seriously. Both of these could have been major problems if not addressed, and both issues likely would be major problems 12 hours later. I was lucky that these things happened early in the race. I was lucky that the sun was out. I was lucky that despite the cold, warmer temps were on the horizon. If these mistakes had happened at 2am, I am not sure they would have been resolved as easily or readily. The reality of the situation is that in temperatures of this nature, you don't get to make mistakes. Mistakes usually come with a high price tag—from frostbite to hypothermia. I was lucky. I adopted the mantra “When a problem arises, fix it now.” With that in my head, I made it the rest of the way to checkpoint one, The Gateway Store, without further incident.

The Gateway store is a great place. I did a decent job of not getting sucked in and overstaying my welcome, which is easy to do at the warm checkpoints. I have been told to resist the urge to

settle and move on. I did meet Joe Stiller here. What a positive force of nature he is! He was out in the parking lot giving words of encouragement to everyone who came in and out. I also saw my friend and fellow Duluthian, former course record holder Todd McFadden here. He was cheering racers on, as he was unable to race this year. (As a side note, my hat is off to him. His enthusiasm for this race is contagious and is a large part of why I was here. Despite being crushed by not being able to start, he turned that enthusiasm loose on the racers, encouraging everyone. He showed up at Gateway, Sheep Ranch Rd, Mel Georges, and Fortune Bay. Thanks, Todd!) Bolstered by words of encouragement from them, I headed out for checkpoint two, Mel Georges.

This leg was largely uneventful for me. A few miles outside of Gateway, around mile 40, I passed fellow Duluthian (and Women's race winner) Leah Gruhn adjusting some gear. I did not see another human being until Sheep Ranch Road at mile 53. The weather was cold enough that the race directors, for the first time, decided to set up a heated tent at this trail crossing. I saw Ken Kreuger, Todd, and Charly Tri setting up the tent and informed them I hadn't seen anyone in 20 miles or so. They chuckled and told me to "get used to it" as Kate Coward rode through. (I was confused when I saw Charly as I thought he was racing. I later learned he was sick and dropped out early. Sorry, Charly), I caught up to Kate, and we rode to Mel Georges together. For a fair amount of time, we also rode with Lindsay Gauld. They say you meet great people at the Arrowhead 135. I found that to be the case.

Throughout the 4 days I was there, I met great people. Kate and Lindsay were two of them. Both are certified badassess in my book. Last year, Kate did the "double" on foot. She ran/hiked from the finish to the start, then turned around and started the race back to the finish on foot. Badass. This year, she raced on a bike, a few short months after having a child. Badass. Lindsay is 70 years old and informed me on multiple occasions that "I'm old and don't care for pushing my bike up the monster hills anymore." That's cool Lindsay. I'm 43 and was quite concerned you were going to beat me the top. He too is a badass. Did I mention he is a former Olympian for Team Canada as well? Badass. What was I doing with them??? Seriously.

We finally made it to Mel Georges...sweet, sweet, Mel Georges. It turned out to be a disorganized train wreck for me. My plan entering the checkpoint was: open toe & hand warmers (I was using hand warmers in my pogies at this point and not wearing gloves), take bottles off bike, go in and find drop bag, order grilled cheese, fill bottles with new drink mix, put back on bike, restock food, get new socks, hat, ColdAvenger, eat grilled cheese, change socks, hat, ColdAvenger, use bathroom, leave. I figured it would all take 30 minutes at most.

None of it went down that way. I arrived and had to use the bathroom, definitely the indoors

bathroom. I talked to people in the house, sharing stories and waiting in line. After using the facilities, I realized 20 minutes had passed way too quickly. I went out to my bike to open hand/toe warmers and get my bottles, then came back inside to find my drop bag and mix bottles. Then I went back out and put them on my bike. I threw out trash and old food, went back in, got new food, then returned to the bike...Then it hit me: why am I walking around so much? And I realized I forgot to order my grilled cheese! I LOVE cheese and wanted one, so I went back in and ordered. Then it was back outside to get socks...seriously how many trips outside could I make? I changed and ate and was finally ready to leave. I picked up my bike and promptly dropped it, slamming the bottom bottle cage into my knee. The cage broke but was still functional. Seriously, how slow and clumsy could I be? I checked my hand warmers, only to find them as cold as can be. I had to dig out new hand warmers and open them for my pogies. I managed to roll out at last 65 minutes after arrival. Ugh.

Within the first mile I removed the hand warmers from my pogies to give them a shake to get them going. I launched one somewhere behind me into the snow. It was dark. The snow was white. The handwarmer was white. I needed to find it as I didn't have too many left and knew I was heading into the longest, toughest, and coldest part of this race or any ride I have ever done. I stopped and searched the trail for it. I managed to find it, only to kick it when I tried to pick it up. Seriously. WTF? I had to tell myself to get my act together. My hands were cold and getting colder with these hijinks.

My mind went back to my mantra: "When a problem arises, fix it now". I started the race wearing gloves that were now wet and useless because of sweat. As I was already stopped, I took this opportunity to bury those gloves in my bag and fish out my heavier gloves.

A second mantra came to mind. A good friend of mine, Chris McKernan, has a saying "Slow is smooth and smooth is fast". Yep. I was doing none of that. In my rush out of Mel Georges I was sloppy. My history of breaking bottle cages, being disorganized, slinging hand warmers along the trail...not good. It was time to be slow and smooth. Thanks for the advice Chris.

The leg from Mel Georges to Surly had me nervous for months. I do not mind climbing, but I am not a runner or hiker. I understood that there would be some hike-a-bike sections here, specifically, 41 hills that to my understanding aren't really rideable. As the miles started to pass I begin to notice two things. First, where are all these un-rideable hills? The realization was clear: at the end of this section. I never thought to ask that. Ok, cool, the last 20 or so miles heading into Surly were going to be tough.

The second thing I noticed is that it is amazing out here. The last person I saw was around mile 75. It was dark--very dark. The kind of dark that I do not think I have experienced before. It was also quiet--very quiet. The kind of quiet that I do not think I have experienced before. When taken together, the darkness and quiet create a kind of solitude that is hard to describe. At this point in the race, you are really remote, and you KNOW it. The sky was clear. Every star seems as if it is trying to stand out, calling for your attention.

It is quiet but not silent. You can hear the sound of your tires rolling over the snow. You can hear your breathing. But more than that, you can hear the wind blowing through leafless branches. You can hear the sound of trees cracking in the cold. You can hear the sounds of woodland creatures scuttling around off the trail. Quiet? Yes. Silent? No. Between the darkness and quiet, you almost feel as if you are the only human on the planet. It was surreal and awesome in a way that I am still trying to process.

Back to the race...somewhere around mile 90 my quiet solitude was interrupted by an upset stomach. My food was making me nauseous. In retrospect, I believe that I had too much food on the sweet end of the spectrum and not enough on the salty side. Every bite of food that I took became harder and harder to swallow.

This was not good. I needed to keep eating for two reasons: energy to make it to the Surly Checkpoint and to stay warm. While appreciating the wonders of nature, I noticed the temperature dropping again. It was getting cold. I needed to eat, so I did. By mile 95 I was choking down small bites of food every 15 minutes or so. I was eating larger portions on the half hour throughout the race prior to this. I knew that my caloric consumption was not adequate, but I was doing the best that I could and hoped it would be enough. My drink had calories, but without knowing what lay ahead I did not want to run out of fluid. I conserved that while closely watching my miles.

At this point I was pushing my bike up hills. In all honesty, I can't believe how steep these hills are. For someone who doesn't enjoy running and isn't a hiker, surprisingly I did not mind the pushing at this point. It allowed me to stretch my legs and force food into my system while walking at a slow pace with a 65lb bike.

Everyone talks about pushing uphill at the Arrowhead 135, rightfully so. The hills are massive. However, what goes up, must come down. The descents are equally insane. I love mountain biking and ripping downhill. This was different. It is a unique scenario to be biking down a hill

that you cannot see the bottom of, at an incredibly fast pace, on snow, in the dark. While that was fun at first, I decide to back off. This point in the race is neither the place nor the time for a crash.

At the bottom of one of the hills I saw two sets of red blinking lights in front of me. People! I quickly decided this was good. I was forcing down food, afraid of bonking. I was unsure what lay ahead, other than what must be the hardest 15 miles of the race. It was getting colder. This was most certainly a good time to run into others. As I approached, I recognized fellow Duluthians Leah Gruhn and Jere Mohr. That was a huge boost! Leah and Jere are two of the most positive and inspiring people I know. Being at a low spot in my race, I couldn't have been happier to encounter this amazing couple. To further the good news, Leah had Tums! Thanks Leah!

The three of us rode and pushed our way to the Surly Checkpoint together. Looking back, I am really grateful for their company. If I had been alone for miles 95-111 with my rapidly deteriorating gut, I am unsure how my day would have played out. It is easier to force yourself to eat when you are with others. It is easier to "suffer" another push up an absurdly large hill in the company of others doing the same. It easier to do both things after a few Tums. The third leg of the Arrowhead 135 is no joke. It is cold, remote, dark, and by far the toughest terrain I have ever biked/hiked. There is little room for error here. I had to keep eating. I had to keep moving. I had to stay warm. The tent at the Surly Checkpoint was a welcome site.

At this point, I parted ways with my friends. Leah didn't want to stop at all (she went on to win the Women's race!!). Jere put some toe warmers in and headed out after her. I had a bit more to do. It was getting colder, and I had not changed since the morning. I wanted to add some long wool underwear, another Smartwool 3/4 zip, and my Smartwool puffy vest. My plan was to fill water, move food around, change, and leave. 20-30 minutes max. Right? I wish...

The water and food parts worked out great. My bike was ready to go in 5 mins. I dug out my change of clothes and headed into the tent to find a few other people and a wood stove. So far, "slow is smooth and smooth is fast" was working. I grabbed a seat and changed my socks, then stood up to put on my long underwear. SHIT!! Who the hell stands up on snow covered carpet in fresh socks? This guy. Now my last pair of socks was wet. (I was changing because my current socks were also wet.) I finished changing, then spent some time with my feet next to the stove to try to dry out my socks. After what seemed like just a few minutes but must have been longer, I realized this was not going to work in an acceptable timeframe. This brought up the last mantra of the day. Todd McFadden's wife, Diana, who is much smarter than the two of us, has a saying. "If you're dumb enough to get into trouble, you better be smart enough to get out." I was dumb. Now it was time to be smarter. I did the math. If I put in toe warmers now they

should get me to the finish in about 3 hours. I had two extra sets. I figured I would likely have to do more hiking and running to keep my toes from freezing. Oh well. I made this mess, but that should be enough to make it to the finish.

I put my boots and jacket back on, grabbed my gloves from the shelf on the stove where people were drying out gear, and...SHIT!! (I believe those are the only two times I swore during the entire event, which is good for me.) My gloves had been moved a bit too close to the really hot part of the stove and the fingertips of one glove burned off. It was below zero outside, and I had the choice of fingerless or wet/frozen/buried in my pack gloves for the rest of the ride.

I went to my bike and dug out my wet and now frozen solid gloves from this morning. I reentered the tent to hold them by the stove. After what seemed like 5 minutes but again must have been much longer, I realized this is not going to work in an acceptable time frame. I put those gloves in my back jersey pockets to keep them warm and possibly dry a bit. I grabbed my now fingerless gloves and put them in my pogies along with some handwarmers and headed out bare-handed, hoping I would not have a mechanical problem. If things went smoothly, I shouldn't need gloves the rest of the way. To be safe, I moved a set of wool mittens and my last set of handwarmers to the end of my bag in case of emergency and set out for the last 25 miles.

I left the Surly checkpoint an hour and twelve minutes after I arrived. Ugh.

The fourth leg of the Arrowhead is interesting. You have Wakemup Mountain within the first mile or so, which is the last hike-a-bike section. Then you have a long gradual (think 1% grade) ascent to the finish at Fortune Bay Casino. The majority of this section is through a lowland swamp. It is amazingly beautiful at night. Without the large pine trees to block the view, the sky is amazing to behold. It would, perhaps, in other circumstances, be quite easy to become distracted by the sheer power of that sky.

That was not my reality. Lowland swamps, while offering great views of constellations, also offer something else. They are cold. Really really cold. There is nothing to block the wind, and as all Arrowhead 135 vets will tell you, the lowland areas are always colder than the forecast. I did not have a thermometer but have been told the temperature was somewhere between -20 and -30.

Things started to get real.

Miles 115 to 125, while beautiful, were miserable for me. The effect of the Tums had worn off, and my stomach was much worse than before. During that ten mile stretch I vomited three to four times? I am really not sure how many times, but that seems right. My still wet feet got cold early, really cold, the dangerous kind of cold, the kind of cold where I knew I can't let them begin to hurt or I would be dancing with frostbitten toes.

"When a problem arises, fix it now" and "If you're dumb enough to get into trouble, be smart enough to get out" entered my mind. This was not the time to be distracted. Distractions can lead to mistakes. Mistakes can lead to bonking and frostbitten toes. They can also lead to hypothermia. I had to have a plan and stick to it. To keep my feet warm, I had to walk my bike and exaggerate my ankle motion to move my toes. When that didn't work, it was time to jog. Whoa! I do hate running. I hate it more with an upset stomach and frozen toes. I did start to warm up. Wait! Not too warm. I did not want to sweat and get wet; my core layers couldn't get wet. Wet clothing gets cold fast, and outer layers can even freeze in these temperatures, leading to hypothermia. I had 2-3 hours more of this to go. That was plenty of time to bonk, get sweaty, and get hypothermia and frosbite.

Those 10 miles were all hands on deck focus for me. I would ride about a mile, cooling down, then run about 100 yards to bring my feet back. As my core warmed up, it was back on the bike to spin and cool down (I did a nice job of not sweating here). All along the way the vomiting and force feeding myself more food (hoping it would stay down) continued.

Finally mile 125 arrived. 10 miles to go. At my pace I figured that should be less than 90 minutes and closer to an hour. I had been keeping a really good inventory of my drink mix situation. I knew that I had about 600 calories in my remaining fluid. The drink mix was not bothering my stomach. Finally, I felt I could stop eating and could drink my way to the finish line.

Now that I was done eating, miles 125-130 weren't as bad. I was still running some every mile or so, but it was much more tolerable to do. Around mile 130 I saw a trail sign. I knew this sign! On Saturday, on our way to the start, Todd McFadden, Dan Luebke, and I rode a few miles to spin our legs out from Fortune Bay. I knew that I was within 5 miles of the finish! Whatever energy I had left went into the pedals. I think I only ran once during that time. I was "hammering" on the bike. (I was probably riding a whopping 10 miles per hour as I am exhausted and close to bonking, but don't judge!) I was no longer concerned about sweating. I just wanted to be done. I could make it from here, and I knew it.

About a mile from the finish I ran into Leah and Jere again. I yelled words of encouragement to them as I passed, and they yelled something back. I couldn't hear it. Later, I reflected on that; I should have tried harder. I hoped they didn't need something! It would have unacceptable if I missed a request or didn't hear about a problem.

Finally, 22 hours and 6 minutes after starting I crossed the finish line. Within a minute Todd was there to congratulate me and snap a few pics. It was 5:00 am. I honestly can't believe he was there. Thanks for all of your help and support, Todd.

MY BOTTOM LINE

Arrowhead 135 is an amazing event. It is an honest effort in a harsh unforgiving environment. There is very little room for error, and if an error is made, it must be corrected quickly and efficiently. If you wait too long to deal with problems, you will likely encounter consequences that you do not want to pay.

On the other hand, it is a beautiful event. There are few places as scenic and peaceful. The rewards of the Arrowhead 135 are great, both the internal sense of accomplishment and experience of the serene wonders of the Northwoods.