

Cary Johnson race report

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 15 September 2020 13:45 -

“In or out?”, I ask Jeff Rock as I go through the keep toss decisions for items in my sled bag that are over and above the required gear. “It’s better to have it with you than wish you did” he quips. It’s the night before the January 2020 Arrowhead 135 mile race on bike, ski, or foot that starts at 7 a.m. in International Falls, Minnesota and ends near Tower at the Fortune Bay Casino on Lake Vermillion with a cutoff of 60 hours. Jeff is an Arrowhead veteran about to make his seventh start and because of significant knee issues, he’ll be skiing this year instead of going on foot. The marine in him won’t let him take a pass on getting to the starting line. Arrowhead seems to be one of those really difficult events that pulls hard on the soul to keep coming back for more. Being a rookie for this race, I set aside some clothes and an extra pair of shoes I’m thinking I won’t need, but will wait until morning to make a final plan. With only three checkpoints including a single drop point for food only, I better have what I need in my sled. A simple mistake or a seemingly small problem could ultimately end my race. It is also why there is a clear distinction between veterans and rookies at Arrowhead.

The next morning as thoughts of all the things that might happen go through my head, I add the rookie indecision pile to the sled bag – a few extra pounds in the sled I’ll be pulling for 135 miles doesn’t seem like much at the moment. The forecast doesn’t look threatening, nothing like one year back when the polar vortex had temperatures below minus 40, but never fully trust a forecast in northern Minnesota. With a late January start on the Minnesota Canadian border, the somewhat sinister goal is to maximize the likelihood of an arctic chill and maybe high winds with a bonus of fresh snow to slowly wear you down to nothing. Arrowhead has a well deserved reputation and I hope all the training and preparation are enough to get me to the finish.

We hit the start area just before the race begins. I walk out of the check-in only minutes before the fireworks go off indicating it’s show time. I scramble to make some final adjustments, get my red LED lights front and back blinking, which they must do 24/7 for the duration of the race, and join the pack when they “release the hounds” as the competitors on foot cross the starting line behind those on bike and then skis. Since we will be on the Arrowhead Snowmobile Trail, the lights are mandatory and intended to prevent competitors from being taken out by a snowmobile.

The first section out of International Falls is relatively flat and everyone settles into a strong steady pace. I await John Storkamp, four time winner in his 15th Arrowhead, who traditionally competes with Chris Scotch to see who can start last before taking the trail in his fast and efficient power hike that allows him to work his way towards the front group rather quickly. I hear John’s voice as he approaches and says “you look like an Arrowhead veteran.” He is very kind! He also gave me the opportunity to pick his brain over dinner back in November and that really helped me dial in my logistics and a general race plan. Each year at Arrowhead can be a

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whole new experience so being prepared to adapt to what mother nature brings is an essential element. I chat with Ben Trok of Duluth who is also doing his first Arrowhead and already sporting a nice frosty beard. I share with him the general pace stats for each section as he had only done some rough calculations on overall pace. A couple minutes later, his speed picks up considerably, possibly after learning we have been traveling just a bit faster than median pace, and before long he is out of view and off towards a great finish.

There is now a light snow coming down and, with very little wind, the northern woods is how I always like to envision it with the falling white flakes backed by a green wall of spruce and balsam fir intermixed with birch and aspen. With such positive thoughts, it must be early in the race!

I enter a section where the snowmobile trail becomes dual purpose with a temporary winter logging road on the left and snowmobile trail on the right. It isn't terrible, but the footing is a little frustrating not being able to pick a consistent line for the sled. Those who did the race with plenty of fresh snow in years past likely don't notice the minor inconvenience. "Didn't even need to pull out the showshoes," they might say. I do have snowshoes in my sled in the event they are needed.

At 5:15 p.m. with the light starting to fade, I arrive at the first checkpoint at the Gateway Store feeling the 36.8 miles in my legs, but pretty good overall. I immediately hit the chili and grab a cup of coffee. It still feels great to get off the feet and have warm food and drink. After refilling my water in the store sink, I venture out into what is now the dark night with headlamp shining bright. Less than 100 miles to go.

I begin to encounter occasional hills as I settle in for the 35 mile haul through the night and jockey back and forth with various other folks before eventually syncing up with Terry Fletcher from Milwaukee. He is doing the race with his brother who is not far behind us. We settle into a good pace with similar energy levels and stay together for a couple hours. My energy level fades just before we hit the one mile Elephant Lake crossing, but being so close to checkpoint, I go silent, dig deeper and hang with Terry to the Mel Georges resort on the opposite shore where we arrive still in darkness at 6 am. It is a very welcome site with a number of sleds parked outside the cabin.

Once inside I sit down and the wonderful volunteers bless me with a bowl of soup, grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of chocolate milk. I'm totally exhausted so sitting in this warm

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cabin having a good meal with 71 miles behind me is beyond awesome! The cabin is busy with competitors coming and going and the volunteers busily tending to their needs. Most try to get some rest here and there are a few beds and floor space in the loft of the cabin. I am fortunate and find an open bed, set my phone alarm for 2 hours and crash pretty quickly. I awake after an hour and a half and don't feel like I'm going to get back to sleep so get up, tape up a toe that's started to annoy me, refill water, eat a very tasty donut with another cup of coffee and say good bye to what is easily the coziest part of this Arrowhead race. I understand why this can be a common drop point.

I feel relatively refreshed leaving Mel Georges at 9 a.m., relatively being the key word, as day two of my race unfolds. It's a good thing as I have the difficult 40 mile stretch to the Surly checkpoint. These long stretches of wilderness with no support, most of it alone, are a big part of what drew me to Arrowhead. Hopes are you planned well for what might unfold in your race and are actually able to execute that plan when the body and mind are being pushed to new limits. That can be a challenge in this winter wonderland. The wolves have not yet serenaded me. I wish they would – that would be extra special. They are clever and remain hidden though I wonder if they are watching. I would gladly give them my remaining beef sticks as they taste horrible now and I can't even force one down.

I have heard about the big hills to come somewhere before the 100 mile mark and ready my mind for the inevitable up, down, up, down on endless repeat. I meet up with Terry's brother Jessie and we also spend a couple hours together on the trail and eventually enter the hilliest section of the race. I start this endless hill section with a bit of energy, but each hill takes an incremental toll on my body and mind. At each hill I sarcastically tell myself out loud "oh good, another hill, just what I was hoping for." The hills are where the sled really makes an appearance and these were fairly long and steep. I try to never stop in the middle of a hill and shut my brain off until my legs have me at the top and the quads are burning. The flip side is I was getting very adept at sledding the downhills. My shoddy steering from yesterday is transformed into a finely tuned system that maximizes trail distance while sitting on my gear bag. It does get hard to just stand up from the sled at the bottom of a hill as the body still vividly remembers the last climb. When I appear to be through the worst of the hills and the terrain starts to level out, I assess the situation and contemplate a short stop at the last check point a few miles ahead, maybe slam some caffeine pills, and head for the finish 24 miles away. Funny how fast things can change. In those last few relatively flat miles into Surly, I start to drag to a new low point and my earlier plan is unraveling quickly. Physical fatigue and sleep deprivation are getting strong footing in my mind. I am absolutely dead on my feet.

I hit the mandatory Surly check-in at 111 miles just after midnight and make my way into the tent with a very inviting wood stove where I park a chair as close as possible to the warmth while I collect my thoughts. Continuing on without a rest doesn't seem like an option and a

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bivvy in the sleeping bag is winning out. I arrived at Surly with another runner who had pushed through this checkpoint last year and that experience also had him leaning towards a bivvy. After a 15 minute zombie stare at the wood stove knowing competitors are disqualified if they try to sleep in the tent, I venture out and down the trail a bit to an area cleared of deep snow where I could spread out my pad, bivvy sack, and sleeping bag. I crawl in and set my alarm for an hour and a half later.

I admit to hitting snooze once not wanting to leave the undeniable comfort of my sleeping bag, but ultimately crawl out, repack my sled, tape a couple more toes that are in pretty rough shape, fill my water bladder and head toward the finish. This rest did not rejuvenate me like Mel Georges, but I'm fairly sure it prevented the wheels from coming completely off had I tried to push through. In warmer weather, there would be little risk in continuing on as you can simply crash when you need to. On a cold winter night the rules are much different. Though saturated with fatigue, I am moving and at least feel awake. For me, it was the right decision.

My thoughts get really dark halfway through the last stretch. "I never want to race again – not any distance! Why would anyone ever want to do this type of thing? This is a game of fools!". Here I am on flat ground with the sled gliding nicely and each step is a major effort. I am still trying to keep hydrating and filling my stomach with Reeses, chocolate chip cookies, mixed nuts, and other junk food to maintain a minimum level of much needed calories. I did have to quit the beef sticks yesterday. Hard to believe Reeses are now hard to choke down and for sure I am eating less than yesterday. Because of that, I am also having trouble keeping my hands warm without using the big mits. I've also added an extra jacket.

With about eight miles to go and having only passed one runner since Surly, I round the corner to another competitor and sled in the distance. As I approach I can see it is Bonnie Busch who not only has finished Arrowhead twice before, she has also finished Badwater four times not to mention a very long list of other tough ultras. Someone is at the race filming her. She is in high spirits and we compare estimates on miles to the finish. "Is there anything you need" she asks. It is a statement of the comradery that exists in the ultra world. Bonnie had gone 127 hard earned miles over two days and two nights and was still reaching out to help a fellow competitor. I feed off her positive energy and suddenly have a new mental reservoir to draw on. I pick up my pace and become determined to close the eight miles. The pain is certainly there, but not substantially changed by pushing a bit harder. I contemplate all that I have sacrificed in training and in the race to this point – what a journey. My first, second, and third goals were to finish and the odds are looking to be in my favor.

Eventually I can see the Fortune Bay Casino and approach a couple guys who instruct me on

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the path around to the back and the finish. I make my way up the last rise and humbly cross the line and come to a stop. 135 miles for me and my sled in 52 hours and 10 minutes well ahead of the 60 hour cutoff. That put me at 33rd out of the 71 who started on foot. 66% of the starters finished. Race directors Ken and Jackie Krueger have pulled off another great race with many more individual Arrowhead stories to be told and retold in the years to come.

For the veterans this may go down as a year mother nature didn't unleash her biggest punches of 40 below zero temperatures or heavy snowfall often reserved for this race, but there are no easy years. Arrowhead has been ranked one of the 50 toughest races in the world. In the best of conditions, Arrowhead is a very tough race and an event that really challenges the body and mind to push well past the normal barriers that exist in our day to day life. I feel I have done that. The long term finishing rate on foot is around 44% so just signing up is no guarantee of anything other than the opportunity to engage in a lengthy and mostly solitary battle with a Minnesota winter and your own will to persevere.