

The author writes Sir Earnest Shackelton a letter in which he attempts to use a personal narrative regarding the 2022 Arrowhead 135 as a platform from which to impress upon the famed polar adventurer the need to accept kicksledding as a legitimate form of manly polar travel, coupled with the hope of gaining favor within the pantheon of DBD Society, once in the afterlife-

Dear Sir Ernest, I hope all is well. Please give both Sir Mallory and Sir Scott my best regards. Another Arrowhead 135 successfully completed. While some would consider pushing a gear-laden wooden kicksled for 135 miles through the wilderness in the depths of winter something to celebrate, for your obsequious student it was just another day out trying to live up to your credo. Although able to cast away discomfort with concentrated intellectual will power, physically my feet did take a serious pounding, so I am a bit hobbled for the near term. In fact, I must admit to shedding a solitary tear during the process of removing my blood soaked socks, as panels of destroyed meaty skin came off connected to my socks. I dare say, if I recall correctly, Peary had the same issue and was none the worse for wear. Of course, I quickly gathered myself, making light of the affair, even as bystanders gasped in horror. The following is a brief synopsis of the endeavor with the goal being to impress upon you the need to consider kicksledding on par with man-hauling for future polar expeditions.

Jim Reed (a seasoned man of high moral caliber, a retired firefighter of unquestioned courage, as well as a pleasant stoic) and I traveled up to International Falls, Minnesota on the day before the start of the fabled Arrowhead 135 race. Jim is also endowed with an old but reliable diesel engine that can go the distance as demonstrated by his many lofty achievements within the realm of endurance endeavors. I know that he has won the Arrowhead and has also completed the course using all three modes of transport. Note: Please consider Mr. Reed for permanent induction at the next DBD Society meeting. We stayed at a local motor-inn, where we were greeted by a ruddy, grinning desk manager. Seemingly, a likable old fellow, albeit cursed with a rather nefarious sense of awkward humor. You know the type; his initial comment was a lewd reference to the specific anatomically distinguishing traits associated with two handsome younger female competitors that were ahead of us at the registry.

For me, the best aspects of these kinds of challenges are the preparation, planning, and the reuniting with like minded folks. Jim and I completed two overnight training sessions to prepare for this particular event. The first one was up on the demanding Northshore Trail (which would make for a great race course- more remote, hillier, and longer than the Arrowhead Trail) and the second was on segments of the trail systems out of Moose Lake, Minnesota.

At the race meeting that night we were able to meet up with a few old friends and acquaintances although Covid protocols did cast a muted net over the festivities. Next year things will hopefully be back to normal. It's always great fanfare to visit with some of the veteran lions of the event, including Lindsay Gauld, David Pramann, Todd McFadden, Chuck Linder, John Storkamp, Scott Hoberg, Leah Gruhn, Jere Mohr and Mark Scotch. Also, it's always entertaining to see all the shiny new and outrageously expensive gear that people are using. The coolest thing that I saw by far was the masterpiece titanium, extra-long bike Don Wood was riding. He even let me ride it around the parking lot. The stylistic, yet highly functional frame and fork were built by Professor Steve McGuire of Iowa. The gracious hosts, Ken and Jackie Krueger, do such a topnotch job on this event. So impressive, for they really have made this into a world class event attracting competitors from near and far.

The morning of the race was relatively warm, the trail moderately soft, and yet I was able to get a good glide from my kicks. The start was exciting but thankfully uneventful, with Jim kicking off in a cloud of snow dust with the top runners. He would go on to dominate the crowded and very competitive Kicksled Category, (to be honest, there were actually only three of us. A commentary on the sad state of affairs for the Kicksled Community). In the spirit of full disclosure and comparison, Jim beat me by fifteen hours while the other guy dropped out early in the game. The trail is mostly flat from the start to the first checkpoint, some thirty-seven miles out. At the first checkpoint I tried to patch up blisters that were already starting to form on various areas on my feet and heels. My last minute decision to go as light as possible was starting to pay dividends if one is willing to destroy ones feet to save a couple pounds of gear. A sympathetic gal working at the Gateway was very kind in supplying me with some padding and duct tape. I could tell from her non-verbals that she thought me a fool, yet she treated me with undeserved dignity. I was not

lost to the fact that there is something inherently disturbing when old men mess with their feet in public.

Thus fortified with a bowl of delicious goulash and a tape job, I moved out and away from the first checkpoint a happy kicker and yet in the back of my mind I knew that with the onset of darkness, the demons would be gathering to harass even the most ardent of Arrowhead competitors. Yet for the time being I felt pretty good. I was traveling at about the same speed as an amicable engineer from Alabama. I enjoyed his company. Perhaps all my dedicated training was paying off.

A few days prior, while watching one of the preOlympic *“Up close and personal”* interviews that NBC does to get us all fired up to watch the Olympics (along with all the syrupy ads about how great we all are, especially if we buy lots of stuff from Walmart and Toyota), the amazing gold medalist Jesse Diggins described how early in her maturation she tried many sports, ultimately coming to the realization that she was *“built just right for xc skiing.”* I am built just right for drinking beer and consuming frozen pizzas, but I also really enjoy the motion involved with kicksledding. Kicksledding is a lot like classical cross country skiing, but without any of the skills or finesse needed. Just like a scooter is perfect for that awkward, pudgy kid that does not possess the athleticism, is devoid of agility, nor has the confidence to use a skateboard. The kicksled is perfect for a guy like me that has no balance, no confidence, and plagued with worn out hip and knee joints. Yes, suited perfectly for the likes of me for in the propelling of the contraption there exists a combination of the thrill and efficacy associated with the cross country ski “kick and glide” along with the stable utility of pushing a loaded shopping cart. In fact, I did some of my best training while kicking my way through the local Target super-store. My daughter says that a kicksledder is like cross country skier equipped with training wheels. So basically what I am trying to articulate is that within the context of the Arrowhead 135, the Kicksled Category (which is a subset to the Foot Category) is the perfect division for an old guy who is too much of a klutz to cross country ski the course, not fit enough to actually run it, and is also too cheap this year to get his snow bike fixed up to be race-ready. Now you may be thinking, *“What about Jim? He’s no slouch and he’s on a kick sled.”* Jim would be the first to admit that he elected to use a kicksled this year because he was not in good enough shape to be seriously competitive on *“foot.”* Jim still races, while I try and survive. Also you may be thinking, *“He’s going to offend the kicksledding community!”* Rest

assured that while there are some who dabble, there is no long distance racing kicksled community other than Jim, Mike Stattelman, and me. By the way Mike Stattelman is the creator of the vast majority of kicksleds that have successfully completed the Arrowhead, which I'd wager is about three or four. Note: Mike made a beautiful one for me. In fact, the case can be made that some race organizers are rather animus towards kick-sledders. I remember, many years ago, being rebuked by Tuscobia's management when I asked to be allowed to use my kicksled in their event. They were apparently worried that the kicksledders would overwhelm the other racers, which conjures a very funny image in my head. In any event, I still feel the sting of that rejection. I might just plead my case to them next season or better yet get a team of lawyer and bring a lawsuit. This kind of snubbing has to stop! But I digress.

Once the thrill of my respite at the Gateway subsided, so began the long long journey into the depths of despair. The realization that I was supposed to move this thing from Point A (Gateway) to Point B (Fortune Bay Casino), that the gap betwixt these two points is nearly one hundred miles, forced a dark rumination that exerted an ever heavier cognitive weight to bear with the slow passage of time. I know it's a cliché, but it really is a mental thing for most of the competitors at the Arrowhead. The vast majority who start the race have the physical attributes to go the full distance. I kept trying to suppress the following sentiments, *"most bikers can knock this thing out within a day, the runners are super fit, tireless crazies, the skiers are other worldly, but I am a sensitive undertrained senior citizen with clearly defined limitations, both physical and mental. I may or may not have the capacity to finish within the allowed the timeframe. I am getting too old for this!"* It's worthwhile to mention a funny observation posed by one of the classical skiers, as we conversed on the second day, a guy that was moving, like me, in other words like a snail, he confided, *"At this point in the race I think its fair to say that we all begin to develop an irrational hatred of the bikers."*

As the darkness enveloped me I moved slowly, then slower, and became more pathetic, more hideous, more self-loathing. I was now limping from the sore feet and a rubbed raw private area. The dreaded chafing! That is all I have to say about that for I know you know what's involved. Yet, I tried to keep the positive vibes slightly out ahead of the building negativity. Fundamentally straining to keep going for as long as possible because I knew that if I bivied too soon I'd get too far behind that ticking clock. It

does make it much easier if one is concerned only with finishing within the time constraints. Age forces humility. The hard truth is that I simply cannot go anymore without regular sleep. I was never good at going without sleep and I probably did it too many times in my youth, but now I just can't go go go to total failure, I need to stop and rest after about eighteen hours tops, twenty hours maximum. Thus, my plan was to try and go for that first day for seventeen hours or until around midnight then bivy for five hours. Yet just after that road crossing that has something to do with Sheep. Is it Sheep Run road? Or Sheep Shearing Road? Maybe Count Sheep to Sleep Road? I spied a fresh snowshoe trail that led off the snowmobile trail. I parked the kicksled and followed it. It led away from the trail a few hundred feet to a stamped out area that provided some shelter from the gaining wind. It was an ideal bivy sight. It was 10:30 p.m. I bivied there for five hours and was able to get some good sleep in and then at 3:30 a.m. I packed up and hit the trail. It's amazing what several hours of sleep can do for one's perspective.

Refreshed, sporting a new and improved outlook, and a renewed appreciation for the various lines of the classic Robert Frost poem that someone had cleverly posted at various points along the trail. I marched onward like a seasoned, but weary soldier unsure of his final fate, only assured of three things, "*The woods are lovely, dark and deep, But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep.*" "*The promises to keep*" came to refer to my students at school of whom I am guilty of often embellishing my personal trials and tribulations. In many ways teaching is a performative art and I am the consummate "*ham.*" Recently, in discussions with my students on this subject, I made lofty declarations, even going so far as to compare myself with the fair and noble King Duncan (of Macbeth infamy), when regaling them concerning my quest for magnanimity, chivalry, and ultimate success at the Arrowhead. In other words, at school I had made a big deal about this thing and how I was going to finish it, even with a newly installed faux hip. The thought of facing them in-defeat was a driving force in my resolve to complete the course. In short, I had "*promises to keep.*"

As I recall the sunrise was muted on the second day as it was cloudy and not very cold. I surmised, given my five hour repose, that I was far back in terms of my place within the rest of the field of mostly walkers and two or three skiers (at this point). This initial conclusion was made evident by the rough shape that the trail was in. It looked like a herd of cattle had made

their way ahead of me. It was slow going all day, but by late afternoon the sun came out, the wind really picked up, and the temperature started to drop. The result was a hardened trail, making for a better kick and glide, but at the same time a significant wind chill made things interesting providing a sense of foreboding.

I pulled into Melgeorge just around 8:00 a.m. and was received by angels on earth. These are the nicest people on earth. As two volunteers scurried around in the kitchen creating life-worth living grilled cheese sandwiches and wild rice soup, a Good Samaritan went to work on my battered feet. It is noteworthy that he had just finished bandaging up another fellow before I arrived. I haphazardly mentioned that I was low on AAA batteries because I have been forced to rely solely on my little head light when my expensive full-on “adventure” Nightrider had abruptly failed early on and before I knew it, a gentlemen volunteer produced the needed batteries. When I tried to pay him, he replied with a saintly whimsical wink, *“I won’t give them to you, if you try to pay me.”* When I subtly, awkwardly conveyed the rather private issue of male chafing to a fellow participant, he immediately produced a small tube of Brave Soldier Skin protectant and handed it to me. I thanked him profusely but indicated that I was not ready at this early stage of our relationship to share in his personal stash of skin ointments. He laughed and assured me that it was an unopened tube and that he had extra to spare. God bless him. This sums up my collective experiences at the halfway checkpoints over the thirteen times I have shown up on its doorstep. It is a tough, rolling, and soft frustrating section getting to the cabin which leaves a guy both frenzied and exhausted. Then the second you walk into that warm room, the volunteers do their best to make you feel welcomed and supported. I don’t know where Ken and Jackie find these people, but if everybody was like them, the world would be a much, much better place. Maybe they just find folks that are just like themselves.

As is always the case, I left Melgeorge with a good disposition fortified (or maybe a better term is “steeled”), for the seemingly endless number of steep hills that awaits the intrepid racers. For those who are able to leave the humanity and associated creature comforts of Melgeorge’s, the Rubicon has been crossed. Replenish and then get yourself away from Melgeorge’s and don’t look back, don’t second guess, commit and move on. Although no one has ever asked, if an aging, slightly overweight, sensitive person were to ask me what the secret is to finishing the Arrowhead 135 on a kicksled, I would say, *“First of all don’t stay at Melgeorges for more than a*

couple hours. The simple truth is that people let their guard down, they lose their edge when they get to Melgeorges and for many, it's too hard to restart."

I fought the big hills and valleys (that distinguishes, so dramatically, the second half of the route from the first half), until around midnight and then bivied in the second shelter out from Melgeorge. The one that is up high and full of rocks. Like the night before, I set my alarm to allow for five hours of repose. By this time I had really come to fully appreciate how stupid I have been to rely on a single pair of boots and socks. I am not going to go into detail about the rationale behind my decision to bring only one set of footwear other than to say that it was based on faulty reasoning. In any event, my feet were in rough shape, swollen and bleeding. A throbbing ache from my blistered and bruised feet prevented any serious slumber, but the mere act of non-movement was a celebration unto itself and despite my rebellious feet, I was somehow comforted by the rather morose observation by the American "self-help" writer/speaker, Denis Waitley, *"I had the blues because I have no shoes, until upon the street, I met a man that had no feet,"* I was a happy camper. For a while, I stared up at the stars and felt a great sense of calm contentment, blessed really. I thought to myself, *"What a wonderful world."* At 5:00 a.m. I was up fast, partly because I was worried that I would run out of time if I dallied and partly because it was cold out. In fact, it was easy to pack up quickly, because the temperature had really dropped, I wanted to get moving so as to warm up. I estimate that it was around fifteen below (for comparison it was officially twelve below at the Surly checkpoint several hours later).

The constant climbs and descents forced me to concentrate so I didn't mind the march to the Surly checkpoint. I even made pretty good time, although the below zero temperatures made kicking and gliding a forlorn effort, so it would be pushing for the rest of the way. As I left the Surly checkpoint I was treated to a beautiful, hopeful sunrise. At this point I knew I would make it to the finish line, but I also knew before the end I'd have to endure those last twenty miles that for many represent a kind of mind-numbing exercise in facing up to the futility of man's brief and absurd existence on earth. To quote from King's treatise on Camus and the Problem of Absurdity, *"Absurdism arises out of the tension between our desire for order, meaning and happiness and, on the other hand, the indifferent natural universe's refusal to provide that."*

Such is the feeling one is confronted with as he or she begins the last twenty miles of the Arrowhead Trail. It is mostly flat (although it feels like one is slowly gaining elevation), mostly straight, and devoid of anything of interest, and seems to go on and on forever. In the subzero temps, try as one might, the committed kicksledder runs up against the natural universe's refusal to allow one to kick the sled forward. So one is relegated to forwarding the sled in a fashion that imitates pushing a loaded shopping cart up an endless aisle of a deserted, albeit massive suburban "super mega-store" lined on both sides with nondescript cans of beans, dietary fiber supplements, laundry detergent, sugar-infested cereals, and the like. Due in large part to exhaustion, the kicksledder begins to lose his mind. He is making less than three miles an hour now, so he tries to steel himself for nearly seven more hours of this. He tries to hum a comforting song for some relief, but Dylan's "*Like a Rolling Stone*," is all he can surmise or contemplate. "Now you don't talk so loud. Now you don't seem so proud. About having to be scrounging your next meal. How does it feel, how does it feel? To be without a home. Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone. With no direction..." Over and over again it played in his frazzled head as I trudged on in slow motion.

The good news is that finally I made it to Fortune Bay Casino with over two hours to spare. The bad news is that I could not scare up a beer until I got home. Such is the complicated bittersweet Joy of Kicksledding the Arrowhead 135.

Your humble servant,
Charlie