

IDITAROD TRAIL

Aliy Zirkle's Journal of the 2014 Race



Two Rivers, Alaska

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Part One – Iditarod Start to Rainy Pass



Allen and our amazing team of SP Kennel dogs dug deep into their physical and mental reserves and pulled off an amazing and record-shattering win on the Yukon Quest on February 10th. This was exactly 18 days before the start of the Iditarod.

Many racers and spectators claimed this was one of the toughest races in the Yukon Quest's history. There had been an over abundant number of trail hazards, open rivers, bone chilling temperatures and incredible competition. In the end, there was one truly competitive team left standing, literally, and it was ours.

There was tremendous drama at the end of the Yukon Quest as mushers sent S.O.S. signals from the trail, were rescued and even medivaced from the race. The media made a huge deal of Allen's relatively *clean* race. Why didn't he have a hard time out there too? With his wry sense of humor, that sometimes eludes folks, Allen quietly suggested that he had won because he had taken "the easy trail".

This comment really made me smile. Allen and I often joke about how difficult our lifestyle can be. It's better to joke about it than cry about it. The reality is: we have chosen this lifestyle. No one forces us to live this life. So, to complain about the difficulties, the perils or the challenging happenstances that we find ourselves in, seems ridiculous. Thus our motto has always been: 'Nothing is Easy.' We live every day thinking that the next will be more challenging.

The Start

The Iditarod Ceremonial Start in Downtown Anchorage was fantastic. Our SP Kennel pit crew is second to none. The whole fun-filled Saturday event went off with out a hitch. Fans were able to mingle with dogs and mushers alike. The Iditarod is a top notch show for people who respect dogs, competition and adventure.

The SP Kennel dogs were clearly ready to race. At times our team even seemed a bit introverted or withdrawn. That is simply because they understand the routine and the countdown is on for the start. This team is a group of veterans and they take the Iditarod seriously. The same fun-loving dogs that you find at the kennel in Two Rivers stealing kisses and chasing their tails are committed competitors and simply want to get out on to the trail and race.

The twelve dogs that raced the Yukon Quest with Allen: Biscuit, Boondocks, Chemo, Chica, Clyde, Mac, Nacho, Olivia, Quito, Schmoe, Scruggs, Scout; were fit, rested and ready for another race. They had raced the Yukon Quest with a slow, steady gait. During the "down time" between races, our focus had been to stretch their muscles out, speed up their gaits and re-energize them. We had done that perfectly.

The other four non-Yukon Quest dogs were at the top of their games as well: Pud, Sissy, Waylon and Willie. These dogs had raced every mid distance event during the season and had just come off the Yukon Quest 300 Mile Race with a win. This was an extremely fast race, so these dogs were shifted up a gear. Sissy and Pud were my final choices for the squad. Sissy had never raced a competitive 1,000 mile event, so she was my biggest 'gamble'. And Pud historically has one good performance year followed by one poor performance year. The question for him, of course, was "Which one would it be?"

The SP Kennel 2014 Iditarod Starting Line Up: *(From front of team to back)*

Quito (Leader)	Waylon (Leader)
Nacho	Boondocks
Olivia	Chica
Scout	Scruggs
Willie	Chemo
Pud	Clyde
Sissy	Mac
Biscuit	Schmoe

My team, the SP Kennel Red Team, started in position number 10 in Iditarod 2014. There were 69 teams total. I was pleased to start near the front of the pack simply because this meant we didn't have to wait too long at the dog truck while a thousand dogs and hundreds of race volunteers streamed past on the way to the starting chute. There is a lot of energy and enthusiasm during that day. So, it is best to just get out onto the trail and start to race.

Pre-race Hype

I thought that the pre-race hype was ridiculous. There had been a chance, due to lack of snow cover, that the Iditarod would start in Fairbanks. The snow conditions in South Central Alaska were very minimal and everyone was worried that without snow to cushion the trail it would be rough and treacherous.

Two weeks prior to the race start, the ITC Board of Directors made the decision to stick with the traditional route and start in Willow. The decision was well thought out and all options were seriously contemplated. There were no politics or favoritism in the final decision. I know this because I was on the Board. There needed to be a decision ASAP, so a decision was made. Iditarod is an enormous logistical event that can only run smoothly if the Trail Breakers, the staff and the hundreds of volunteers can get out ahead of the race and do their respective jobs.

There is always a build up to the Iditarod. There is a certain amount of drama that goes along with a 1,000 mile winter wilderness adventure race. Annually, there are front page newspaper stories about the dangerous sections of the race route. This year it seemed to me that this hype was over the top. Some mushers were down right petrified to even start the course. Photographs of mushers wearing rock climbing helmets, knee pads and hockey gear flooded the internet.

For some reason, I never thought the trail would be that bad. I had heard the trail conditions and reports. I had seen photos and documentation. That all led me to believe that the trail would certainly be challenging, but doable. In over twenty years of dog mushing I had never been in a situation that wasn't at least navigable by dog team. (Although some situations required incredible effort.)

I guess I am extremely confident. Personally, I wouldn't call myself cocky, but perhaps I am. I truly believe that physically or mentally, there is very little, if anything, that I can't do. I have always thought this. So far, I have generally lived up to my rather lofty personal expectations.

So, this year's race was no different for me at the starting line. People kept asking "How bad is it going to be?" And I kept answering "How bad can it be?" I went into Iditarod thinking: "I'm ready. The team is ready. Let's just get on with it!"

But, this year's race was, in fact, very different. The trail conditions were unreal. Portions of the trail were down right dangerous. And in the end, the race even became life-threatening.

Early Trail Conditions

We started the Iditarod on a glorious Sunday afternoon. The sky was blue and the ice on the river was slick and fast. The two days prior had been extremely warm. Much of the snow in downtown Anchorage had melted and ran down gutters all over town. This only added more public anxiety concerning the trail conditions.

But, on that Sunday, the temperatures dropped and were just above freezing for the start. Dog teams were ready to go and mushers were generally sick of the hype and ready to try their best.

Thousands of people gathered around the starting gate and lined the chute for miles. There were spectators everywhere and they were happy to be part of this annual Alaskan tradition. Even Mt. McKinley, or Denali, was looking down on our dog teams. At one point on the first evening of the race, we mushed directly towards the largest mountain in North America as the sun set. The alpine glow turned the peak to a soft shade of pink. Magnificent!

I had Quito and Waylon in lead as I left the starting line. Waylon is a little spit-fire and he likes to burn off some extra energy at the start of the run. So, why not let him? In addition, Waylon likes to try and impress Quito. Watching his antics often amuses me. Quito is perfect. She expects to be in lead, so I put her there. She knows the trail and knows the goal. She runs the team from the front and I run the team from the rear.

In the beginning, there was little or no snow cover on the river ice where the trail was located. Everyone had difficulties trying to slow their teams. A sled's braking system depends on metal rods that are pressed down into the snow pack. When there is no snow pack, slowing your sled becomes difficult. A few dog teams loped by me at 14 or 15 mph including Norwegian champion, Robert Sorlie. He blew by me like a freight train. I started to wonder if perhaps we were going too slow. But, I settled down and tried to keep our pace under control.

Only 20 miles out of the starting chute, I already had a problem. Scout, my no nonsense, part-time leader and always reliable team mate was favoring his right shoulder. I hadn't seen him trip or falter but his gait just didn't seem right.

Allen and I meticulously select the dogs for the Iditarod Red Team. The most important factor is that every dog on the team comes into the event 100% healthy. That means no physical issues whatsoever, no matter how miniscule. No broken toenails, no harness rubs, no muscle soreness, no cuts, no bruises. Nothing! It is challenging to select the final 16 dogs when we are this picky. But, we have learned over the years that no matter how much you might want to bring your favorite wheel dog or team dog or special swing dog who is a cheerleader, if they are not 100% healthy, don't do it. He or she will not contribute to his or her full potential. It's not fair to the dog to ask for it all when you know that they can't give it to you. It was heart breaking this year to look at Scooter howling directly at me "Pleaseeeeee... pick me. Pleaseeeeee! I can do it." and then choose Sissy.

So, Scout was an anomaly. He had been 100% healthy even after finishing the grueling Yukon Quest. He was a shoe-in for the Red Team and has always been a “go to” dog for me. I thought that he had looked even better this year than last year when he finished the 2013 Iditarod with me. So, I was bummed to see him with this weird gait. I watched him closely and briefly stopped to massage him. As I manipulated his bicep I thought that I felt a small cramp.

Dogs cramp just like humans do. Having the correct hydration, vitamins and minerals all contribute to a dog’s well-being. Perhaps Scout didn’t get enough to drink while we were in Anchorage for the three days prior to the race? While in Anchorage, the dogs are off their normal schedule. They spend a great deal of time in the kennels on the dog truck. We take them out religiously to go on stretch out walks but that is very different from the complete independence they have at home in Two Rivers. Perhaps this contributed to Scout’s condition? I was convinced that it was a cramp and that if I stopped periodically to rub his muscle, it would work itself out. So, as we made our way down the first leg of the race, I stopped the team every 30 minutes for a ‘Scout massage’. Looking back, this probably was very good for the entire team because it let each dog roll on the ice, grab a few bites of snow and cool off on such a warm afternoon.

We continued towards the checkpoint of Skwentna where I had decided to take my first rest stop. It was dark by the time we pulled in and there were volunteers everywhere. The Skwentna checkpoint must be one of the most difficult to manage because dog teams stream through nearly every minute for several hours. There are teams that want to park for varying lengths of time: 5 minutes, 15 minutes or a few hours. The volunteers try to help each musher keep to their individual race strategy.

I planned to stop for several hours. My first objective was to have a Veterinarian look at Scout’s muscle cramp. I was convinced that I would be able to massage his biceps during the rest stop and the cramp would dissipate. But, I wanted a Vet to confirm this. I tracked the Veterinarian crew down and they came over right away. They did a full team work up. They checked heart rates, hydration and the respiration for each dog. I singled out Scout for them to examine more thoroughly.

After the exam, a Veterinarian walked over with my Vet Book, handed it to me and said “You’ll have to leave him at the checkpoint.” I was flabbergasted. I must have looked like I was in disbelief because he said “Come look at your dog with me.” Of course I immediately followed him over to Scout. He picked up his right front leg and felt the muscle underneath Scout’s elbow. “Right here.” I followed where his hand went with my fingers and could actually feel a small abrasion on the muscle. “Oh my goodness!”

I told the Veterinarian I was very sorry that I hadn’t been more amiable to his diagnosis but it totally threw me. I was utterly convinced that it had just been a cramp. We did the dropped dog paperwork and within 15 minutes of arriving at Skwentna I had moved Scout over to the dropped dog resting area. As far as I could tell he was the first dog removed from the 2014 Iditarod. What a bummer!

After making a meal for the team and repacking my sled I walked up to the checkpoint building. I planned to grab a bite to eat and lie down for an hour. It was about midnight and the checkpoint was constant activity. The volunteers make mushers feel very welcome and I thanked them for the bowl of soup that they offered me. I went upstairs and managed to fall asleep for 20 minutes. I always feel proud of myself when I can sleep the first night of Iditarod. As I came downstairs there was a bottleneck of mushers trying to get indoors. I overheard people talking about the chaos on the trail and not being able to slow down their dog teams. It was easy to let my mind wander about upcoming trail conditions.

I went outside to my dogs and offered water to everyone. Just a few takers. I walked over to Scout and checked on him as well. I brought him some salmon snacks and said goodbye. I find it very challenging to leave a dog behind. I logically know that it is best for the team and the dog but my emotions don’t care about those things. Scout wasn’t in any shape to try and win the Iditarod now, but I sure didn’t want to leave him in Skwentna. As I stood there another dropped dog was brought over to the resting area. For some reason that made me feel better. He had company. I walked back to the team.

It didn’t take me too long to button up the hatches and get back out on the trail. I kept the team composition the same. The only difference was Scruggs was now running by himself. I tried not to dwell on leaving Scout behind as we left the Skwentna checkpoint.

One of my goals was to keep the team slow for the first 5 or 10 minutes after a rest. I know how important it is for me to warm up and I believe it is the same for the dogs. This meant that I pressed all of my weight onto my sled brake as we trotted away from the checkpoint. The noise of the metal brake tips scratching across ice was deafening and my calf muscles strained.

We mushed away from the checkpoint activity and got into our own groove. It was very pleasant out on the trail. I’m sure that there were teams stretched out 25 miles ahead of me and 25 miles behind me by now. But we motored along in our own little bubble and saw no one for a few hours. We did come across a few bonfires parties celebrating the Iditarod however. People have a great deal of fun camping out on the trail and watching us mush by. I’m sure that I would be doing the same thing if I wasn’t racing.

The trail was still rock hard ice. We crossed several frozen lakes that were actually shiny ice skating rinks. They even glowed from the moon’s reflection of the ice. The team made great time because there was nothing to slow us down. Usually the snow in the Alaska Range is deep and dogs have to buckle down and use some extra muscle to climb through the hills. This year we loped up and down the hills and galloped across the flats. Even as I tried to keep them slow, we probably averaged over 10 mph. This of course meant that we arrived at the next checkpoint sooner than I had expected.

The final mile into Finger Lake checkpoint follows the lakeshore. A team can see the checkpoint for 5 minutes before they arrive. That means they get more and more excited as they watch the headlights dance and bob off on the horizon. By the time we pulled in, my team was super amped. Thank goodness volunteers had chopped deep holes into the lake ice so that I could anchor my team. We stayed just long enough to sign the Official Time Sheet. Quito knew where we were going.

The exit trail is off to the right past all the resting teams. As we pulled away, a volunteer tried to run in front of the team to show us the way. Quito wanted none of that. I felt badly that we kept passing the gal, but not too many people can keep up with a racing dog team... especially with Quito in lead!

I looked over at the resting teams as we motored through the checkpoint. There were only a few. I knew from the Official Time Sheet that there were more teams than that in front of us. That meant they were either camping on the trail before Rainy Pass checkpoint, heading directly to Rainy Pass or traveling even farther. After last year, when Martin Buser ran the first 200 miles of the race in one leg, I wasn't sure what to expect. Our destination, on the other hand, was the Rainy Pass checkpoint.

I enjoy the trail from Finger Lake to Rainy Pass. It is through the heart of the Alaska Range mountains. The trail travels up and down steep traverses and pivots around sharp corners. A musher needs to have their sled driving skills in top form.

There was just enough snow on the trail to slow the team on the descents. The principal of dog mushing is that a dog will continually pull on any resistance. It is their "job". They are trained to always keep their tug lines tight. So, in order to stop or even slow a team, it is the musher that must stop the sled first. If a musher lets a sled go 20 mph downhill, then the dogs will run 20 mph downhill. It is the musher's "job" to reduce the speed of the team.

When a musher stops the sled, the dogs feel even more resistance. At this moment precise moment, the musher must verbally command the team to either pull harder to continue moving or stand and rest. Mushers have different vocal commands for different situations. Some teams have no patience and bang at their harnesses to go. Other teams stop and wait for commands. My team was balanced. They would perk up their ears, listen for my commands - while pacing side to side - and were always ready to charge ahead but not crazy.

As we mushed through the mountains, daylight appeared. It was a beautiful day. It seemed like it might be another warm day so I was hoping that we would make it to the next checkpoint before the heat of the day. The trail offered little resistance and we continued to cover ground at a rather speedy rate.

We twisted and turned through some large spruce trees and immediately the trail dropped out from under us. It was the first of the three Happy River Steps. I was prepared for them, but the first one sometimes startles me. I managed to navigate the turns without too many issues and stopped the team at the bottom to sort out Sissy and Mac who had jumped over the mainline at some point during the drops.

We started up again and turned out onto the Skwentna River. This part of the race course is usually the same, year after year. The trail comes down the steps, drops onto the river then goes back up the bank - all on the same side of the river. I looked ahead for race markers and saw them leading us towards a strange looking man made structure. It was a bridge! To be honest, it looked a little scary even from a distance. I could see plywood and spruce tress as railings.

The team followed the race markers but I could already tell that they weren't excited about the bridge. I tried to stop but the river was a sheet of ice and although it made a lot of noise, my brake wouldn't puncture the ice to slow us down. We motored full speed ahead towards the bridge. I watched Quito as she tried to come up with a solution. She *wasn't* going over that man-made contraption. Her head was up, her ears flicked back and forth and her eyes were darting around. All of a sudden she saw the answer. Sadly, so did I.

Directly off to the right and up on the river bank was clearly the spot where the trail had gone last year. There was even an old trail marker nailed to a tree. But, in order to get there, we'd would have to climb up a massive river bank. It was obvious that the river had eroded its bank this past spring. The bank was now an impassable 8 foot wall of frozen mud. There was no way the trail breakers on their snow machines could make it up that mud wall so they logically moved the route down river about 25 yards.

Dog logic and human logic are not always the same. Quito was pretty sure she could make it up that 8 foot wall. Besides that she *knew* this was the trail from last year. In an instant, she turned the entire team perpendicularly off of the newly marked trail and headed for the river bank. But, to complicate matters, there was a 20 foot wide section of flowing (non frozen) river between us and the river bank. That's why the bridge was constructed!

I pieced all of this together at the same time Quito pieced together her solution. The only problem was we had two totally different perspectives. I am a nearly 6 foot tall human being. She is a 2 foot tall dog. I could see the open water that lay between us and the trail. She couldn't!

I really don't blame her for being dog logical. If I was in her position I would have done the same thing. So she turned the team towards their new found destination and skirted to the right of the bridge. At the last minute she saw the open river below her and was able to veer left in order to miss plunging into the water. One at a time the dogs behind her came to the same conclusion. They all ran toward the old trail and then at the last minute, zigged to the left. All I could do was hang on and hope that the team kept skirting left around the river. Biscuit and Schmoe were the last dogs to see the water and they jumped off to the left to avoid it. When these two dogs jumped, they pulled my sled with them. One runner went left onto solid river ice and the other was suspended in air over the hole. I held my breath and looked down. It seemed like slow

motion as my sled tipped over into the hole. My sled dangled upside down over the flowing river. My weight and the weight of all my gear suspended above the river brought the team to a stop. I hung there and clung to my handlebar above the raging river.

I was able to kick my left foot onto the left edge of the ice but my entire right leg bobbed into the river. The dogs were stopped, waiting for my command. As I dangled above the river, I yelled "Ready? Okay!" After a few tries they pulled the sled and me out of the river. My arms were quivering as I righted the sled.

The team pulled ahead and I just let them go. I certainly wasn't going to turn around so we went forward toward the steep river bank. We came to the 8 foot frozen wall of mud. I couldn't believe it, but each dog managed to clamber up the impasse. But when the sled reached the wall it t-boned and stopped. Schmoe, Biscuit and I were all left at the bottom. The team was stopped up above us and I couldn't see any of them.

Eight feet straight up is higher than I could reach. I tried to get under the sled to at least help push it but I couldn't get any leverage. I paused for just a few seconds and I knew that the team had to pull me up that wall. I didn't want them to turn back around. And I certainly didn't want them to come see what I was doing back there, so I kept yelling up to them "Line out. Straight ahead." I was far from calm. I decided that we had to get going now! I yelled "Ready?" The team surged forward and with a strength that I never knew they had, they pulled Biscuit, Schmoe and our sled up that 8 foot wall. I hung on to the back of the runners and pulled myself up behind them.

I picked myself up and desperately tried to just stand on my sled runners as the team made their way up the hill. I just wanted to breathe. Deep breaths. My adrenalin was pulsing and my body started to shake. My hands were shaking. My legs were shaking. That was a close call. The water in that river was raging and scary. If I would have fallen in, I would have been sucked underneath the river ice... forever.

The team made their way down the trail. The "old" trail connected to the new one after 100 yards. In just a few heart beats, we were free and clear of danger and ready for the next challenge. After I got my breath back, I analyzed my situation. Had I lost anything into the river? My sled bag hadn't been entirely zipped up when I flipped? I did a quick inventory and found most critical items were still on board. I looked down at my legs to see if the river ice had sliced through my pants or parka. I saw that my entire right leg was drenched from the crotch down. Yikes! As I realized this, I stepped down on my right boot and noticed a squishy feeling. My right boot was full of water too. Sometimes when I look back at dangerous situations I think "Perhaps it wasn't so bad." Well the recognition that my entire right side had been bobbing in the Swkenta River didn't calm my nerves. I began to get a slight chill so I reached around my back and felt for my beaver mitts. I unclipped them and put them on. My mitts were also full of water!

The dogs were churning ahead without a care in the world. The sun was up and the temperature wasn't too warm. I stopped on a lake after a few miles and gave everyone a quick break and a snack. I took off my boot and wrung out the liner. Then I stashed my beaver mitts in my sled and took out my spare synthetic pair. My pants were still drenched. I wasn't too worried because I knew that as I ran up the next few hills, my body heat would wick the moisture away from my skin. We took off and the first big hill came as soon as we got off the lake. Up I ran!

I had Quito and Waylon still in lead and Nacho was very strong in swing with Boondocks. This team was phenomenal. I couldn't believe how much talent was in front of me. They were strong, determined and if I could keep us headed in the right direction, we might be in contention.

My chill had gone away as the adrenaline surge went away. I mushed my team the best I could. The next 10 miles into Rainy Pass checkpoint were rather smooth. I started to make a 'to do' list in my head for arriving in the checkpoint.

A musher's checkpoint routine is critical. I like to be organized and efficient. Since it was a great clear sky weather day, I was sure that Rainy Pass would be full of fans and spectators while I was there. So, the more organized I was *before* I got there, the better. First priority was to offer the dogs some water. Since the trail had such little snow cover, the dogs has a difficult time "dipping snow". Usually a dog can run along and casually reach out to the snow berm alongside the trail and grab a bite of snow. But this year, the dogs had to make an extra effort to lean down and try to bite off a chunk of ice from under their feet. Since hydration is such a big deal, I made a point of stopping the team periodically so that they could bite ice without injuring themselves. Little did I know, this routine would become standard as we continued down a trail with less and less snow cover.

We pulled into Rainy Pass checkpoint and I signed in on the Official Time Sheet. Martin Buser was parked right next to the cache of food drop bags. I asked him what he was up to? All joking aside, you never know what Martin's race strategy is. I knew that he probably had one of the best teams on the race. And he is no slouch either. So, I tried to peer over at his outfit while I grabbed my drop bags but my team didn't like being ignored and they started to get rambunctious. I didn't want to park this far away from the cabin that is set aside for mushers to use. I got back on my sled and traveled a few hundred yards to the far side of the checkpoint. I didn't see Martin again for a while. Mike Williams Jr was also parked at the checkpoint but I didn't see his team.

I had looked at the Official Time Sheet and noticed that there were other dog teams ahead of us in the race. That was interesting. I asked the Race Official if these teams had packed a bale of straw before leaving the Rainy Pass. This would indicate that they planned to camp before the Rohn. The official said that not everyone packed straw. Every musher

formulates their own strategy in order to do the best they can on the race. But, I couldn't fathom running my team all the way to Rohn.

I tended to the dogs and had everyone snug in straw beds when Hugh Neff pulled in beside us. We spoke for just a short time about dogs. I recognized quite a few of his team from the Yukon Quest. Apparently he had Quest dogs from both his team and Brent Sass' squad. My Quest dogs, minus Scout, were fairing well despite the fast pace. I was a little worried that their muscles wouldn't hold up to these speeds however.

My next priority was drying all of my wet gear in the cabin. I hauled all my sopping clothes inside the little shack. There was an oil drip stove and I adjusted it to high. I hung a clothes line type rope above the stove and draped my gear every where. I felt a little badly about hogging all of the space, but no one was else was inside yet. I set up a nice bed right next to the stove. My plan was to rest for a lengthy time. Why not be comfortable?

I walked back outside in my long johns and slippers. I wanted to get dog food soaking before I napped so that the team could eat as soon as we woke. I looked over the dogs and they were very comfortable in the sunshine. The checkpoint activity was ramping up and there was a flow of airplanes landing on the lake. There were probably 20 planes parked on the ice. Mushers also streamed through the checkpoint. Despite all this commotion, I think the dogs slept for a while.

I went back inside, adjusted my bunk, set my alarm and snuggled into my cozy bed. I slept for one hour. I woke to my alarm. I had set it a little early so that I could rotate my gear on the clothes line. I really needed my pants to dry out. I had very little hope for my mitts, but at least I had the spare pair. Sonny Lindner and Robert Sorlie were claiming sleeping bunks now. Robert talked a little about crashing and losing gear off of the back of his sled. He no longer had dog dishes or a cooler. I told him that I had a few dishes that he could use. Sonny seemed to have a rather smooth run down the trail. But he isn't much of a squeaky wheel, so he might have run through Hades and he probably wouldn't share the details.

I went back outside to look over the team. They all seemed rested and pretty pleased with their situation. I fed them a soupy meal and tinkered with each dog a little. I soaked a little more dog food in case they wanted to drink before we left. My plan was to go back inside for another hour before leaving. It seemed that I was resting my team a long time compared to my competitors. Martin, Mike and Hugh had already left.

Allen walked over while I was looking at the team. We chatted about dogs and he got a few of them excited by talking to them. He told me that he had already broken his sled. But, in actuality, I was driving *his* sled. He had spent a lot of time working on a new sled design this winter. After he built it, he had won both the Copper Basin and the Yukon Quest with it. It is a more flexible, but not a bulky design. His thought was that it would bend and flex with the rough trail conditions instead of hitting rigidly against frozen terrain. So, the sled that I was driving (*his sled*) was holding up great! The sled that he was driving ... not so much.

I went back inside and rearranged my gear again. My pants might actually be dry in an hour! That made me very happy. I got back in bed, stuffed ear plugs in my ears and slept for 30 minutes. It is imperative for a musher to get as much sleep as he or she can, so I did!

When I heard my alarm go off, I wasted no time. I grabbed all of my drying gear and hauled it out to my sled. I dressed in warm, dry clothes. What a blessing a oil drip stove can be in the Alaska Range. I even put on dry socks and boot liners. I was ready!

I had been resting for a while so I was energized and ready to go. After dropping off my gear, I walked to find the race official. I wanted to look over the Official Time Sheet. I knew that a lot of teams had gone through Rainy Pass while I rested, so I was wondering how far behind I really was. I spoke with Andy Anderson and he told me that Kelly Maxiner was already in Rohn. I was a little surprised that he was trying the same race strategy that Martin had unsuccessfully tried last year. But, apparently Kelly thought that he could improve on Martin's plan. He had mushed his team 200 miles before giving them a rest. I thought "More power to you. Maybe we will compare race plans when I pass you in 400 miles."

Even more interesting news that Andy relayed was the fact that Kelly termed the trail into Rohn, treacherous. Ouch! I knew that the trail would be bad, but I was hoping that it wouldn't be *treacherous*. I thought about it and hoped that perhaps Kelly wasn't as talented on a sled as I was or that maybe he was a little tired from the 200 mile push.

No matter. I packed up my sled and soon left Rainy Pass checkpoint behind.

Part Two – Rainy Pass to Takotna



Treacherous Trail

Climbing out of the checkpoint and off of the lake was refreshing. There had been a lot of activity on that lake so I was ready to leave that behind and get out into the wilderness again. The mountains were literally jumping out at us. The sky was a brilliant blue and the white mountain peaks were enormous.

All of the dogs looked solid. I had Quito in single lead. She is a steering wheel. There were numerous obstacles in our path as we tip-toed out of the checkpoint and I really didn't want to slam into a parked airplane or a hovering helicopter. I knew Quito and I could find a safe path through all the hazards.

I had made some small changes to the lineup. I moved Chica up into swing with her brother, Nacho. She seemed pumped and ready to run. I wanted this energy farther forward. I bumped Boondocks back one spot to run with Olivia. I ran Waylon with his brother, Scruggs, in the third position. I could easily move him up front again.

We motored up into the mountains. I tried to slow the team as they warmed up. But it was challenging. The trail was hard packed and offered little resistance to my sled. The dogs cantered uphill. Sometimes the Alaska Range is a grind and the dogs really have to toil to get a loaded sled up and over the mountain pass. But, this year, that was not the case. We moved higher and higher and soon we were following the creek that meanders through the high pass itself. We were traveling in a deep gully with steep cliffs on either side. This was avalanche territory.

The sun shined down on a warm afternoon, but the temperature didn't seem to negatively affect the dogs. Mac and Sissy regularly grabbed at the icy trail for a "drink" of snow. I took that as a sign that some of the team was thirsty so I stopped every so often to let them chew on ice and hydrate.

We summited without much of a struggle. I had a hefty load in my sled but that didn't seem to phase this team. We started down the other side of the mountain pass and I put much of my weight onto the sled brake to slow our progression. Running this team downhill at 20mph wasn't my idea of a smart race plan.

The first few miles downhill I stayed in control, steering the sled along sidehills and through willow bush tunnels. As we neared the lower half of the mountain decent, I started to notice less and less snow cover. I even said out loud to the team, "This could get tricky."

The intensity that comes with mushing a team of powerful huskys downhill and around sharp corners is pretty overwhelming. I had to control my breathing and concentrate on steering my sled. One mistake here and the sled will veer off into the brush or get impaled on a rock. Every year, this section of trail is a roller coaster ride. I have come to expect it. But as we encountered less and less snow I began to lose control. Then, the team came down a steep hill and around a sharp curve. I couldn't brake hard enough to pivot the front of the sled. The sled and I launched off a short cliff and onto a sheer patch of ice. The sled flipped. The dogs forged ahead until they heard my screaming plea to stop. As talented and driven as this group of dogs is, thank goodness they also listen to me. Biscuit and Schmoe looked back at me as I was on my side clinging to the handle bar. I could understand the look in their eyes that meant: *all you have to do is steer this sled!* I righted the sled and told myself that I needed to focus 100% and drive. So I did.

We eventually got off the mountain side and down into the Dalzell Gorge. That's when trail conditions got worse. There were patches of snow punctuated by dirt, frozen mud and ice. The ponds and lakes were sheer ice skating rinks with rocks littered everywhere. The dogs were a little nervous so this made them run faster. We weaved and bobbed along the rough trail and I shook my head in disbelief.

I continued to concentrate all of my energy. I needed to drive my sled as carefully as I could. There were so many spots where it would have been easy to break my drag, my brake or even my runners. I used most of my strength just trying to hang on to my handlebar. I used the weight of my lower body and moved side to side in order to maneuver the sled. I threw my legs this way and that, often times having neither leg on the runners. The whole time I spoke calmly to the dogs: "Take it easy. Take it easy." They were excited enough. They didn't need to hear the panic that was inside of my brain.

The worst part of the Dalzell was the 100 foot sheer drop down a tunnel of frozen mud and dirt. This section of trail is bad on a good trail year, so I knew that it would be awful now. I braced for it and tried desperately to keep my sled upright. There was no way to slow the dogs as they plummeted downhill at their fastest possible speed. If I had put my brake down or even dragged my foot to slow our progression I am sure that I would have broken my ankle, leg or something worse. When we reached the icy river bottom I hollered: "Hip wool!" We made it in one piece.

The trail in the gorge was a crazy ride in itself. The trail breakers and volunteers had built ice bridges over the flowing river but they were constructed of glare ice and often sloped directly towards the raging river. It took all of my strength and concentration to navigate and not fall into the river.

At one point I suddenly heard an alarmingly loud noise. I looked up to see a small red helicopter hovering just beyond the trail. It tracked my progress for a few minutes then flew off down the trail. I thought maybe I was imagining the sight but my imagination couldn't have been that loud. There were quite a few film crews covering the race this year. This must have been one of them.

I continued to struggle - trying to keep my body loose and flexible enough to steer but rigid enough to hang on when we hit a tree and came to a sudden stop. I came up over an icy mound on the river bed and when I looked ahead it was straight and down a frozen waterfall. The trail markers actually led us down the icy plunge. I couldn't believe that we were mushing over a waterfall!

The front five dogs got tangled in a branch that had fallen in the trail just before the plunge. They stood shy of the waterfall drop, looking down it. I was able to stop the sled and shove my snow hook into an ice crevasse. It was a dreadful place to stop but I had to get to the dogs untangled. It was the first time we had stopped in some time, so I took the chance to catch my breath. I remember my hands were quivering.

Just as I began crawling up on the ice to untangle the dogs, that darn helicopter came out of nowhere and levitated just in front of us. It stayed in one place and the noise ricocheted off the canyon walls. The prop splash from the rotors hit us and blew us all backwards. The front five dogs were blown off the branch and up into the forested canyon wall. I had no footing on the ice as it was, so I was blown on my knees back toward the sled. I tried to wave off the helicopter. I don't know how I managed to crawl up to Quito and untangle her from the forest. I led her toward the edge of the waterfall, I looked down and thought "Jesus." But, there was no other way.

I crawled back to the sled, removed the snow hook from the crevasse and down we plummeted. Amazing! If the helicopter was taking video, they got one heck of a show!

For the next few miles, the trail never got better and never got worse. The dogs listened well and when we would crash into trees they would stop and stand and wait for me to right myself. Biscuit would actually start to slow down and sit when we came upon a really tricky section. He knew what was about to happen! I do not know how many times I flipped my sled and got stuck on trees, roots and stumps. Many!

As we neared the Rohn checkpoint the trail started to meander through the woods and this created a whole new problem. Tree roots popped up everywhere. I tried to stay off of my sled brake for fear of hooking into one of these roots and breaking *everything*. I'm not sure how we managed to get to Rohn, but we did. I finally had a chance to turn on my video camera 5 minutes before the checkpoint. I guess that's when it really struck me: There was no snow!

I must have pulled into the checkpoint with a facial expression similar to all the mushers who had pulled in before me: utter shock and disbelief. We had actually mushed dogs across terrain that should be reserved for experts in ice climbing while using crampons, axes and screws. Even with all that crazy trail, we made a fantastic run time. Actually we had the fastest time of all the race teams from Rainy Pass to Rohn.

I said hello to the folks that often greet us in Rohn. Happy, friendly faces. They parked me in a spot where I could pack some fresh supplies and leave without disturbing resting teams. Everyone expected me to go through this checkpoint and I didn't let them down. I glanced over the Official Time Sheet and there had to be at least a dozen teams already in the checkpoint.

I had made a mental list of what I needed in order to resupply for the trail ahead. I was planning to make a camp spot to rest the team a few hours down the trail. I sorted through my food drop bags, quickly gathered my gear and repacked. I was chatting with the checkpoint folks as I packed. I asked how many sleds had been broken over that last 25 miles. They said "Only one." Wow. I really was racing with some of the finest dog mushers in the world. There should have been broken sleds all over that trail.

Just before I pulled away from the Rohn checkpoint I remember asking "Does anyone know when we will see snow again?" The long pause before the reply should have told me the answer: nobody really knew. Someone took a stab and said "Past Egypt Mountain. There should be snow there."

As I packed and reassessed, the dogs rolled in the dirt and grass. About half of them took their booties off in the 10 minutes that we were stopped. I walked up and down the team and picked up all the "spare parts" that the team had littered. I asked "Does anyone want any valuable souvenirs from Rohn?" I had my sled lashed up and I didn't want to open it up just to shove 20 used booties inside. I was kind of joking, but a few folks said "Sure. We'd love them."

I talked to the team and asked if they were ready for what was in store in front of us. They said that they were! We trotted out of the checkpoint and jumped down on a river of pure glare ice. We immediately rocketed over driftwood, sand and gravel and I was sure glad that I wasn't hitting this trail with a well rested team!

Hang on for a Ride!

Annually this section of the trail is notorious for poor trail marking. It's not that the Trail Breakers do a bad job here. It's just that marking a windy, frozen, ice-laden river bed is quite challenging. I was happy that it was still daylight and I scanned the entire area for trail markers. The last thing I wanted to do was go too far downriver then have to turn the team around on this ice skating rink. Far ahead of us on the other side of the river I saw a bright colored blur. As I focused more and more, I realized that it was a group of parked snow machines. That had to be the trail. Quito and the team were more than happy to head directly towards them.

People travel the Iditarod trail on snow machines for many reasons. There are folks who live in the villages that the Iditarod passes through. This trail is their highway to visit family, go hunting or bring supplies from one village to another. There are also groups of adventurers following the race route from Anchorage to Nome. Sometimes these folks start before the race but this year there were a few groups of machines that were traveling the trail simultaneously with dog teams. Lastly, there is the media who is trying to document and report on the race. I often see the guys, including the Iditarod Insider crews, on the trail. I try to work with them because I know how important the race coverage is to my family, friends and sponsors.

I imagine that riding a snow machine this year, across many miles with little or no snow had to be rough. When I passed the three snow machines, they were pulled off on the side of the trail. I waved hello. I'm not sure if they were broken down or just resting. Either way, there was little help I could give them. When there is no snow... your *snow* machine doesn't function well!

The first few miles away from Rohn there was just a hint of snow. After 2 miles... there was none. Amazingly, the dogs made incredibly fast time pulling a heavily laden sled over nothing but frozen dirt and grass. I would have never guessed that we would have moved with such ease. The plastics on the underside of the runners screeched and screamed as they rubbed against rocks and gravel.

My fear increased as we started to climb the first hill after leaving Rohn. Going up was a piece of cake. Going down was horrifying. I couldn't use my drag because I was pretty sure that it would rip off in a heart beat. I tried to tap my brake but only in sections of the trail where I saw no roots or rocks. I knew that if I hooked a root with my brake claw I would stop on a dime and break every bone in my foot. So we went downhill at record speeds and completely out of control.

I talked to the dogs and they never seemed to panic, but it was incredibly nerve wracking. Every time we climbed up a hill I would utter under my breath "Okay. That's high enough. Okay. No farther please." But the trail was the same trail that I have traveled for 13 years and the ups and down are just part the landscape. I was concentrating so hard: looking at every little snag and rock in the trail so that I could try to navigate the team.

The sun started to set and darkness was on us quickly. It actually became even more difficult. I turned my headlight beam on high so that I could try and see the hazards before we were directly on top of them. It was downright scary.

My body started to take a toll from the rough ride. I flipped my sled more often than imaginable. For some reason, I always landed on my right hip. Smack! Smack! Smack! As soon as my sled would start to flip I would cringe from the pain I knew was forthcoming. I felt like I was tenderizing my hip for some French chef's gourmet dinner. Someone could have beat me with a sled hammer over and over and it would have had the same effect.

I kept a death grip on my handlebar. There was no way I was letting go of my team. When they went 20mph, I'd go 20mph. Damn it was scary, but we were a team.

For as long as I've been dog mushing, I have tied myself onto to my sled. The thought being that even if, heaven forbid, I lost a hold of the handlebar, I would be drug along behind the team. I did this originally because I learned to mush with: me, myself and I. I never traveled with anyone and I never told anyone where I was going. I was completely on my own and I *could not*, under any circumstances, lose my sled. My sister was living in the Caribbean at the time so I had her send me a surf board leash. I had the same thought that surfers had: don't lose your surfboard! Don't lose your sled! The leash fit perfectly around my wrist and I could firmly attach it to my sled. I have been using a similar leash ever since. However, this year, on this race course, I actually took my leash off. I think there would have been a real possibility that I would have been drug to death if I was pulled at 20MPH down that trail by my arm.

We continued to climb and fall. Climb and fall. I fell over numerous times and lodged my sled in tree branches and roots. I closed my eyes and held my breath more often than once. I was in sheer amazement that I didn't loose grip of my sled. The intensity was amazing and was for quite a duration.

At one point, the trail came out into an opening. The team charged out ahead and we soon learned that this opening was actually a pond. I scanned the horizon with my headlight and saw water *everywhere*. The pond had overflowed and we were trotting through 4 inches of water. The dogs appreciated this roadway hazard immensely. They hadn't been able to "dip" since we ran out of snow. I knew that they had to be thirsty. I stopped the team and they stood ankle deep in water and drank for several minutes. It was pretty comical to listen to 15 lapping husky tongues in the darkness.

When we started up again after the "water break", the team motored off to the right. We got back onto a frozen section of water and started to trot into a forest. The only problem was... there were no trail markers. We were moving pretty swiftly too. It was very dark so I scanned the area for trail reflectors. Nothing.

Suddenly Quito and Waylon went on one side of a tree and Nacho and Chica went on the other. They came to a sudden halt. The rest of the team didn't stop. The whole team caught up to those four dogs and we became one big pile of dogs. There were 15 dogs, one musher and a sled all wrapped around a tiny spruce tree. I tried to walk up to the tree but repeatedly fell over on the slick ice. There was no traction. Eventually I crawled up there on my knees and managed to untangle some of the team. But I stopped. I realized that I better figure out which way we needed to go *before* we started up again.

I was able to grab spruce trees and use them as hand holds and I walked past the team. I cut across the pond and walked back through the forest - in the direction I thought we needed to go. I moved my headlight this way and that, and finally found the trail. But the trees were so thick in that forest, there was no way my sled would fit between them. The only solution was to turn around and head back the direction we came.

I got back to the dogs - who looked pretty sad in a huge tangle around a tiny tree. I got my axe out of my sled and with a few swift chops I cut down the spruce. My team was free. I grabbed the main line between Quito and Nacho and started to slip and slide back the way we had come. The dogs followed me but soon came to another dead stop. I looked back and my sled had flipped over. I scrambled to get back to the sled by using the dogs' backs to balance. I righted the sled and hoped that I had securely lashed all my gear in my sled. I really didn't want to get to my camping spot and find half of my provisions missing.

I walked back in front of the team and we started to move forward again. Pretty soon I had Scruggs, Chemo and Willie all riding my butt. Then out of the corner of my right eye, I saw Pud and Clyde passing me. This was the first time that I got a little gruff with the dogs. "Wait just a minute here!" I made enough of a ruckus that no one passed me again. I don't mind sled dog enthusiasm - but give me a break!

Finally I saw a trail marker to our right. Quito saw it too and she turned sharply. My sled flipped for the 800th time and came to a stop. That was good because I needed a break. I took time to sort out all of the dogs and make sure no one was tangled or had a foot over the line. I tried to look over everyone - feet, harnesses.

Our harness and line system is such a life saver in situations like this. Each dog has only one short leash or line attached to them. Basically each line is then attached to one *very long line* that runs from the sled to the lead dogs. The fact that our dogs don't have another line attached their collars, made this situation much easier to deal with. I could unsnap a dog's line, detangle it and quickly reattach the dog. Slowly, my 15 dogs became one long line again and not a ball of yarn. Of course, they were ready to go before I was ready. Sissy and Mac stood screaming while I tried to right my sled. Patience is not always a sled dog attribute! When Schmoe started "woo woo woo", I thought "We better get going."

My race plan was to camp at a creek that is about 2 1/2 hours from Rohn. I imagined that we still had a ways to go. I was having my doubts that we'd make it that far in one piece. We could just camp here. There was obviously plenty of water to feed. But I was nervous that resting my team this early was actually a bad idea. I would much rather have a tired dog team than an energetic one on this crazy trail. I decided that we would just keep going. We would find another spot to camp.

Of course, this meant that I needed to buckle down and focus on driving my sled the best that I could again. I didn't want to break *anything*: sled parts, human parts or dog parts. It was incredibly tiring but I turned my headlight beam on high and I concentrated on our path. All in all, we did the best we could in those conditions. Soon, I saw the glow of Egypt Mountain off to the west. Maybe that guy in Rohn was right and there would be snow soon. But, as we motored ahead, there was none. I think that I cursed under my breath a few times. But we kept going.

Finally, we made it to the creek where I had planned to camp. There was running water, so I knew that we could easily stay here. I navigated the team around a "U" turn on glare ice and onto the far shore line of the creek. I needed to set up a camp, but I also knew that the trail would soon be busy. Even though it seemed like we were out here battling these elements by ourselves, I knew there was probably a dog team or two right behind us.

When I parked, my team needed to be tucked away - not camped right next to the trail. My dogs don't sleep well if they are concerned about other dogs running right through their rest area. So, I led the front half of the team off of the ice, away from the trail and back into the trees. I anchored the front of the team to a stump in the distance. Quito, Nacho and Chica were at least 30 feet away from the trail. I couldn't even see them because of the tall grass in the area. But, the rear of the team was still parked just alongside the creek, as was my sled. I could see where a passing dog team might confuse the trail with my camp spot. So, I grabbed my ax and tromped through the forest to look for a few large dead trees. With no snow it was easy to walk anywhere. I hauled several trees out and placed them parallel to my team - between the dogs and the trail. I collected a few more and erected a large wooden barrier. Any passing team would now have to jump over a mound of spruce trees to visit with my team.

I was pleased with my camp site, so I started my cooker and heated up some water from the creek. The dogs made beds in the grass that was everywhere. I looked across the clearing and if I were to see this exact scene in a photograph, I would have guessed that it was late September: chilly, a little ice, running water and no snow.

As I rummaged around the area and walked ahead down the trail. I always try to go see which direction we will need to head after our camp. I found several piles of dog snacks: finely chopped pieces of salmon and tripe. That was a big clue that Martin had stopped here. He obviously didn't camp here for long, but long enough to snack his team. I picked up a few random snacks and handed them to Olivia and Boondocks. They enjoyed the Happy Trails Kennel variety.

About an hour later I heard the cracking of a brake on frozen ground and I knew that another dog team was headed our way. One thing about this trail: you sure couldn't sneak up on anyone! About 5 minutes later I saw a headlight on the far side of the creek and a team came around the icy curve. It was Sonny. I led his leaders past my team simply because I was standing in the way. If a few teams made it by my team smoothly, there was a better chance that trailing teams would follow their scent.

He parked just ahead of me. We chatted a few minutes. He said that his brake was completely busted. We both just shook our heads at the trail conditions. Amazing. I walked back to my spot and checked the dogs. Everyone was sleeping pretty well. It was nice to see them curled up in little cozy balls on grassy beds.

It was important that I get a little rest here too. I was planning to camp here for several hours and I needed to sleep. I made a bed for myself out of spruce boughs, fleece dog tosses, my sleeping bag and biivy sac. I had lost my sleeping pad somewhere back down the trail. I had my snowshoes and pad lashed to the rear of my sled when I had left Rohn. After a few miles I heard a dragging sound. I looked back to see my snow shoes trailing my sled by a bungee cord. My pad was already gone. There was no telling what kind of carnage that trail would create over the next 24 hours.

I lay down and tried to relax. My legs were killing me. I soaked a freeze dried meal for myself and ate a little. I forced myself to drink an entire thermos before closing my eyes. I knew that I was dehydrated and I could do something about that since we were next to a creek. I slept for 45 minutes. I briefly woke several times as teams passed our camp spot. But my spruce tree barrier worked because I never got out of my sleeping bag.

When my alarm went off I was sound asleep. I took a deep breath and immediately climbed out of my bag. I looked ahead and Sonny was simultaneously preparing to go. He had started the race two hours behind me. He was the last team to leave the starting chute in Willow. He was now equal with me.

I puttered here and there with my team. I thought about leaving their dog booties off. Dogs can easily run on mud and dirt without needing booties. But there was the risk of more icy conditions and heck... maybe we'd find snow. I put booties on everyone. I was nearly ready to launch when I heard another team coming. It was 5 minutes until I saw the headlight. The musher stopped on the far side of the creek and parked his team. From the far off voice, I couldn't tell who it was.

As soon as that team parked, I heard another. My team was now *really* ready to go. I would have to pull out into the traffic sooner or later. But, I let this team pass in front of us first. It was Aaron Burmeister. I helped his leaders pass my team. Aaron stopped right next to Sonny. I heard him yelling and moaning so I walked up to see what was happening. Aaron had twisted his knee and was asking Sonny for an Ace bandage. Sonny rummaged around in his bag. I walked bag to my sled to grab a few rolls of vet wrap. I had no Ace bandage but elastic vet wrap might do the trick. By the time I went up to hand it to Aaron, he was gone. "Well", I thought "I better get going!" We pulled back out on the trail.

The conditions did not improve. Frozen dirt was our race track. The team charged up every hill and plummeted down every decent. I hung on the best that I could and landed over and over on my right hip. But, we motored down the trail.

We started to get closer to the rolling hills near what is known as the Buffalo Camp and I worried a little more. The hills in this area are *very* steep. A musher usually has to run up the steep side and ride the brake with incredible force on the descent. It would be very dangerous without snow.

I saw the first hill from a distance. I got off my sled runners and started to run. The least I could do was help the team *up* the hill. We got to the top and... *Holy Cow*... there was a sheen of ice on the downhill slope. I was able to cut my brake claw into the ice and actually slow the team. This was the first time that I felt I had any control since we had summited Rainy Pass. Earlier, I thought "If there is any mercy in this world, there would be ice on the downhills." And there was! I breathed a tremendous sigh of relief.

The next 10 miles we were on a continuous roller coaster of ups and downs. I navigated them with the utmost care. I was smiling ear to ear because of the fact that I could actually slow my team when I wanted. We passed by the Buffalo Camp and Aaron was parked. He was fiddling with his knee or his sled or something. At this point, in this particular race, I was not concerned with other teams. I was still highly concerned with my own. So, I passed him and continued down the trail.

The remainder of the run to the Nikolai checkpoint was certainly not hazard free, but it was *so* much better. I was happy now, the dogs didn't seem to have a care in the world. I had the same line up of dogs and everyone was holding their pace. I knew that we had to be setting a speed record because there was absolutely no resistance on the trail to slow our movement. We would be in Nikolai before we knew it.

Nikolai Checkpoint

Daylight was coming and the glow from the sun was inching up the horizon. We passed the trail spots that I recognized: a creek with a man-made bridge, the Salmon River cabin and the steep creek just before the village. The dogs were really animated and I was excited as well. I think we were all proud that we had actually made it this far! Plus, this would be the fastest we had ever arrived in Nikolai.

I started to think about the last 100 miles and how horrendous they were. I was truly fortunate to have made it in one piece. My thoughts of course drifted to Allen. Of all of my "competitors", he is obviously the one that I am most concerned

about. But he is durable, hard core and resilient - to say the least. When I had last seen him, he had already broken one stanchion on his sled. I was sure that one way or the other, he would make it down the trail.

There were other mushers on the trail that kept drifting into my thoughts. DeeDee Jonrowe was one of them. Before the race start, she had been highly concerned about the trail conditions and had voiced her opinion loudly. I thought that she had been over zealous with her concerns. I was wrong! Every concern that DeeDee had about the trail was correct and then some. I couldn't get my mind off of her. I was afraid for her because she actually knew how bad it was going to be! It would have been different for me, if I had actually known the dangers. When I came into the checkpoint, I send a message back to DeeDee. All I told her was, "Yup. The trail is as bad as you thought it would be."

I pulled into Nikolai a little before 8 in the morning. My team was still energetic but as I parked them on the gravel bar, they began to lay down and relax. They knew that we were here to rest. I looked through the Official Time Sheet and I was the fourth musher to sign in. I knew that a few teams, including Martin, had arrived several hours ahead of us. I saw that Hugh Neff and Nick Pettit's team were camped there also. None of those three teams had stopped for a significant rest between Rohn and Nikolai. That meant that they had just completed a 10 to 12 hour run. We, on the other hand, had only a 7 hour run under our belts. Logically, this meant that my team wouldn't need as much rest.

The dogs really were no worse for the wear. It was amazing to see how easily they were able to haul my sled over this gruesome trail. But, I guess it wasn't that gruesome *for them*. They could easily navigate stumps, frozen dirt and roots - they do it all the time during summer walks or fall training. So, for the last 100 miles it was a musher's nightmare but a dog's dream. I looked them over and was happy. They slept well in the sunshine.

I went through all of my drop bags and repacked my sled. I changed my runner plastic and looked over my sled. It was holding together... thank goodness. I walked up to the checkpoint building and went inside. I warmed an egg sandwich and drank a lot of water. I sat down and took off my boots. I saw a few mushers scattered around the room. I wasn't planning on staying too long so I didn't really talk to anyone much. I found my way to the 'sleeping area'. I noticed that Martin had bags strewn everywhere. To me, this meant that he was taking his 24 hour mandatory rest in Nikolai. Interesting. I laid down next to his sleeping bag, put a dry red beanie on my head, covered my eyes with my jacket and fell asleep for 45 minutes.

I woke up to my hip throbbing. I needed some ibuprofen. I gathered my gear, put my boots back on and was out the door 1 1/2 hours after I walked in. I went back down towards my team and a Race Comms volunteer came up beside me. He told me that my message made it to DeeDee but she had already scratched in Rohn. In some sense I was sad for her. But, I was happy that she wouldn't have to see what she had dreaded all along.

When I arrived back at my team there was a lot of activity nearby. I looked two teams behind mine and caught a glimpse of Hans Gatt. He had blood streaming down his forehead and across his face. There were many horror stories about loose teams and broken sleds and his was just another tale. More and more I understood how lucky I had been out on that trail.

When I readied my team, I rubbed everyone's feet. Willie always likes his feet rubbed down. He is such a happy addition to any team that keeping him cheerful is super important. The dogs ate and drank some plain water. It was funny to me that they were so excited to lap water out of a pond 50 miles ago but to offer them water in a dog dish in this village was an insult. Crazy.

Sonny left the checkpoint and I was somewhat surprised. I had thought that he would stay a little longer. He sure had an aggressive race plan. He and Rick Swenson are good friends and they trained this team together all winter. We live in the same neighborhood and I know how talented his team is. I watched them leave and they were all business. That was going to be one tough team to beat!

Hugh Neff left right behind Sonny. He also had started nearly 2 hours behind me. I was intimately familiar with Hugh's team. I had watched this team very closely during the Yukon Quest. I knew that they were extremely talented, especially his leaders: Jewel and George. I wasn't sure that they would be able to keep up this speed however - especially if he continued to minimize their rest so early in the race.

I didn't rush as I watched them both leave. There were other mushers preparing to go as well. I had no reason to take off before I my plan dictated. There was a *long* way to go to the finish line. I put booties on the team and sorted my gear again. I said my good byes to the checkpoint volunteers and some of the folks from the village. I pulled out of the checkpoint 20 minutes behind Sonny.

I was beaming with a huge smile because my dog team looked fabulous as we departed Nikolai. I stopped them on the exit trail, they stretched out, did their business and were literally screaming to go. My team isn't always that animated so this vocal enthusiasm surprised me.

It was almost noon and it was warm. The sun would soon be directly overhead and the afternoon temperatures would climb. But, the pace of the race was fast and if I stayed in Nikolai until darkness fell, I would lose all of the advantage that I had gained over the last 300 miles.

When we got out on the river, under the sun, I calmed the team and didn't ask them for any speed. There was no shade out there and I would rather they move ahead at a conservative, methodical pace. The temperature zapped most of their high end speed so they simply carried on with a steady gait. I was pleased and told them so. I stopped enough to let them roll in the snow and that rejuvenated them regularly.

In a very few miles, we came upon Hugh's team. They were sluggish. I pulled up beside him and he stopped. As I passed, he frantically asked me if I had seen his Norwegian knife in the trail. I had seen nothing since leaving Nikolai so I shook my head. He was very upset and mumbled something about 'one in a million gift'. I could tell that his attitude wasn't helping his dog team so I was glad that my team was significantly faster and we soon left them behind.

This run was sunny and slow. But overall, it was steady. There was enough snow on the trail that the dogs could actually grab bites of snow and I could easily use my brake. All in all, things were looking up!

The afternoon also brought a lot of aircraft activity. The race was exciting and aerial spectators were out in force. Both Sonny and Hugh had left Nikolai before me and I hadn't caught Sonny yet but I was looking for him. I did notice a helicopter hovering over the trail about a mile ahead of me now and then. When it returned, I watched it slowly travel above the race route and I knew that they must be directly above Sonny. I was sure glad that the helicopter was on top of him and not me. I was still a little pissed off from the incident in the Dalzell Gorge and I thought that I might give them "the bird" if they flew over me again. So, it was probably best that they follow Sonny.

It was interesting to watch the helicopter inch closer and closer to McGrath. In essence, I had a bird's eye view of Sonny closing the distance to the checkpoint. As I watched the helicopter, I knew that I wouldn't catch him before he arrived. It would have been nice to get the Penn Air Spirit Award that Danny Seibert gives to the first musher into McGrath.

I pulled into the checkpoint about 15 minutes behind Sonny. The crowd was still gathered and very excited. I asked "How long ago did he leave?" Everyone responded with a resounding "He's still here!" Interesting! Well... I wasn't staying in McGrath. My goal was to camp in Takotna, about 15 miles farther along the trail. I gave my leaders a "Gee" and they turned off of the main street and down onto the river.

Getting in and out of villages is often tricky. The people who live in the area know the trails intimately - just like we know the back roads and short cuts near our home - so, sometimes the trail marking isn't as specific as it could be. This was one of those times. In years' past the Iditarod route paralleled the south river bank for nearly a mile. So when my team got down on the river they turned left, took this known route and got on a well traveled trail heading west. I looked around for trail markers, as a musher does constantly, and saw none. I knew that we were headed in the correct direction so I wasn't too worried. I continued to scan the wide river and suddenly saw trail markers on the opposite shore line! Darn it!

A musher never knows where the bad river ice is located or what hazards lay ahead, so following the marked trail is smart. I stopped the team and considered my options. There was a pretty rough but obvious snow machine path traveling from my well traveled trail back towards the trail markers. I asked the team to take that trail and they obliged me. It was a slow trudge, but it got the team excited because we were nearly headed back in the direction of McGrath and the dogs saw all the people standing along the shore line.

I kept the trail markers in sight and we jumped from snow machine path to snow machine path until we came to the markers. We had to do a "U" turn in order to head west and not go back to McGrath. The dogs were excited about this strange and different route.

I wondered what the fans thought as they watched us zig and zag across the river bed. I must have lost 5 to 10 minutes during this "adventure", but I knew that it was probably smart to follow the markers. We traveled a mile along this trail on the north shore of the river. Then it started to veer to the south. By golly if this stupid trail didn't hook right into the well traveled trail that we had originally been on!

I tried not to be frustrated because the dogs thought "That was fun and different." So, I grinned and said to the team "Now that we are warmed up and ready - let's head to Takotna!" I did wonder, later on, if the folks in McGrath went out and fixed the crazy zig-zag route that my team took or if the remaining 50 dog teams all went over the same loopy route.

I wasn't exaggerating when I said the team was warmed up. They were ever! We were really gelling and moving rather fast with Quito in single lead. The conditions were still a bit icy and hard so the team had little resistance pulling my sled 10 mph towards Takotna. The whole team was destination bound! Sissy was the only dog who had never been to Takotna but she seemed as excited as everyone else. I still had her partnered with Mac and when he got excited, I could feel it!

There are some sizable hills about 10 miles into this run and I am always inspired to ski pole and run up as many of these hills as I can. I get this inspiration from memories of my first Iditarod. My team had contracted kennel cough just prior to the start of that race. By this point on the route, I had already left 7 of my team mates at previous checkpoints because they were coughing. I was down to a 9-dog team and they weren't the spunkiest group. These hills seemed ENORMOUS to me that year. I tried to run and push my sled to help the team, but we stopped a lot. It took me a heck of a long time to cover 15 miles that year.

Ever since then, I have played a mental game with myself. I tell myself that there is no reason that I shouldn't try as hard as I did that first year. It's almost a competition to see if I can beat my previous year's efforts. So this year, I ran, pedaled and I ski poled and we simply rocketed up over those hills. Before I knew it, I had all of my weight on my brake bar as we made our way down the other side and into the Takotna checkpoint.

24 hour Rest - Takotna

When we arrived I heard a loud siren that I had never heard before! It was announcing the first team to arrive to Takotna. It was us! How exciting. There was a whisper in the air about how fast we were traveling and the pace of this year's race. I knew that we had made pretty good time but I hadn't really looked at the overall stats since arriving in Nikolai. I had rested my team for the exact same number of hours as I had on the previous race up to this point. So for me, it was an easy to determine: when moving, we had a faster overall speed than ever before!

Takotna was comfortable and welcoming. I will have to say that the absence of long-time race fan and checkpoint "mother", Jan Newton created an obvious void. She was the heart of the checkpoint for many years and had constant positive and cheerful energy. I did see some of the same volunteers that had been there for years and they were trying to keep the checkpoint as upbeat as they could. I was happy to walk into the main building and see the same cook in the kitchen. That man can cook some eggs!

I parked my team just beside the checkpoint building and situated everyone on a longer leash so that they could stretch out and find themselves a comfortable bed in the straw. Biscuit and Schmoie were back near my sled and Quito was up at the front. Everyone looked for a cozy spot. I could tell that the dogs weren't "dog tired". They were ready to rest, but they took some time to settle down. I liked them being in this condition. They didn't *need* rest, but they *appreciated* it.

We were now starting our 24 hour mandatory rest. It was about 7PM when we arrived. After the 24 hours and some additional time to equal out for our starting differential, it looked like we would be allowed to leave around 9PM the next evening. Perfect!

There were a few children in the crowd and they asked if they could pet my dogs. I thought of myself at that age and petting dogs was the center of my universe. So, I guided the kids over to Mac and told them that they could pet him, but only when I was around. Mac was settled in and didn't mind the extra attention. They asked me who my smallest dog was. I pointed out Boondocks and they fell in love with her. Who wouldn't fall in love with Boonie?

The crew looked good. Chica and Nacho were snug. Scruggs settled in and fell asleep immediately. Willie and Waylon circled a bit before becoming comfortable. The "queen" (Quito) up front wouldn't even lay down, so I finally moved her back near Scruggs. There was a lot of media and fans gathered around her while she was up front, so maybe she felt like she had to entertain them. I certainly feel that way some! She settled down when I moved her.

I talked to the reporters and media. I honestly don't remember our exact conversations. Of course everyone always wants to know what I think about everyone else's race strategy. However, I never get too worried about where all of my competition is before Takotna. I feel like the race is still just in the beginning stages.

Mind you, I was aware of some teams making interesting "moves" early on in the race. For instance, I knew that Kelly Maxiner was trying the exact same strategy that Martin has used the previous year. He ran 200 miles from the starting line before resting. I also knew that, funny enough, Martin wasn't sold on this plan from last year, because he was trying something entirely new. As I mentioned, I saw Martin's gear scattered around the Noikoali checkpoint and knew he and his Happy Trails huskys would be ahead of me when they left their mandatory rest at that checkpoint. Of course, I also knew that Sonny was mathematically ahead of me and would soon arrive in Takotna after his rest in McGrath. I had also passed Hugh out there, so I knew he was nearby. I had seen Nicolas Petit, Aaron Burmeister and Jeff King in Nikoali so I knew that they were close to me as well. But, as for the other 60 or so teams racing with me, I didn't know enough to comment to the media.

For the first 300 miles, I believe that focusing on my competition is somewhat pointless. All I *should* do in the beginning of the race is focus on my team. I need to mush my dogs at a perfect pace for them. For 300 miles, my plan is prearranged and I rest at predetermined spots. These spots are chosen to: #1 - utilize the dogs' excess race energy and excitement, #2 - refuel and rejuvenate the team consistently and #3 - keep everyone (dogs and humans) positively energized. If this plan enables us to arrive in Takotna near the front of the race pack, then it's clear that we have one of the strongest teams in the race. After Takotna, I will begin to factor in my competitions' actions. Even then, my team's capabilities will ultimately define my race.

After tending to the dogs, I knew that I really just needed to leave them alone and let them sleep. When I stay outside and mess with gear or food, I distract the team from getting solid sleep. They will continually look up from their rest spots to see what I'm doing and if I'm preparing to leave. So, I went inside.

My first priority was to find out where Allen was. The Race Comms folks usually have printed Official Time Sheets floating around the eating area and I searched for one. Apparently, the printer hadn't been working, so someone helped me with the computer. It's a complicated machine with a huge screen on the wall and I was not tech savvy in my current condition. Finally we pulled up the information and learned that Allen was in Nikolai. That brought me a huge sigh of relief. Knowing that he and the dogs had made it through that nightmare trail and were (hopefully) in one piece resting in Nikolai made me almost giddy.

I ate some eggs and sausage and made my way to the sleeping quarters. I hung up my gear to dry and sorted through my drop bags. I filled my thermos and brought it with me. I was going to force myself to drink a half gallon of electrolyte water

every few hours. I needed to build up my hydration to pre-race levels. I had exerted a lot more energy than in a ‘normal’ race. I wanted to be 110% hydrated in next 24 hours.

Takotna is the one checkpoint where I allow myself the luxury of making a truly cozy sleeping spot. In other checkpoints or camp sites, I am comfortable, *somewhat*. Normally, at temporary rest spots I can sleep, but my comfort level won’t allow me to sleep for too long. That’s the point. But Takotna is a different story. This is where I hope to become completely refreshed. My goal is to sleep for at least 50% of the hours that I am there. I never nap any longer than 3 to 4 hours at one time. But, I do this a minimum of 4 times. When I depart, I want to feel like I just started the race.

The first nap is always my best. When I lie down, I know that the dogs are all resting well and have full bellies. All of us need to bank a little bit of sleep. I am not thinking about the remainder of the race... yet. My mind is centered on “here and now” during this first nap. So, I slept hard for 4 hours and woke in a bit of a haze when my alarm went off.

I went outside and checked on the dogs. I gave them a small meal and tucked everyone in again. No one really got up to eat so it was an easy chore. I wasn’t going to do too many chores right now. I was going to wait until we had been resting for at least 12 hours before I massaged and walked the dogs. This would also be the time to look through my sled and gear for damages. It’s always nicer to do these things when there is some daylight.

So, by about 2AM, I was ready for my second nap. But, I really wanted to find out where Allen was before lying down again. Knowing that he and the team were safe made me rest more peacefully. I went and looked at the computer screen and tried to do some math in my head. I calculated that he would arrive in another 4 hours. That meant that the next time I woke from my nap, he’d be here. Perfect!

I snuggled back down in my “bed” and feel asleep. I was sound asleep and I heard someone stepping almost on top of me and walking around my head. “What the heck?” I looked up at the culprit and saw it was Allen. I had obviously miscalculated. It is very easy to do such a thing with your own run times, much less someone else’s. I went back to sleep with Allen right next to me.

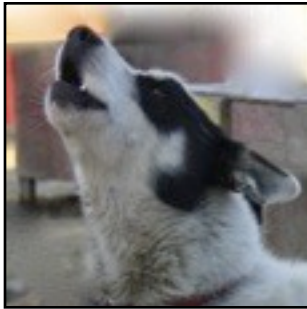
It’s amazing how quickly 24 hours goes by. I had repacked my sled, walked all the dogs and set all my dog jackets and booties beside the dogs. It is easy to let minutes slip by in the last hour of my “24” and I wanted to be ready exactly when I was allowed to leave. I ate a meal with Allen and we heard a few more trail horror stories. Someone asked me if I’d seen Jeff King’s GoPro video from the trail. I said that I didn’t need to see his video, I saw the trail out of my own eyes!

My official ‘out’ time was 9:06PM. I was ready by 8:45PM and the checkpoint volunteers helped walk my team down to the restart line well before 9. Allen was walking up and down the team giving everyone a pep talk - including me. The time keeper said that I had a few minutes to wait so I started a team howl and every dog responded. It’s always refreshing to have a good howl before getting back on the trail.

The time keeper jumped the gun and told me to leave at 9PM. I knew that we were leaving 6 minutes early, but I didn’t argue. We were off!



Part Three – Takotna to Unalakleet



Overland through the Hills

The team had eaten pretty well during their “24” and a few dogs needed to “do their business” as we left the checkpoint. I tried to keep the team slow so that everyone would warm up and no one would get left behind. But, it was difficult.

So we rolled up the hill away from Takotna. The dogs were completely rejuvenated and I was thrilled. It seemed like I had stopped at the perfect time to maintain their energy. They were definitely as strong now as they were at the race start. I tried to get my GPS unit out so that I could measure how far and how fast we were traveling. I took it out of my pocket, turned it on and the unit spent a long time acquiring satellite data. During this time, we probably traveled 5 miles! So much for technology high in the arctic.

I was a little bit worried about moving so fast, but at the same time I didn’t want to hold up their enthusiasm. We motored up and down large hills. I didn’t ski pole, pedal or even speak to the team. They obviously didn’t need my help.

We passed a few teams right away. I almost felt guilty as we flew up behind them and nearly passed them while they were still moving. I would see a headlight out in the distance and then ... BAM! We were right behind them and Quito was wanting to pass. So the run from Takotna to Ophir was over in a flash.

We pulled into the Ophir checkpoint and there was a bit of a panic. No one expected us yet. The volunteers had pulled out the food drop bags for the two mushers that I had passed. So they scrambled around and did their best to get my bags to me ASAP. As I waited, I walked up through my team and put a snow hook out in front of them. I didn’t want anyone getting the idea of rolling in the straw only 20 feet away. The dogs were quite lively. Quito kept rubbing her fanny on the mainline and Schmoe kept up his “woo woo woo”. I rummaged through my bags and picked out what I needed for the next section of trail. I also ratcheted a straw bale to the back of my sled. My plan was to camp in about 50 miles. It took me 20 minutes to pack - which I chastised myself for later! A musher needs to be efficient in checkpoints and 20 minutes isn’t efficient!

We burst out of the checkpoint and booties flew everywhere. My dogs certainly have a bad habit of taking off their boots whenever we stop. So over the next few snack stops, I put boots back on everyone. The trails were still hard, fast and icy. I was hesitant to let anyone run for too long with out boots.

I was pretty comfortable as well. I had a heavily loaded sled now but it held everything I might need and more. I had a full thermos of water and snacks for myself. My GSP was functioning now so it calculated the overall distance we had traveled since it reset. My goal was to run the team at a steady pace, stopping regularly to snack them and after 50 miles we would stop to sleep.

I was driving the sled that Allen built for the Yukon Quest this year. It was extremely flexible yet durable. There was a large compartment behind me that held most of my heavy stuff: dog food, salmon snacks and my dog food cooler. On the top of this rear rig is where the dog jackets are stored. These jackets make a cushiony “seat”. I told myself that I would sit down at least 5 minutes every hour to give my legs a rest. I tried to stick to this schedule and I think that it really helped. The remainder of the time I stood on the runners and ski poled with both arms.

All year long, Allen and I train to be able to ski pole. We have a work out regime that uses a lot of stomach muscles and triceps. We actually have surgical tubing attached to the wall in the work out room and one common exercise is to “stand on your sled and ski pole”. Anyhow, people always comment on our double ski poling during the race and how we never let up. I think that our dogs can go just a little bit faster and a little bit farther with our assistance. So, really, why not?

The wee hours of the morning came and went. The dogs moved with great ease and quite fast. I had been watching Biscuit closely since Nikolai and he didn’t always have a tight tug line. He is the one of the bigger dogs on the team but he is also one of the toughest SP Kennel dogs *ever*. He had just won the Yukon Quest with Allen. The team’s speed at the end of the Quest was about half the speed that we were traveling now. I think this shift of gears was a little hard on the bigger, more muscular dogs. Schmoe and Chemo, who are both over 50 pounds, also seemed a little “tight”. The only big dog who loped like a puppy at any speed the team went, was Mac. He looked phenomenal at 5, 10 or 15MPH. And he knew it!

Running a 70 mile leg doesn’t mean we run 70 miles straight. I stopped the team regularly to give them snacks and regroup. They never seem to want to stop but they appreciated the quick roll in the snow or a bite of salmon every so often.

Finding a good camp spot is an art. Often the location is determined by my overall plan. Sometimes there are several legs of a plan to consider. I don’t want to stop too soon on the first leg because that will make my next leg too long. If I am planning three legs then I *really* don’t want to stop too soon on the first one.

Therefore, I might pass up a perfect camp spot because it's just a few miles shy of our goal. I watch my GPS and the trail. I keep my eyes peeled for a spur trail or an open clearing for a camp spot. It's best to park the dogs as quickly as possible when I find a spot. But in the end, the quality of the camp spot is more important than the amount of time it takes to get the team situated.

I must have been doing something right because an ideal camp spot appeared right when we needed to stop. The main trail took a sharp left and a lesser used trail continued straight. I slowed the squad and asked them to continue straight. They knew exactly what that meant! I maneuvered my sled forward until the back of the runners were just off the main trail. This put my wheel dogs 15 feet from any traffic with my sled as an obvious barrier. Just in case, I walked behind my sled grabbed two race markers and made a big "X" behind my sled: "Don't go this way!"

I gave straw to everyone and put on dog jackets - their comfort was my highest priority. I made some dog water and mixed a meal for myself and the team. I was super efficient with my dog chores and soon made a bed for myself. I nestled in the straw right between Mac and Schmoe. They didn't seem to mind. I slept for 40 minutes.

I woke with a bit of a chill. That always makes me get up quicker. I find that if I run around or do jumping jacks for a few minutes my blood starts pumping and I warm up quickly. As I was doing jumping jacks, the Norwegian champion, Robert Sorlie, passed me. I bet he was wondering what the heck I was doing!? I got my team situated, repacked and was on the trail in no time.

It was a gorgeous day and the sun was coming out. We were destination bound again. The plan was to run another 70 miles. We were averaging incredibly fast speeds still, so I didn't think it would take 8 hours even with a few rest stops. Basically, the dogs would have an 8 hour "work day".

The team moved along. I had Quito and Waylon running together again. I liked watching the duo. I had dressed Waylon in a pink t-shirt to give him a little extra insulation while he slept at our camp stop. I kept it on him for the run as well. I was joking with the team and saying that "Waylon's not too proud to wear pink!"

The only dog who concerned me was Biscuit. He wasn't injured and he wasn't tired. Basically, the pace was too fast for him. His tug line was not tight and he clearly wasn't helping the team. It didn't surprise me because we were *moving*! I kept an eye on him and wondered if we'd slow down to a pace that he could work into. In all my Iditarods, the pace had always slowed down sooner or later. It didn't bother me if Biscuit "coasted" for a little while as long as it didn't bother him.

The trail before the Cripple checkpoint is tedious. It's one of the few sections on Iditarod that gets tiresome. This area has deceived quite a few mushers in the past. I always keep that in mind. John Baker even turned around here once because he thought that he must have passed the checkpoint. So, I maintained my focus, ski poled and tried not to peer around every corner looking for the checkpoint trail.

We eventually turned off the monotonous trail and jumped on a frozen river bed. The whole team knew we were close to Cripple now. The team picked up the pace - even more! We loped around a few bends in the river and there stood a camp of wall tents, dog teams and checkpoint volunteers ahead of us.

Through Cripple

I stayed at the checkpoint in Cripple many years ago. It didn't have the same "luxuries" as a village checkpoint: running water, heated building or printed race stats. So, to me, camping in Cripple is actually inconvenient. Checkpoints are only convenient if they are spaced apart at the exact distances that I want to cover with my dog team. So, I usually consider Cripple a resupply point, that's it. The Race Officials know this about me, so these days they aren't surprised when I don't stop for long.

I pulled in and asked the Vet to look at Biscuit. I didn't think there was anything wrong with him but Vets know a lot more than I do about heart beats and lungs. The Vet took out his stethoscope and after a few minutes said he seemed fine. Just as the team stood facing the exit trail, Biscuit started to get impatient. After a minute or two he was jumping and pulling in his harness. He couldn't help himself!

I emptied my sled of all the trash that I had accumulated during my camp and repacked it with more food and gear. There was a 55 gallon drum of heated water nearby, so I filled up my personal thermos. I stayed for less than 10 minutes. I was more efficient than in Ophir, at least!

I had glanced at the Official Time Sheet when I signed into the checkpoint. Both Sonny and Jeff were ahead of me on the trail. Strategically this meant that they were going all the way to Ruby to take their 24 hour rest. I tried to do a little math in my head to calculate how far ahead they were but that nearly got me dizzy: I had taken my 24 hours at Takotna but they had both spent a few hours in Cripple. I would give my team another break before Ruby and they probably wouldn't. After adding and subtracting, I decided that I would just do my best and see how the standings shook out in Ruby! My guess was that we three would be neck and neck on the Yukon.

We left Cripple looking great. I was proud of that team. They were hauling a heavily loaded sled but they still left the checkpoint enthusiastically. I had packed a lot of snacks and fuel. I wanted to generously snack the dogs at least every two hours.

The entire team was enjoying the beef snacks that we had pre sliced and packed in individual “16-packs”. During a snack stop I would run up to the front of the team as soon as I stopped so that the front of the team didn’t run back to me first! I grabbed quite a few human snacks as well. I was trying to keep my energy up and the homemade bars that we packed did the trick. They are the perfect combination of oatmeal, bananas, peanut butter and coconut. Plus, even in really cold temperatures they remain chewy.

The trail in this section is very isolated. The small rolling hills are covered with spruce forests. I ski poled constantly and the dogs never slowed. It was daylight and I looked ahead and followed the trail visually for miles over the ridges into the distance. We passed through one spot that had burned during a recent forest fire. All of the trees were still standing but the branches and spruce needles had been burned off. There were thousands of thin tree trunks spread across the horizon for miles. I could see forever.

We were heading north towards the Yukon River. We began to pass by very old cabins and mining equipment. Ironically, this area is called “Poorman”. Perhaps not everyone stuck it rich in these hills?!

I heard some motors behind me and looked back to see several snowmachines lined up. I had talked to a Norwegian musher, Tomas Waerner, and knew that he and some friends were traveling the trail by machines. They were trying to follow Sorlie in order to document his race for the Norwegian media. Sorlie is an important sports figure in Scandinavia. I stopped my team on a small lake and gave the group space to pass. I’ll just say that not everyone can drive a snowmachine. The last machine veered out into the deep snow and immediately bogged down. I didn’t hesitate starting up and passing it. I hate playing leap frog with snow machines on the race, but it’s really part of traveling in Alaska. The dogs don’t like how loud they are when they zoom by and I don’t like breaking the rhythm that my team has with a ‘stop and go’. Needless to say, I caught up with the other machines who were waiting. I shrugged my shoulders and pointed back down the trail. Sadly, this routine played out several more times before the group managed to pass me in one full swoop. But, then I heard that they took the wrong turn coming into the Ruby checkpoint and got stuck again. Traveling in the Arctic is never straightforward.

We got on an actual “road” about 40 miles from Ruby. It’s not plowed but it has large sweeping turns and reasonable grades. The route follows the ridge tops and gave me a gorgeous view off to the west. At some of the highest points along the ridge line, the wind gusts blew with enough force to clear the road of snow. The dogs were certainly used to running on grass, tundra and gravel by now. There were several patches of ice that caught my attention too late and I landed on my right hip again. Boy that stung! The dogs looked back patiently as I clambered to right my sled. I *really* didn’t want to fall anymore.

The route comes down off the ridge and curves around a wide corner. There was a creek that flows underneath the road. The culvert was frozen solid so the water wasn’t currently flowing *under* the road, but *over* it. It was obvious that the creek had been flowing for a few weeks because the ice build up on top of the road was generous. As we made our way across, the semi frozen ice started to crack underneath us. I managed to jump on top of the rear ‘sit down’ portion of my sled as the team broke through the ice and tromped through knee deep water. My feet stayed dry but the dogs’ booties got drenched.

My race plan seemed to be evolving. I still had a few miles before I was supposed to camp. But after we crossed the creek, I brought the team to a halt. I looked at my options and made a quick decision: we are camping here. Obviously, there was plenty of water to feed the team ASAP. I also didn’t want the dogs to run too far in wet booties. This change in plan would make our run time to the next rest spot (Galena) a little longer but that would be in the middle of the night. Night temperatures would be cooler and we might travel faster.

So, I set up a camp spot off the side of the road. My first priority was to get the dogs comfortable so they would sleep. I tied Quito, Nacho and Chica to the base of a road sign that marked the creek crossing. From that road sign back, I stretched out the rest of the team to the sled. They were parallel to the road, but about 10 feet off to the side. I stomped down spots in the snow and made straw beds for everyone.

The sun was shining, so I wasn’t too worried about anyone getting chilled. I put jackets on Quito, Chica, Olivia, Boondocks, Waylon and Pud. I always put a jacket on Pud. He has a thyroid condition and even though he’s on daily thyroid medication, I worry a little about him regulating his temperature. Plus, he really likes jackets!

I was able to make dog food quickly with the “running water” near by. And I heated up additional water for my thermos. I made myself drink an entire half gallon.

The trail was busy. A few snow machines passed us. They were people from Ruby out on a day trip. As I did chores several dog teams passed us. Sorlie’s team came by. I silently wondered if he had problems while passing the Norwegians on the snowmachines as well. Nicholas Petit passed us and his team wanted to ‘visit’ a bit more than I wanted them to. He even said, “Your camp spots are booby traps for my team.” The Iditarod Rules state that a team can not camp right along the trail. I think that the farther I can get my team off to the side of the trail, the better they will sleep without interruption anyhow. At only 10 feet, we were closer to the trail than I wanted. Luckily, I didn’t expect too many teams to pass me.

I didn’t unpack my sleeping bag. But, I did arrange a spot next to my sled that I could sit down comfortably and rest my legs. I cut some spruce trees and laid them out. I grabbed my gear bag and set it up as a back rest. I sat in the sunshine for a little while. I never slept, which was a mistake.

My mind was reeling. I was thinking about dropping Biscuit at the Ruby checkpoint. This team wasn't slowing down and our speed was too fast for him to keep up. I sure wanted him to finish the race with me. But it really wasn't fair to ask him anymore. I had never dropped Biscuit from any Iditarod team. I was a little bit sad and I wondered what he'd think when we pulled away without him. I didn't need to get emotional at this point in the race, so I shook it off and started to think about my next run.

We had a few more miles of running the ridges before we came down into the Yukon River valley. I needed to go through my Food Drop bags while in Ruby, pick out a few important items and then repack for our run over to Galena. The last 45 miles of this next leg were on the frozen Yukon River. I wondered what the temperatures would be tonight.

As I sat at the camp spot, the hours clicked by and soon it was time to go. I put dry fresh booties on all the dogs, fresh socks on my feet and we left our sunny spot. I got into a comfortable rhythm with both my ski poles. I once again knew that we were setting a blistering pace. Boy, this was a spectacular dog team!

Before long we were descending a long hill where the road was plowed. I started to see more evidence of civilization. We passed cabins and since it was now dark, I could see lights in the distance. I was excited and the dogs picked up their pace. We made a few sharp turns, following trail markers through the village until I saw what looked like a checkpoint building ahead.

I was surprised when the checkers asked me if I wanted to park in a long-term or short-term spot. I said "I'm not staying." They weren't really prepared for that. I tried not to be frustrated as they took a few minutes to decide how to park the team. Granted, not too many dog teams would actually blow through the Ruby checkpoint, but it certainly isn't out of the realm of possibility.

I got a little cranky when there was no Veterinarian nearby. I said, "I need a Vet right now." I started the process of dropping Biscuit. I took off his harness and attached a cable neck line to his collar. I took him off my team line and brought him behind my sled. A volunteer agreed to hold him until a Vet showed up. I rearranged the team and brought Schmoie back into wheel with his sister, Sissy. I talked to the team the whole time. I didn't want anyone to lose focus. I clapped a few times to keep their energy up.

It took me a several minutes of backtracking to find my Food Drop bags. They were a distance away from the team so I yelled "Keep your boots on!" as I rummaged through my gear. I kept shining my headlight back towards the team so that they knew I was watching them.

I got back to the sled and asked the folks standing around "How long ago did Sonny leave?" They said "No one's left Ruby yet. Sonny is still sleeping." Wow. I was surprised.

A Vet had found our team, we had filled out the necessary paperwork and I had turned Biscuit over to him. I gave Biscuit a good butt scratch before I left him behind. I was ready to go!

The Yukon River

We pulled out of the checkpoint with Quito in single lead. Since no dog team had left the checkpoint yet there was no dog scent guiding the way. It was pitch black, there were roads and trails everywhere and the trail markers were few and far between. We screamed downhill through the middle of town. I've been through this village enough times to know generally how to get to the river - pretty much just keep heading downhill. But we definitely got off of the marked route. We took a few very sharp turns, zoomed around cabins and over several large berms. I made an quick guess to turn to the left after a large snow berm. I was correct! A trail came in from the right, joined us, and there was an Iditarod Trail marker. We were very lucky that we didn't recreate our exit from McGrath!

When we trotted out onto the frozen Yukon I felt the power of the team again. I was happy that we had left Biscuit because these dogs were still pumped. I grabbed my ski poles and was determined to double pole until we reached Galena.

As far as my general race plan so far, I had kept my team under an "8 hour work day" in between resting. This run would probably be just a little bit longer. But, if I ski poled like a demon, perhaps I could shave some of that time off.

When you are in the lead of the Iditarod, you look back a lot. Since the Yukon has a huge riverbed, at various times I could see for several miles both in front and behind me. My concern was behind me. I wanted to know when my closest competition left Ruby. It was now a race! As I peered backward, I saw a multitude of headlights come down the hill in Ruby and jump onto the river. Either five dog teams were now right behind me or there was a group of snowmachines on my tail. I hoped for the latter.

I switched my thinking. Why worry about who's behind you? "Focus on your race, Aliy."

I started to work with the dogs and we made our way west. The run time from Ruby to Galena can vary from year to year. I have always been happy if my team could get there in less than 6 hours.

It was very dark that night. My headlight shined brightly on the backs of the dogs and created 'tunnel vision'. We traveled right down the middle of the tunnel. There was white, hazy frozen river off to the left and more of the same off to the right. I monitored my watch closely and stopped the team on a regular basis to give them snacks and check their booties. But, to be honest, I was getting pretty tired. I ski poled harder and harder to try and stay awake.

A few snowmachines zoomed past and that startled all of us. The dogs ran faster and I ski poled harder for those few minutes until my adrenaline subsided again. I started to really regret not sleeping at my last camp spot. Even a 10 minute nap sounded delightful right now. I couldn't stop ski poling because that was what was keeping me awake. I kept up a strong rhythm and every time I pushed the tip of a ski pole into the river ice it made a squeak sound. I concentrated on that sound.

I started to see visions out to the left and right of my tunnel. They weren't natural bumps and I wondered what they could be. They looked like big rocks in the middle of the river. The dogs barked last minute as we passed a group of guys parked on snowmachines. They had pulled just along side the trail and were videoing the team. They passed us and stopped several times and this actually helped me stay awake. It must have been the guys filming for the Iditarod Insider or perhaps Sebastian for his blog. Whoever it was, the minimal excitement of them passing us at two in the morning, while I was struggling to stay awake, was a Godsend. Whoever it was: I owe them some thanks.

When I finally saw the lights of Galena and I knew that I had survived another obstacle on my race. I shook my head, chastising myself for not sleeping when I could have. I had slept so well in Takotna that I hadn't worried too much about sleeping after that. But I had left Takotna nearly 33 hours ago. During those 33 hours, I had only slept once, for 40 minutes.

Physically I was still up to the task, but I was very slow. Mentally I was shot. Funny thing was, I could look at myself from the 'outside' and see that I just needed to sleep. I formed my plan for a very methodical checkpoint routine. My goal was now to get to a sleeping area as soon as possible.

I arrived in the checkpoint but my memory is a little hazy. I was greeted by a bunch of great people but I spent very little time interacting with the crowd. Race Marshall Mark Nordman was there and he presented me with a "First Fish Award" from Bristol Bay Native Corporation. After that, I refocused and tended to my dogs rapidly. Thank goodness no one needed a full body massage because I was struggling with each minimal task. I remember wrapping a few wrists and jacketing the entire team. But after that, I tucked tail and went indoors.

I took my gear bag, dog food cooler and clothing. I don't remember looking through the stats from the Official Time Sheet, but I know that I studied them before going to sleep because they were next to me when I woke up. My plan was set in stone regardless of what other teams were doing. I was going to stay in Galena for an 8 hour rest.

I found a cot, lay down my gear bag as a pillow and pulled my jacket over my head. I was asleep in seconds.

I woke to my alarm 3 hours later. I'm pretty sure I hadn't moved a muscle. As I stretched out my legs, they started to cramp. Yikes! I had forced myself to drink quite a bit during the last 12 hours but while ski poling down the Yukon, I had sweated profusely. These cramps were evidence of that. I walked around and stretched. I drank a bunch of water and took an electrolyte tablet. As soon as I got moving again, I felt 1000% better. My mind was focusing and my body was doing alright. I actually breathed a sigh of relief. I hadn't been that tired in many years.

I went out to my team and talked to everyone. I felt a little bad that I had just thrown snacks and straw at them 3 hours ago and gone inside. But, now they looked PERFECT! They had slept as hard as I did.

The dogs were all standing up, stretching and ready for the enormous meal that I had been soaking while we slept. I mixed additional kibble into the soupy broth and ladled out huge portions. If anything can make a dog musher happy, it's watching her dogs gobble down a big nutritious meal. Mac even looked up from his empty dish and wanted more! "Okay buddy."

I worked on my sled a little bit and talked to a few spectators who circled around me. Jon Korta, the Galena checkpoint manager, was there and he said "I'm real happy to see you acting like yourself again! I was worried."

I told him that I felt much better after my nap and that I might even have time for another short one. Gilbert Huntington was also there. Allen and I had raced against him in a sprint race the previous spring and he is a real 'dog guy'. There were a few kids who wanted autographs and the Iditarod Insider video guys asked for stories.

I repacked my sled and got completely ready to depart. But, an 8 hour rest is pretty long! So, when my full-bellied dogs curled up and went back to sleep, I walked back indoors, ate a full meal myself and followed my dogs' lead. I napped for another 30 minutes.

Upon waking up the second time, I was again at the top of my game. I scurried around in the checkpoint with determination. I knew what I was up against and my race plan was clear. I got out to my team well ahead of when I was going to depart. Mark Nordman had told me that I needed to stay an additional 6 minutes at this checkpoint. As you might recall, my 24 hour rest was 6 minutes shy back in Takotna. I was surprised that someone had actually caught the error. I had no problem correcting it.

We left Galena and, once again, were rocketing down the trail. It was mid day and I didn't expect the team to set a such a blizzarding pace due to the warmer temperatures. But, all was not right. I noticed immediately that Schmoe was stiff on his front shoulder. He was in the wheel position with Sissy, so he was easy to see. When he loped his gait looked normal but when we slowed to a trot I could see a weird gait. I stopped regularly to hand out meat snacks and tried to rub down his shoulder muscle. I wondered if he was cramping like I did or if he just got stiff after such a long rest in Galena. Either way, it looked like I would leave him with the Veterinarian in Nulato.

I moved Walyon up with Quito and the tandem trotted down river in front of the team. I had really been enjoying the brother - sister combo of Nacho and Chica in swing so I kept them there. I had Willie in the third spot by himself. I could move Walyon back, next to Willie, when I needed Quito to run in single lead. Scruggs and Clyde were paired next. Chemo and Pud were just in front of Boondocks and Olivia. I had Mac one position up from the sled running by himself and Sissy and Schmoe in the back. I still had spots for 16 dogs on my mainline, but only 14 dogs.

The sun started to set and the entire river glowed pink, then light purple. There were large icebergs on either side of the main trail that jutted up into the sky. The brilliant hues bounced off of the ice. It was absolutely breathtaking for the last few miles before sunset.

As we rounded the corner before Nulato, Scruggs stepped off to the side of the trail and slipped. He came back over and immediately started limping. I was shocked! I stopped the team and felt his entire front end. I was pretty sure that he had the same injury that Scout had at the race start. It happened suddenly and there was nothing I could do. We came around the river bend and I knew that I would now be leaving both Schmoe and Scruggs.

When I drop one dog, I go through a little depression. After sulking a while, I can eventually justify that dropping them is best for the entire team. But, WHAT THE HECK!?! I was going to have to leave two of my absolute powerhouse dogs at the same time.

These two dogs had been flawless this entire season. For Pete's sake, they were Yukon Quest champions on one of the toughest routes *ever*! They had made it down the most challenging part of this year's Iditarod trail (so I thought.) It was very hard to pull my mind away from a selfish little pity party.

But, as it happens during the Iditarod, my brain is always looking for problem solving solutions. And it found one! I began to think that since I had to drop both Schmoe and Scruggs, I needed to lessen my overall payload. Obviously, I still had to carry plenty of dog food, snacks and race gear, but I could get rid of my only "luxury" item on the race: my seat!

This solution might not seem logical from an outsiders perspective, since I still had over a third of the race to complete. Having a seat is pretty nice and even helpful at times. But, my logic went as follows: Schmoe is a big strong boy with power and strength. I always look to him for his cheerful energy and his constant "grind". Scruggs has been my 'go to guy' this entire season. I had told Scruggs that I was going to move him up to lead when we got to the western coast. When he's ready to go, there's no holding him back. Without these two dogs, I would definitely have less strength and enthusiasm. If I removed the rear section of my sled then the rig would weigh almost 15 pounds less. With out it there, I could also jump off between my runners with more dexterity and run with the team. So, when we pulled into Nulato, once again, I had a plan!

We pulled into the checkpoint and we were parked directly along the trail. Both Martin and Sonny's teams were parked there too. These two teams had passed through Galena while I was asleep. I knew that they were ahead of me because I had checked the Race Stats prior to leaving. Martin's dogs were just across the road from us. I looked up and down his team and tried to get a feeling of how they looked - but during a dog's nap isn't the best time to 'sneak a peek'. I messed with my dogs for quite some time and tucked them all into straw beds before I started to work on my sled.

Dismantling the sled took a lot longer than I anticipated. It was pretty obvious how rough the trail had been because parts of the sled were contorted at angles that they shouldn't be. I unpacked everything from my sled bag. I made a big pile of gear that seemed 'unnecessary'. I went through the pile twice and either packed gear back in my sled or put it in a 'return bag' to ship back home to the kennel. I was conservative and still kept all of my survival gear and a few 'extras'. Before going indoors, I had the sled completely revamped and packed. It looked pretty small *and* overloaded.

Martin walked outdoors as I headed indoors. He was singing and seemed positively excited. We said a few words but I was in a hurry to get a short nap and he wanted to start moving down the trail again.

I had just a few more 'to dos' before I could nap. I wanted to plug in my rechargeable headlight battery for one thing. I also thought that it might be fun to have my iPod to listen to on the trail ahead. I don't listen to music very often but I wanted to have it ready for the run from Kaltag to the western coast - just in case I needed some extra musical motivation. I also sat down at the Race Comms table and looked through the Official Stat Sheet.

At this point in the race, most teams have already taken their 24 hour and 8 hour mandatory rest stops. So, what you see, is what you get. The race was starting to shape up. It is very interesting to look at the run times between checkpoints and see who is traveling faster, versus who is resting less to keep up. There were a few teams with faster run times than ours, but we were holding our own. And it seemed to me that we would be leaving Nulato in the number 2 spot.

I made a quick meal and drank some water. I got my thermos ready to grab and go. One of the Iditarod Insider guys came over and asked me sheepishly, "Aliy, can I ask you when you plan to leave?" They are in a very tricky situation. Musher's are trying to be secretive and not share their intentions or race plans with anyone. But the Insider guys can't just stay awake 24 hours a days and watch for a musher to leave. They really wanted to sleep too! So, I told him that I was leaving about 11PM. I looked at my watch and realized that I needed to go lay down if I was going to sleep at all. I asked the Checker for a wake up call - something I *rarely* do - and found a cot. I slept for 20 minutes.

I woke up refreshed even though it seemed like a 2 minute nap, not 20! I walked outside and was ready to go in no time. The dogs perked up and stood up off their beds. I had reduced the length of my mainline, since I was now leaving Nulato with 12 dogs. My team was smaller, but my sled was smaller too.

We immediately trotted back out on the Yukon River.

The run to Kaltag is the last river section. We did it in the middle of the night and it was starting to cool off. This was the first time during the race that it seemed to be well below freezing. I put jackets on the dogs and bundled up myself. We can normally function in temperatures far colder than 10 or 15 below zero, but we had become acclimated to warm days and mild nights. So, it seemed a bit chilly!

About halfway to Kaltag, Chemo started to run with an awkward gait. He had a sore tricep during the Yukon Quest and Allen had actually dropped him after 600 miles of that race. However, when he returned to Two Rivers, after the Quest, it didn't look like anything was wrong. We were hesitant to start him back into training but after some muscle therapy and a few short runs he was bumped back up because he was 100%. Up until this point, I had wondered if he just had a cramp during the Yukon Quest. But, nope. His tricep injury had returned and I knew that he would be the next dog that I would have to leave. I thought for a fleeting moment about the race website and how bad it must look that I had to leave three dogs in less than 50 miles. I was sure going to be bummed to see Chemo go!

The run to Kaltag didn't take too long. We made a sharp right turn on the river, went into a familiar slough then popped out to see the village lights sitting high up on a bank far ahead of us.

My race plan was to resupply in Kaltag and then continue farther down the trail to a cabin about 30 miles away. I like to break up this run over to the coast into two sections. Some years, when I have chosen to run the 85 miles in one leg, I feel like the dogs (and I) really lost our speed the last 20 miles. So, to avoid this and keep everyone excited to go, I was breaking this run into two.

I arrived and quickly got the attention of the Vet. I told him about Chemo's past injury and he told me that he would take good care of him. I went through my Food Drop bags and repacked for the trail ahead. I really wanted to bring a lot of snacks and plenty of fuel for my camp spot. After only 7 minutes, we were on the road again. I was becoming more efficient... thank goodness!

The Portage Trail to Unalakleet

The trail that leaves Kaltag climbs uphill from the Yukon River valley for quite a ways. With a heavily loaded sled and one less dog, I could feel the team slow their pace. However, without my seat, I was able to jump on and off the sled quickly and help the team by sprinting up the many small inclines that dotted the route. I was happy that I had made the decision to remove my seat in Nulato.

It was the wee hours of the morning and still pitch black. I needed to be active or an early morning fatigue would kick in. We climbed and climbed and I kicked and ran. We were getting somewhere.

My destination was Tripod Flats cabin. BLM builds cabins across Alaska that can be used by travelers for shelter. They have two cabins on this section of trail over to the coast. I have always liked this location. The dogs would rest better being alone and most likely, I would too. We neared our destination and I could smell wood smoke. "Hummm... that meant that someone was there."

There is a circular drive into the cabin and I wanted to park so that I could leave easily should anyone else show up. Often times on the Iditarod, you feel like you are the only dog musher out there in the wilderness, but you aren't! So, I 'Gee-ed' the team to the right and we mushed past the cabin and several parked snowmachines. We came around the circular route and back down toward the Iditarod trail. I stopped the team as my sled pulled up beside the cabin.

Two folks came out of the cabin as I parked. They were the Iditarod Insider guys that I had seen in Nulato. They looked exhausted. I could tell that they couldn't believe I was here already. "Sorry."

They did a little bit of videoing while I tended to the team, but they soon went indoors. I followed them and hung up some of my gear over the raging wood stove. They had breakfast burritos thawing out on the stove and offered me one. I needed to get my dogs situated first, so I went back to my team. But, they sure looked tasty!

I wanted to make a large meal for the dogs so I needed water. There is a creek a 1/4 mile from the cabin where I had found water before. I walked for 10 minutes along the creek bed and thought that I might have struck out when I found a thin clear sheet of ice. After a few swift chops with my axe, I had "running water". I filled up my 3 gallon cook pot and another smaller bucket.

I got back to the team and everyone was sleeping soundly. I had a small predicament with my normal dog food making procedure. I usually have a cooler or ice chest that I use to mix fat and dog kibble with warm water. The kibble soaks up the water and some additional fat calories. But, when I had taken my sled apart back in Nulato, I had to leave my large cooler behind because it would not fit in my abbreviated sled. In my Food drops I had sent a smaller cooler to Unalakleet. That was still 50 miles farther down the trail. I hadn't intended to take my sled apart until then. So, I had no dog food mixing container. I improvised and filled one of my water proof gear sacks with the warm water, kibble and fat. I figured if the sack can keep water out, it can also keep water in. I went back inside the cabin and hung it up. The benefit of having an ice chest or cooler is that you can leave it outside and since its insulated, the food mixture won't freeze. Luckily, I was at a heated cabin where I could hang my bag of food.

The guys had left me a bottom bunk. Perfect! I had a set of ear plugs, thank goodness. I laid out my sleeping bag, took a warm burrito off the stove and jumped inside my down sleeping bag. I ate the tasty burrito while curled up and cozy. The burrito was so good that I got up and took another. I felt pretty bad, since they had only offered me one, but they were both asleep and I couldn't ask. I hope that they didn't starve the rest of the race.

I woke up to my alarm after a wonderful 45 minute nap. The snoring was still bouncing off the walls so I was careful not to make too much commotion. I went outside and the dogs look snug as well. It was daylight. I looked down toward the trail and just at that moment Martin's team trotted by. He looked over towards the cabin and I waved. I set my timer to see how long it would be until I was back on his heels.

Ten minutes later an enormous ruckus filled the sky. A helicopter seemed to appear out of nowhere and fill the sky above the cabin. The guys were no longer sleeping because I'm sure they thought World War III was beginning with that chaos. Thank goodness the helicopter only hovered above the dogs for a few minutes then went towards the trail to land.

As quickly as I could, I prepared to leave. I didn't need to waste time right now with an interview. I could just imagine the conversation:

"So, you just saw Martin go by?"

"Yeah."

"So, shouldn't you be chasing him."

"Yeah."

"So why aren't you."

"Because I'm talking to you..."

I hurried. As I was putting the last few boots on the dogs the reporter and cameraman appeared from the helicopter. They were dressed like they were at a downtown Anchorage winter cocktail party. I pretty much told the reporter that he should be ashamed to be dressed like that in Bush Alaska. He didn't get it.

The cameraman slipped a microphone on my jacket and asked a few questions as I packed. I was not terribly friendly. I'm sorry. But, all of this made me get my chores done faster, not slower. So, that was a good inspiration. Soon, I left the media guys behind. By golly, I really was trying to race!

I looked at my watch and I was exactly 45 minutes behind Martin. We had 50 miles to reach the Unalakleet checkpoint. I knew that we could catch him. That became my goal.

The trail was as hard as any trail I have ever mushed on yet. It was either ice or frozen tundra. The dogs had difficulty biting ice in order to 'drink'. I had to stop about every 30 minutes to let them find some ice to chew on. Chica had her own special technique. She would run far out into the tundra, even 10 or 15 feet from the team, and watch for small chunks of ice. She would pounce on one when she saw it. She looked like a coyote hunting mice.

We ran 2 hours and I saw the sign for the second BLM shelter called Old Woman cabin along this section. There are two trail routes here: one directly in front of the cabin (convenient if you are stopping) and one that bypasses the cabin entirely. We chose the bypass. I never even looked off to the right as we passed the cabin outlet trail. I always think that the more I look around, the more the dogs look around. I don't need Willie thinking "Gosh... look at that cozy little cabin over there. Maybe we should visit."

We were steady, but we weren't fast. I ski poled constantly. Because of the fact that I stopped the team so often to drink, we really weren't making good time. I often looked at the trail and wondered if Martin was stopping his team at all. I never did see any spots where he let his dogs roll around, eat ice and cool off. It had me a little worried. Some mushers carry a cooler of water, so he might have been doing that instead of letting the dogs eat ice.

Several hours after Old Woman we came to a section of trail that always seems endless. I could see *forever* and it all looked the same. Rolling hills, with one swath of icy trail. And I could see no dog team ahead of us. I had convinced myself that we were faster than Martin, so I was starting to get a little bummed. Maybe we had slowed down?

Finally up ahead I saw a guy on an ATV 4 wheeler. He sat on the side of the trail and watched us go by. He started up his machine and passed us. I yelled at him "How far ahead is Martin?" He just shook his head and drove out of sight. Hummm. Several miles later we passed another guy on a 4 wheeler. The engine to his machine was turned off and when I knew that he could hear me, I asked clearly "How far ahead is Martin?"

The guy said "He's not ahead of you! I drove all the way from town and I didn't see him."

Huh? What the heck?! Martin stopped? Why didn't I see him?

I was confused. Finally, I saw one of the Iditarod Insider guys off the side of the trail setting up the perfect "natural mushing video". I ruined it because I stopped right in front of his camera and yelled, "Where's Martin?"

"He's at Old Woman. Didn't you see him?"

Holy cow! I was in first place. Gulp.

We trotted out onto the Unalakleet River and headed down stream. The ice was horrendous and the dogs had zero traction. I directed them off to the side of the river where there were some grasses growing up through the frozen sheet of ice. They could at least stand up without falling down. I skated up next to everyone and took their booties off. At least if they were barefoot they had a chance of having some traction.

I was a little worried that one of them might cut a pad or scrape a foot. It was amazing how poor the trail conditions were. Off to the right and left of the trail there was zero ice or snow - only grass blowing in the wind. There were lots of people out since it was mid day and the temperatures were warm. I looked off to my right as we came into town and I saw the Blueberry Hills. These were the next obstacles on the Iditarod route. It was pretty evident that there was even less snow up in the hills than down in the flats. I had thought that we had left the 'no snow mushing' behind but, obviously not. I had to laugh out loud at the sight of my fantastic sled dog team pulling my winter rig across tundra and dirt. Weird!

I saw the checkpoint ruckus from a ways off. People were lined up everywhere. Kids had "Go Aliy" signs and everyone was taking pictures. There was certainly some excitement in the air. I gazed around quickly to see if any friends or family had made it to Unalakleet. I saw no one.

The dogs trotted up into their designated parking spot and rolled around. I offered them plain water to drink and gave them dry kibble to snack on. It was obvious that people were very excited and it made my team a little anxious. I laid down straw for them and a few seemed to get comfortable. Dr Stu Nelson and several other Veterinarians went through the team and found them to be 100%.

Mark Nordman was there and asked if I could put a few minutes aside to receive the 'Gold Coast Award' from Wells Fargo. "Well, of course!" I was presented almost 2 ounces of gold, a nice trophy and a dog team print from Jon Van Zyle. "Sweet!" The crowd was crazy excited. Everyone wanted a photo of me. It took me an awful long time to focus back to the dogs.

Finally I looked over the berm of pushed up ice and saw Moira, Meghan and my Dad. *Yeah!* I gave them all big hugs. We all walked up toward the checkpoint building together. It was so great to see them. I had so much to tell them and not enough time or words to even begin the story. Their faces just showed me how worried they had been about the race course. I couldn't even start to describe it! But, all they needed to do was look out the window of the airplane they flew in on and they knew some of the story.

I sat and ate more than I had the entire race. I tried to get a printout of the Official Stat Sheet but the printer wasn't cooperating. That seemed to be my luck. I forgot a few things out at my sled and went to find them. There were fewer people by the dogs now and I actually was able to spend a few minutes with my team and focus on them. The dogs hadn't really eaten very well but I could understand that with all the commotion around them.

I went back to the checkpoint building and went into one of the rooms that was set aside for mushers. There was actually a bed. Wow! That could be dangerous. I asked the Checker for a wake up call just in case my alarm misbehaved. I slept for 50 minutes.

Waking up from that nap was excruciating. My whole body pulsed in pain. I don't know why. After a week of little to no sleep, I think that my nervous system is so screwed up that my neurons are just firing like a machine gun when they first wake up. The pain only lasts for a few minutes. But, it is nauseating.

Also when I first wake up, my face is swollen and my eye lids can barely open. I know that I am a horrifying sight. When I woke up from this nap I greeted Moira, Meghan and my Dad and immediately said "I feel a lot better than I look." Of course, it was somewhat of a lie, but I didn't want them worrying about me anymore than they already were. I just needed to get back outside. The chill of the winter air would reduce the swelling in my face and wake me up. Or at least that's what I convince myself.

I didn't have much time to get my gear together and get down to my team. I wanted the team to rest for 4 hours here but not much longer. Martin had arrived less than an hour after me. I knew that Jeff was also barking at my heels.

One of my big concerns was whether to put booties on my dogs. I had spent quite a bit of time taking them off when we traveled on slippery ice. It sure looked like there was a lot of that on the trail ahead of us. I wanted to protect their feet but I didn't want anyone slipping and spraining a shoulder muscle because they couldn't get any traction. I decided that since we still had 300 miles to go I needed to leave Unalakleet with booties on everyone. I would never race a 300 mile event without booties. If I had to take them off in route... so be it.

I had gotten this far by making smart decisions while racing down the Iditarod trail. I would try to keep my mind focused on one thing at a time. I would continue to do the best that I could do. That's all I could do.

Part Four – Unalakleet to White Mountain



The Struggle along the Western Coast

I left the checkpoint with a enormous group of spectators watching. I actually hate leaving the Unalakleet checkpoint. The exit trail is not logical for a dog. We ask them to follow a route that is not commonly traveled and runs over slippery ice and down along a lagoon. However, lucky me... Quito knew exactly where we were going and she tip toed out of the checkpoint in single lead. She was worth 10 times the weight of gold that I had just won. But, if you offered me twice that much, I would never sell her!

The trail to Shaktoolik was a nightmare. It parallels the sea shore but does not run on the ocean itself. What do you find along the sea shore? Driftwood. Lots of it! Apparently the tides in western Alaska had been quite high earlier in the year because there were enormous

piles of driftwood everywhere.

I was the first dog team to try to negotiate the Iditarod route in this section and all I can say is that I did my best. There was no snow to stand up trail markers so the route was barely marked. The best the Trail Breakers could do was tie red flagging to pieces of driftwood or ice bergs. We meandered in and out of mazes of wood and ice. Quito and I would both be looking in the opposite direction and to see where we thought the trail was. For the first 15 miles before the hills began it was very hard to follow the trail. The teams behind me definitely had the advantage of following our scent.

I took the hardest fall of my race about 20 miles from Unalakleet. The team had crested a mound of frozen ice and the drop down the other side was a 6 feet sheer plummet. None of us saw it until the last minute. The dogs jumped down onto the ice below. But my sled stalled over the small summit, crested and when it slowly went down the 6 foot drop it turned sideways. I held onto my handle bar with all my might and when the sled hit the ice, I hit hit the ice. I fell onto my right side and my head snapped over and pounded the ice.

The team stopped. I was motionless on the ice. I knew that my head hit *hard*. I had even heard some gruesome sound when it hit. I laid there only about a minute and then stood up. I was dizzy but I made myself think about the trail, the dogs and the race. I was lucky that I didn't get a little loopy.

The rest of the trail over to Shaktoolik was simply scary. It reminded me of the Farewell burn 500 miles earlier. The tundra ground cover was showing and there were enormous mounds of grass that got in between my brake and runners. Sometimes all I could do was pick my feet up, stand on the runners and hold on. I couldn't use my brake or my drag for fear of busting something! These are big hills too. On a "normal" race year I press my brake with all of my weight in order to slow the speed of my team down these hills. But, not this year. We motored! I can't believe I made it up and down some of those hills in one piece.

We came to a section of trail that was along a creek in between two large hills. The ocean ice had washed up onto the shore in huge ice bergs. We tried to pick our way through the tangle of hazards. We came to a stop when a few dogs got their harnesses snagged on driftwood. I walked up and untangled them. The team was so incredibly patient at this point. It was like we were a platoon of soldiers and we were all just looking for the next bomb to drop.

I got back on the sled and tried to navigate for the team. I would occasionally run alongside to help them pull the sled. I put my foot down to run and it slipped in between two smaller ice chunks and got stuck. The team kept moving forward, I wrapped my arms around the handlebar and yelled "Whoa!" We came to an abrupt stop when my foot anchored the team. But I had already felt my hamstring stretch and pop.

I had an incredibly difficult time getting my foot out. It was pinned in at angle. My toe was literally shoved up under the ice. Thank goodness the dogs were patient and waited for me to get my axe out. I chopped at the ice all around my foot. I loosened up the left side, near my boot and moved my leg enough to pull out my foot. But, my hamstring was throbbing. I knew that I had finally really hurt myself. Honestly... it was about time.

I wasn't too upset because it was amazing to me that I wasn't badly hurt days ago. But, now I couldn't run very well on my left leg. I kept trying and my hamstring would sting. So, I limped up hill or hopped on my right foot.

I actually thought out loud "I wonder if I've hurt it as much as I can? Can I hurt it more if I just run on it?" That's simply crazy! Of course, I could always hurt it more. I tried to stop running but that wasn't natural and sometimes I simply had to run. That's when I started to ski pole harder. The hills between us and Shaktoolik were not gonna keep me down!

For years people have asked me what my favorite section of the Iditarod route is. I have always said the Blueberry Hills between Unalakleet and Shaktoolik. I'm not so sure now. I still like it. But this year, I couldn't do it justice. One of the main

reasons that I love it there is that I can really help the team in those hills. I always run and whistle and sing and we zoom up hill with enthusiasm. This year, I ski poled and on the steepest slopes I limped and hobbled... a lot.

We finally made it through the hills and down onto the lagoon that parallels the ocean before Shaktoolik. The wind started to pick up. Figures.

Nothing was going to be easy. I certainly knew that by now. The wind was probably gusting to 30 mph.

The lagoon was completely clean of snow. The ice was frozen solid and when I shined my headlight down I could see ocean plants frozen in the thick ice. That was pretty neat.

When the wind gusted, it became obvious that I needed to take dog booties off again. The dogs would try to run forward but the wind would catch them and blow them off to the side. Booties gave them zero traction. I stopped on a magical sheet of ice where I swear I could look down 10 feet and see the sea floor. I decided to only take off their front booties. That way they could navigate and steer with more traction from their front feet but their rear feet would still be protected from ice injuries.

I wasn't moving around much so I started to get a chill. I felt my hamstring really tighten up. I got out my wind gear and dressed as the dogs continued toward the checkpoint. There was seldom a trail marker but I knew where we were going. Better yet, Quito knew where we were going.

It took us 6 hours to navigate the trail to Shaktoolik. I've done this section quite a bit faster. But, I just couldn't be too upset about our time. We had actually *found* the trail and it wasn't an easy task!



Shaktoolik to Koyuk - Across the Ice

The team looked strong coming into Shaktoolik. Sissy was really impressing me. She was my final choice for the team and she was performing like a Rock Star. Sissy had never finished Iditarod or Yukon Quest, but she didn't seem to be letting up now. She absolutely *loved* running next to Mac. Pud was also unstoppable. He's as tough as they come. He doesn't have the silly demeanor that Sissy has, but of course, he has seen a lot more races through out his career. Clyde looked great. He worked like a champion and never let up. He was such a young dog but his talent and drive made him stand out from the others. My front end was as level headed as they were at the start. I moved Waylon up with Quito when I felt like she wanted company and I moved him back to run with Willie if he seemed tired or she had to navigate tricky situations.

It sincerely surprised me how good they looked when I felt so bad. When the trail is that rough, it doesn't seem to effect the dogs like it does the musher. They are able to navigate bare ground and icy obstacles easily. And there is such little resistance to the sled that the team can pull it at amazing speeds.

In Shaktoolik we parked behind the checkpoint building. When I got off my sled, boy, my hamstring was sore and tight. I had to jump around a little on my good leg, just to loosen up a bit. It hurt. I was still able to go up and down the team and put on jackets and snack everyone. I had some Ibuprofen in my med kit and I took some before I went indoors. I wasn't sure how this injury was going to effect us as a team. If I was a dog, I would have dropped me there.

The previous checkpoints were so busy with enthusiastic spectators that my team hadn't eaten as well as I hoped. And Shaktoolik was the same. The dogs would gobble down a meal while out on the trail - no one stepping on their tails or tripping over the mainline - but in checkpoints they were leery. So, I mixed my cooler full of dog food and packed numerous snacks of meat, fish and fat. My plan was to feed them on the trail, in between Shaktoolik and Koyuk. That would mean that we would have to haul a heavier sled and we would stop several times for a longer duration. But, heck, the team needed to eat and this seemed like the best option.

I went indoors and sat at the table. I undressed from my heavy winter gear even though I wasn't planning on staying too awfully long. There was a heater just to the side of the table and it blew warm air right at my back. Ohhhh. Delightful. If my gear would just be that dry and warm when I put it back on, I'd be in heaven.

I ate some stew that was warm and tasty. At least two bowls. I looked at the Official Stat Sheet and things were certainly interesting. I saw that Jeff was bearing down on us and Dallas had made a big move. Martin was right behind us too. I could set my team up to win the race here but, by the same token I could set us up to lose.

It is tricky to guesstimate the exact amount of rest that you want your dogs to have. But, sometimes, it's even trickier to figure out how much I need to have. I clearly remembered my low point in Galena and I didn't need to hit that again. That would ruin our chances of winning for sure.

Our run time to Shaktoolik was 6 hours -- the dogs hadn't nearly reached their 8 hour work day peak. But, I felt like I was suffering a bit and needed some quality down time. So, in the end, I decided that the dogs would get 3 hours of rest. That meant that I would be indoors for a little over an hour and hopefully I would sleep for about half of that.

Jeff came indoors while I was contemplating my race plan. He was wired. I got up and walked back to an empty cot. I set my alarm for 30 minutes and also asked for a wake up call. I didn't want to sit around and watch Jeff go through the same strategy planning routine that I just had. Plus, I was pretty sure that he would leave as soon as I left. I wondered how much he and his team had 'left in the tank'. Only they knew that!

We left Shaktoolik and the team had no hesitation. We were all rested and ready to go. Mentally, the finish line seemed a lot closer.

The wind was blowing a steady 25 mph into our face. I was dressed in all of my wind gear including goggles. I tried to ski pole and help the dogs but my body acted like a sail in the wind and blew against us. We moved faster when I ducked down out of the wind behind my sled. It was upsetting to not be able to help the dogs. I had trained and conditioned all year to ski pole across this section of flat frozen seas ice.

Since I had taken off my seat, I couldn't actually sit. I had to squat down on the runners. My left leg was very stiff and my knee didn't bend very well. So, when I squatted I would kneel on my right knee and balance my right toe on the rear of the right runner. I kept my left leg at a 90 degree angle on the left runner. My leg would cramp every once in a while so I would have to stand and stretch. Whenever I stood, I could feel the team slow down because the wind blew me back like a sail.

The dogs didn't like the wind either. They had their ears laid back and their wind jackets whipping in the breeze. I had put neck lines on everyone. My thought was that an extra leash attached to their collar would help them not get blown backward by the wind gusts. I had booties on them all. Luckily, the ice was covered with a hint of snow so they had traction. I stopped them often to snack and I fed them a pretty big meal about an hour from Koyuk. They were hungry and they ate every little bite. I knew that I wouldn't have to give them a big meal in the next checkpoint. That was the plan.

The sun rose as I was crossing the frozen ocean. I could see land off to the right but the ocean seemed so vast. The wind had a dramatic effect on the ocean. There were pressure ridges where big frozen ice sheets had been blown together. We climbed up over these hills of ice. There were also gaps in the ice sheets where the wind had blown the sheets apart. I grabbed my ski pole once and put it down into the space between sheets. I hoped that it didn't widen much more. A swim in

the Bering Sea would be a race obstacle that I'm not sure we could actually survive. As we got closer to the land on the north side of the frozen sea the ice became more slippery. The minimal amount of snow that had given us traction was blown clear. There were sections of ice that were bright blue and other sections that had gravel or sand showing.

I could see the village of Koyuk ahead of us. The sun was directly above us now and the ice glistened everywhere. The dogs tippy-toed around sharp blocks of ice and skated this way and that. I could see where we were supposed to come off the ice and into the village, but I wasn't sure how we'd actually get there. If a bomb had gone off in the frozen ocean, blowing ice bergs every direction - this is what it would look like. Quito stiffened up as she skated across a slippery spot. Her movement was not natural. At that moment, I knew that she had hurt something. I slowed the team.

Now that I was going slowly and I had stopped for 10 minutes to feed, I began to think that someone surely would catch me. I periodically looked back, but I didn't see anyone. I slowed the team even more to navigate a route through a dangerous section only 100 yards from the sea shore. I directed Quito to the left and the right. I started to really worry about her. I didn't want anyone else to slip and hurt them self this close to the checkpoint. So we were crawling. I looked back again and saw a team quite a ways back. However, in the time it took me to cover the the last 100 yards, it caught me. The team must have seen us and galloped directly for us.

We got off the ice and came up into the village streets. They were literally just sheets of ice. No matter where we tried to maneuver, we slipped down to one side. The team trotted right up in front of the checkpoint building. But as soon as we stopped, we slid 20 feet off the road down into the ravine. A minute later I saw Jeff's leaders pull up right next to us. I hadn't even signed in yet!

I got off my sled and slipped all the way up to Quito and Waylon. I grabbed them and on hands and knees, I crawled up onto the road and down towards a parking spot. The entire village was an ice skating rink. People were slipping and falling everywhere. No one had traction. And there were people *everywhere*!

The Vet crew came up to me and asked about my team. I grabbed Dr. Griffiths, one of the Vets, and led her up to my leaders. I asked her to please give Quito a very thorough exam. That dog was my quarterback, my ace in the hole, my one in a million. She is smart, driven and has sass. She knows her job and she likes it. Some dogs put their head down and just 'do their job'. She revels in her job. She is the leader. She is my leader. I'm sure that we could continue with out her, but it would be a different race.

I messed with the other dogs and put on jackets and blankets. They had been working for 7 hours against the wind and they needed a quality rest. I massaged Olivia for a while and then put a heavier jacket on her. I had her partnered with Boondocks for much of the race and the two of them were curled up together in the sunshine. Olivia and Boondocks have similar energy but their appearances are night and day. Olivia is the supermodel: blue eyes, buxom body, gorgeous markings and every photographer on the race snaps endless portraits of her. Of course, she even poses. Boondocks is more like a waitress at Denny's or Waffle House. A *fantastic* waitress, none the less. She does her job and works incredibly hard to get everything right before you even ask. She is so good, you don't notice her. She's also a little rough and gruff. Boondocks is a waitress who will work hard but will snap at you if you don't tip her enough!

A crowd was standing around my sled and dogs the entire time I worked. I looked up now and then and talked to a few people or asked what the weather was supposed to do. Finally, I looked just 20 feet behind me and there was Jeff. He had two spectators. I stood up straight and looked out at my crowd. I asked a few people near the front "How come you guys don't go visit Jeff?" A woman looks straight at me and said "He's kind of a jerk." Well... there ya go! I laughed out loud.

Dr. Griffiths spent 20 minutes examining Quito and she told me that nothing seemed serious. She told me to spend a good deal of time massaging her left tricep and right bicep. She might have strained something while navigating the ice. After I massaged her for 15 minutes with Algaval, I dressed her in a fleece jacket that has pockets for chemical heat warmers. This would keep her muscles warm and loosened up while she rested. (Now, if I could just have one of those for my leg!) I shook my head, as I walked away. I would do the best I could for Quito and if she seemed stiff when we were ready to leave, then I would drop her. Gulp!

I went inside and the checkpoint building was a bustle of activity. I focused on my food, my thermos and drying out my gear. I wanted to get everything situated so that I could leave as soon as my rest was up. I planned to stay 4 hours. I didn't know what Jeff was planning. I heated up a few egg and sausage sandwiches and a Mountain House pasta meal. I looked over and saw Jeff sitting at the table by himself. "Well, why not?" I went over and sat next to him.

I've got nothing against him or most of my competitors, for that matter. Mind you, we are serious competitors. I want to beat him. He wants to beat me. It's simple. All dog mushers are individuals and have different approaches to the race and the sport. Jeff has been incredibly successful and I admire him for that. I don't always agree with him but that shouldn't come as a surprise. Right now, I knew that he had a fantastic dog team and they were sure showing it!

Jeff turned his nose up to my choice of my food. I'm not a very picky person and his luxury seam-sealed meals of slices of filet mignon didn't seem any better to me than my freeze-dried stroganoff. I changed the subject and asked about his dogs. I really liked one of his small back females with blue eyes. I asked who she was. (In mushing lingo this means: what is her lineage?) He said that she was a genetic combination of his Yuksi line and a hound sprint lineage from Sweden. Interesting.

Jeff asked what my plan was. I told him that I was going into the back room to sleep. He grinned and said “Sure you are!” I really was.

Jeff had lost a very close race one year when Lance Mackey had told him the same thing and then snuck out the door while Jeff was sleeping. I’m a pretty honest person. I want to beat Jeff, but I want to beat him fair and square. So, I got up and went to the back room and laid down directly in front of the heater. I set my alarm. A few minutes later, I heard a commotion. I looked up to see Jeff setting himself up for a nap with his legs stretched out across the hallway. I would have to step over his legs to leave. Ha! I guess he was planning to sleep like that!

I slept for 50 minutes. My leg had stayed warm since I was directly in front of the heater. After waking up, I laid there for a few minutes and stretched. Ouch! I wanted to really help the team in this next section of trail so I was hoping my leg would stand up to the task. I found some Ibuprofen in my gear bag and swallowed a few more tablets.

When I went outside there were quite a few other teams at the checkpoint now. They were lined up in front of where I was parked. Each team had either slid off to the right or the left of the icy road. I wondered how I’d navigate the slick route with out ending up on top of one of these teams.

I walked up to Quito. She looked up at me. “How’s it going, girl?” She didn’t give me much of an expression. I leaned down and removed her heated jacket and rubbed her triceps and biceps for over 10 minutes. This really was the worse case scenario. In a situation like this I would normally walk a dog around for 10 or 15 minutes to warm up his or her muscles before even setting foot on the trail. But, the only spot she could walk was a pure sheet of ice, sloping down hill. Lovely. I decided to come back to her in a few minutes. I distracted myself by taking some of the heavier jackets off the rest of the team, folding them up and packing them in my sled.

I messed with the rest of the team when I should have been focused on leaving. I left wind jackets on all the dogs and insulated jackets on Pud and Boondocks. Of course Waylon had on his t-shirt too. I also decided to keep necklines on everyone. If they slipped they would be held to the team by both a leash on their collar and one on the harness. They didn’t have the same freedom with a neck line on but most of the dogs didn’t want any freedom when it came to being blown across the ice. I wondered how bad the ice and wind would actually be.

Finally I took Quito on the shortest ‘stretch out’ walks of her life. We basically walked in a 6 foot circle. From what I could tell, she looked good. Dr. Griffiths rechecked her and said “I think she can go.” Whew.

Both Jeff and I prepared to leave. I had walked my team out onto the icy road just ahead of my parking spot. He trotted his team past mine - jockeying for position right away.

The trail conditions were awful. If I thought they were bad before, I was mistaken. Jeff’s team got to the end of the road and took a sharp left. The trail *always* goes to the left. I let a few of my dogs tinkle and watched Jeff head down toward the frozen sea. I commanded my team to follow with a “haw”. Quito looked back at me with a question in her eyes. I looked around more closely and there was a race marker straight ahead of us in the bushes. There was *no* trail, just some markers.

As I stood there deliberating, my loaded sled slid down the ice into the ravine along the road and anchored us of any forward movement. Quito was on the far side of the road following the markers she had seen. The team was stretched out in between the two of us.

I yelled back at the spectators and yelled, “Is this really the trail?” I was pointing towards Quito. No one knew for sure but there were certainly markers. And I looked to my right to see Jim Gallea, the Checkpoint Race Official, running after Jeff. So, I took that as a good sign that he had gone the wrong way.

All I could do, was crawl on my hands and knees up on top of the icy road. I used the mainline like a belay rope on Mt. Everest. Hand over hand I crawled across the icy sheet. I passed Olivia, Boondocks, Pud, Clyde, Willie and Waylon. They were all secured to the line with both necklines and tug lines - thank goodness - or they would be spayed out all over the ice. Quito, Chica and Nacho were on the far side which was full of bushes. I got to the front of the team and grabbed the mainline and heaved my sled up out of the ravine. As soon as I got it moving, Mac and Sissy were able to climb onto the road and the whole entourage skated over to our side. My sled followed the dogs, picked up a lot of speed and flipped over when it hit the other side.

This was certainly one of the best ‘exits’ I had ever made from an Iditarod Checkpoint. I looked up and a red parka caught my eye. It was Bridgett! I yelled with a smile “Hi Bridgett Watkins!” I quickly wondered why Allen’s daughter would be in Koyok and where Allen was right now. I was hoping he was in a better situation than I was at the present.

Now my team was in one big clump. I started to sort out one dog from another and here came Jeff. He was dead set on getting out of the checkpoint in front of me. He gee’d and hawed and pulled his team around my big mess. It took me just a few more minutes to sort out our tangle. I was in a hurry - *believe me* - but my dogs aren’t the kind of dogs who react well to yelling and rushing about. So, I tried to stay calm as Jeff’s team got farther and farther ahead.

I finally got sorted and the team could now follow a fresh scent left by Jeff’s dogs. To be honest, that made it a lot easier. Not only that, but we could see his team off on the horizon and my dogs got excited at the chase. So, we soon caught up to him and I even had to use my drag so that I didn’t run up on his sled. For the first 2 hours, we traveled at the same speed. I stopped several times to mess with my dogs but I never lost sight of Jeff.

The trail was as bad as it could have been with out being an open ocean. When we traveled along the shoreline it was chock full of icebergs that had washed up onto the beach and frozen at different angles. There were gaps and treacherous holes in between the bergs. I was very happy that it was daylight and the dogs could watch their steps.

The wind started to pick up as well. The weather forecast was still calling for 30 mph wind with stronger gusts. When we trotted across sections of trail that were smooth glare ice the wind would actually blow the entire team in the direction of the gust. It would affect the sled the most because it acted like a big sail. So, during a big wind gust, the dogs could put their shoulders into the wind and travel into it. But, when the sled caught the gust it would actually pull the dogs backward. Mac was in wheel with Sissy and he was pretty irritated by it. He's a big dog to be blown here and there. All I could do was use my brake to try and slow our progress but that would soon stop the team. So, we traveled in a zig zag fashion getting blown all over for several hours.

Finally the trail climbed up a hill and off of the sea shore. We traveled through the hills and that gave us a little protection from the wind. Jeff started to pull away from me then. He is smaller than me and his sled was smaller. I was carrying a full cooler of soaked dog food. The last meal they had eaten was on the ice before Koyuk. My plan was to feed them about 12 hours apart. I was a little bummed because my team is usually very fast in the hills. My mind reeled over and over about how to keep the same pace as Jeff.

We were only about 3 hours from the Elim checkpoint now. As we traveled into the sunset and back along the frozen ocean, I formulated a plan. I would stop in Elim for exactly one hour. I would feed my team their big meal and let them nap. That would doubly rejuvenate their energies. But, I knew that the village crowd would be very excited to see us. That was a problem. I didn't want the dogs encompassed in a crowd of well-wishers again while they tried to eat and sleep.

There was one more minor issue. The checkpoint building in Elim was closed to mushers, so I couldn't get out of the weather. There had been a death in the community and they needed that building.

So I decided that while the dogs were napping, I would work on my sled. I would remove all excess weight. I remembered Allen telling me that my drag weighed about 8 pounds. I wondered how much less Jeff weighed than me. Probably more than 8 pounds! I was sure that I had other baggage in my sled bag that I could shed as well.

We slowly made are way past a fishing village along the coast. The fish nets were hung and the boats were pulled up on shore. No one would live there again until winter was long gone. From the look of things right now... winter was far from leaving. We finally got on a road that connects this fishing village to Elim. There are trees in this area so it gave me a false sense of security about the wind. I caught myself saying to the team , "Maybe it's not so bad."

We came down the street into Elim. The lights were bright in and around the checkpoint. There were people *everywhere*! I pulled in and the team was flanked on every side by excited folks. I couldn't blame them. I signed in and saw that Jeff had arrived 20 minutes before me. Darn!

Elim to White Mountain - Challenges Continue

I asked the checker to park my team as far back behind the building as possible. I told him that I wanted him to keep the crowd away from my team. He looked like I had punched him in the stomach. "You want me to keep the kids away from you?" I smiled and said "No, no, no. I'll come and talk to everyone. I promise."

But, I knew what I had to do to have my team rest. So, after we parked the team, I gave them a huge meal, took their bowls away and then gave them straw beds. I quickly took off booties and put on a few blankets. This took me less than 10 minutes. The checker had told the people to not crowd me. They were trying but I could see young kids starting to come my way. The Vet crew had looked through my team, given Quito an "A- OK". I walked up to the two Veterinarians and asked "Can you guys please do your best to keep people away from my dogs? I'd really like them to sleep a solid hour." They said they'd try.

So, then I walked away from my team and out into the crowd. I kept walking away from my dogs so that I brought the crowd with me. The people were so happy and excited. I signed autographs and posed for pictures. I talked about the trail and how happy I was to be in Elim. I spent 10 minutes with them. For as much time as it took from my race plan or my tight schedule, it empowered me. These people were rooting for me, praying for me and they were standing here at midnight on a dark and windy night just to shake my hand. It was overwhelming!

Finally I went back to my sled. The Vets were standing sentry. I thanked them. They said that the dogs had been sleeping well. Yeah!

I completely unpacked my sled. I opened up a 'Return Bag' and started to fill it with non necessary items: extra runner plastics, extra human meals, spare dog jackets and blankets. I took out my tools and removed the drag on my sled. I still had my brake. Why did I need an 8 pound drag as well? I repacked and made a large thermos of water for myself. I was nearly ready to go. I sat down on my cooler for 5 minutes to rest my legs.

I hadn't focused on Jeff much. I had my job and I new that the race would be won on the trail not in the checkpoints. He had a race plan of his own. Whether that correlated with mine or not, I don't know. When an hour was up, I was bootying dogs. I stayed just a little longer than I had planned. By chance, I left just minutes behind Jeff.

After meandering through the village streets, the trail turned out onto the frozen ocean. The trail report had said that the ocean ice was frozen solid for 4 miles. After that, the trail headed up into the hills because the ocean was open water. My goal was to run up these next 20 miles of hills like I had never run before.

The team look great going through town. We got to the edge of the ice and I looked out into the dark vastness. I stopped the team because a few dogs needed to pee.

Quito stood up front in single lead. She was ready to go and started to bark her distinctive “Ar ar ar.” Waylon was back with his brother for now. I walked up and down the team just checking with everyone and giving each dog some praise. I got back on my sled and gave them my customary “Ready?”

They all lunged forward in their harnesses and Quito took off with out us. I saw a blaze of grey fur run off onto the frozen ocean. She was gone.

I stood with the rest of the team looking out into the darkness. Needless to say, it was a moment of panic for all of us. The dogs were restless. I was stunned. Willie was the most vocal, barking: “Where did Quito go?!” All I could say was “I don’t know buddy.”

We stood at the edge of the sea ice for 2 or 3 minutes. I hoped that she would notice that her team wasn’t behind her and come back. Then I had a minor panic attack and wondered if she had caught up to Jeff. I knew he wouldn’t stop if he saw her trailing him. So, I started yelling her name - *loudly* - out toward the horizon.

Quito has a bad habit. When she is resting in her straw bed at checkpoints she, understandably, wants to be comfortable. I keep her secured to the rest of the team by a leash. She has plenty of freedom to move about and find the ‘right’ spot to nap. But, sometimes, she thinks she needs just a little more freedom. In both Koyuk and Shaktolik she had chewed her leash completely off. Then she would curl up anywhere she pleased. She never leaves the team so it never concerned me too much. Quito is a special dog and she deserves special privileges. When I woke the team in Elim, she still had her leash attached. What I didn’t notice was that she had *nearly* chewed it in two. When she charged ahead, it had snapped.

The trail is marked by 3 foot wooden race lathe. They have ‘glow in the dark’ stickers at the top. Whenever I shine my headlight onto a lathe marker it glows brightly to indicate the route. These lathe are also used to signal ‘danger ahead’. When they are fashioned into an “X” formation you better watch out because a hazard is near.

The sea ice leaving Elim was full of sharp cornered icebergs and pressure ridges. So there were “X”s everywhere! I looked out from the edge of the sea ice where the team stood and there were glowing markers in every direction!

I started wondering if Quito even knew what direction to go. Silly me! I went back to my sled and asked my leaderless team to head down onto the ice and at least look for the trail. Nacho and Chica gladly took up the slack of their now “missing sister”. We trotted ahead about 50 yards. I didn’t want to go too far in case Quito came running back to us. I didn’t know what to do. She could have been a mile away by now.

As I looked out onto the ocean I turned my headlight beam on high. I still saw glowing markers everywhere. But, I saw something else: a pair of markers weren’t quite the same color as the rest of the race lathes. I walked out farther, away from the team, and yelled for Quito. I kept looking at the “strange” set of markers off to the right. Finally I thought “What the heck, I’ll go see what that is.” I got 20 yards from the “hazard” and it was Quito’s eyes glowing in my headlight beam. She sat there and was looking at me. “Here’s the trail, dummy. Aren’t you guys coming?”

I shook my head. She would never leave us. People say a lot of things about how “crazy” sled dogs are and that they don’t even care whether you are on the back of the sled or not. Well, obviously Quito cares! She had been sitting out there the whole time, watching. She was smack dab in the middle of the Iditarod trail waiting for her ‘slow boat’ team to catch up. I walked up to her and said “Would you mind terribly coming back to the team with me? We are in quite a state with out you.” I grabbed her harness and lead her back. A few dogs barked at us when we came back into view. I can’t imagine what they were saying. So, I put Waylon up front with Quito and we started down the trail. Needless to say, we were all wide awake at this point even though it was 2 in the morning.

The route stayed on the ice for just a little ways and then left the ocean and headed up into the hills. These were some pretty large hills for the end of a race. I worked incredibly hard. In all my years, I have never ski poled as hard as I did for those miles. We finally got to the top of Little McKinley and looked down the long decline onto Golovin Bay. Right then and there I knew I had made a bad mistake.

The downhill trail was barren of any snow or ice. It was rock hard tundra and mud. I had taken my sled drag off in Elim in order to shed excess pounds. But, now I had no way to slow the team. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. We literally, plummeted down the hill.

We went at our top possible speed - gravity was in control. I, on the other hand, had no control whatsoever. I was scared to death. I could only tap my brake every so often when I saw a patch of ice in the trail. The dogs were trying to stay ahead of my sled as it roared directly behind them. We ran like this for 20 minutes.

I think back to it now and I can’t believe I kept my rig upright. The top of the route is an incredible side hill and I leaned off the left side of my sled in order to not roll head or heels to the right. I was constantly hitting frozen tussocks and bouncing off rigid ruts of solid mud. I cursed my sled revision the entire time. I drove with such physical intensity that my arms and legs muscles never relaxed.

When we finally got to the bottom of the mountain and out onto the Golovin Bay, I let out a stress relieving sigh that made the entire dog team look back. Oh my goodness. I couldn't believe I made it!

We were now traveling on the frozen ocean again. My arms were quivering from exhaustion. I tried to focus on the here and now. When I did I realized that the adventure continued. The ice we traveled on was once again pure sheets of glare ice. There were no ripples of texture or grains of sand for traction. The USA Olympic figure skating team could have practiced on Golovin Bay.

We were headed east toward the village and there were plenty of trail markers that had been drilled down into the ice. So I could see a trail out ahead of us. But, seeing the trail and actually being able to follow it are two entirely different things. The wind was blowing 30 mph with occasionally gusts to 40 mph. When the gusts hit us, the entire team was blown to the south - the sled, the dogs and myself. Quito and Waylon tried to arch their way towards the markers but my sled would catch a gust and we'd be blown off course again.

All I could do was talk to the team and say "Let's do the best we can." I shook my head again and almost laughed. This race was really starting to become unbelievable. If we could actually find the finish line, it would be amazing!

The rest of the route in Golovin was spectacular. And not in a good way. We left the ice several times and crossed actual sand bars. I had to run beside the sled and even push it. The sand wasn't frozen and running on beach sand in my enormous winter boots was quite the task. I can't believe I could do it. We even climbed several sand dunes. I thought "Maybe I'm hallucinating." But, nope. Soon enough the route had us back out on the frozen ice skating rink. It was very obvious to me that if the wind picked up much more no one would be able to travel in this section.

Finally I arrive in the village of Golovin. There are never race officials there, but there are always spectators. I came up off the ice and onto Main Street. I stopped to simply regroup. There was a small crowd gathered to watch us. I think I was nearly laughing out loud and the ridiculous trail conditions. As I sorted out Mac and Sissy who had gotten their legs over the mainline I looked at the front of my team and they were completely tangled around a telephone pole. Yikes! Every dog loves to lift their leg on a big tall pole and Nacho is no exception. He had drug the rest of the team off to the right and they proceeded to wrap them selves in a knot.

At this point, I wasn't going to get upset. I walked up to them and began to sort. Our dogs weren't used to running with neck lines and they couldn't have gotten more tangled if they had tried. I was probably there for 10 minutes. I talked to the spectators the entire time and even signed a few autographs. Finally, I got the team sorted and we headed through the center of the village. The overhead street lights were very bright and seemed foreign.

The race route goes through town for about 200 yards and then turns a sharp left around a garage. Then it turns a sharp right and goes back out onto the sea ice. We took the left and ran directly into a man on an ATV 4 wheeler. Oops.

My leaders ran off to the left to avoid the machine and there was no stopping the rest of the team on the ice. I yelled "Whoa!" They came to a stop but only after encircling a big metal tractor trailer unit. It was the size that a small truck would haul. I asked the man to stand on my sled just so it would stay in one place. I skated around, literally, and tried to get the dogs out from behind the unit. They were pretty convinced that they were headed in the correct direction. Plus, the container unit that we have back at the kennel is full of dog food - so I'm sure they associate *good things* with containers. We must have been tangled here for another 10 minutes. It was really very frustrating. I was laughing now because of how incredulous the whole situation was. The harder I struggled the more I would slip and fall on my butt.

Finally I got the team in somewhat of a organized fashion and headed in mostly the correct direction. The nice man wanted to help me get the team back out on the ice and he asked if I wanted him to drive his ATV (with tire chains) ahead of me to show me the correct route. I said "No thank you." My team and I had made it this far. We could manage.

We left Golovin behind and I felt like I had been there for hours. We might have been. I hadn't looked at my watch for a long time and it seemed that we were making very poor time. I got wrapped up in a mental downward spiral for just a moment. The dogs really pick up on that so I did my best to think positive.

I started to ski pole like a demon and we made our way across the ice toward the village of White Mountain. Physically, I was very tired. I knew that there was now a light at the end of the tunnel and I could nearly see it. I wanted to stay positive for the team but I was tired and I kept drifting mentally. The last few hours into the White Mountain checkpoint are hazy for me. I know that we stayed on course all the way.

When we arrived I was elated. That section of the Iditarod had been the worse yet. I had to smile when someone told me "It will be easier from now on." It hadn't been easier yet. Why would it be easier now? I couldn't imagine how it could be more challenging. But, I was completely convinced that whatever lay ahead from White Mountain to Nome would most likely be the most difficult part of the trail. I was almost silly about it.

At the checkpoint I was greeted by the media, fans and villagers. They were excited and happy. It was 8 in the morning and it was cold. The folks didn't stay out too long and socialize. One photographer asked me why I was so wide awake when I should have been exhausted. I admitted to him that I had taken a "No Doze" caffeine pill just after leaving Golovin. In addition to that, I was simply ecstatic to actually have made it this far.

I got the feeling right away that the media had crowned Jeff the 2014 Champion. His run times had been consistently faster than mine for the last 200 miles. He was now an hour ahead of me. Only I knew how much time I wasted looking for Quito or tangled in various spots in Golovin.

We were an hour behind Jeff now. An hour is a lot of time, but I thought we might be able to do it. I was no longer worried about Quito. Whatever little soreness she had back in Koyuk was long gone. Every other dog on my team was 100% fit and had great attitudes. They were the best team I have ever raced. They knew where the finish line was. I also knew that they would do anything for me. Anything.

I was still worried about my hamstring but it seemed to loosen up during a run. I couldn't push off with my left leg but I could put weight on it. That was good, right?

I tucked the dogs into straw beds and gave Quito an extra long leash so she could curl up anywhere she wanted. My plan was to sleep as long as I could. Since I had an 8 hour layover that meant I could get at least 3 hours. I headed up to the checkpoint building and hung up my parka and clothes to dry in the boiler room. I sorted through my gear so that when I woke I wouldn't have to arrange anything.

I went into the sleeping room and saw Jeff. Once again he was sleeping sitting up in the corner. I had actually unpacked my sleeping bag for this rest. I planned on really sleeping hard. I got my gear bag situated as a pillow and got very comfortable. I was super cozy as I drifted off.

I didn't ask for a wake up call but my alarm woke me in a heart beat after 3 hours. I didn't waste much time getting up because I had a large meal of dog food ready for the team. I went out to the common area in the building and saw Bridgett and Ryne. Wow! What a great surprise. I asked Bridgett if I had actually seen her in Koyuk or if she was just a mirage. She said that she had been there. A friend from Nome was flying his airplane along the trail and she hitched a ride. She said that they barely made it to Koyuk before I pulled out. She had seen me crawling on all fours across the icy road. I said, "That was just the beginning."

Ryne and BJ had snowmachined the 77 miles from Nome. They mentioned more than once how windy it was in the blow hole and near Safety. The weather forecast was for the same now: 30 mph winds, with gusts to 40 mph. It wasn't going to be pleasant on this next run.

The three of us went down to the dogs and I fed them a huge meal. Poor Ryne and BJ wanted so much just to pet or cuddle with the dogs. Race rules of course prohibit that but I caught Ryne 'coo-ing' to Sissy and Mac since they were closest to her. It was neat to have a couple cheerleaders on my side. Especially since it seemed like everyone else had written me off. Apparently Jeff King was going to be the next 5-time champion.

The dogs ate great. They gobbled up everything I laid in front of them and asked for more. Boy, that got me to smile. I started to fuss with my sled and the Race Official walked over. He said, "Jeff tried to sabotage your race by burning your sled." Oh my!

Of course he was joking. Jeff had fired up his dog food cooker and a cardboard box had caught on fire. The wind picked up the box and blew it under my sled. It singed the mainline that attaches my dogs to my sled. Someone had seen it and rushed to put out the fire.

Tyrell Seavey was standing next to the Official. Tyrell is an experienced musher (and a Seavey). He has many, many years of mushing knowledge. He said, "It doesn't look too bad Aliy. But you might want to just add a safety line in case the main line breaks at the burned spot."

I hadn't planned on this time consuming activity, as well as my other chores. I was now in a rush. They saw me contemplating my options and the Official said "I'll allow you outside assistance in this circumstance since it was by no means your fault." Within seconds I said, "Okay. Tyrell, can you fix it for me?" People thought it was funny that I should ask Tyrell - did I mention he is a Seavey - to fix my sled.

I got my gear situated and ready to go. The dogs were content and that made me super happy. I laid out snacks, booties and wind jackets for all the dogs. I had about two hours until I left. Bridgett, Ryne and I went back up to the checkpoint to have a bite to eat.

Judy Carrier, my neighbor, was a checkpoint volunteer and she got me hot water and some snacks. Dallas had just woken up so he sat red-eyed at the kitchen table. The conversation was mostly about the finish of the Yukon Quest. Both Dallas and Tyrell (who updated me on my fixed sled) know Brent Sass very well. I hadn't spoken with Brent since he was medivaced off the Yukon Quest only 75 miles from the finish line. But, all this talk did nothing but reinforce the idea that the last 77 miles of this race - were going to be challenging.

I sat inside while Jeff's team left the checkpoint. A few people watched from the kitchen window. I chose not to. I certainly wanted to see him again before the finish - but I didn't want to watch him now. Call me hard-headed. I *really* wanted to beat him.

It was soon time to leave and I headed down to the team. Ryne, Bridgett and I stopped at the village store and bought two bottles of that '5 hour Energy' drink. I never drink the stuff but it seemed like maybe I should. We got to the team about 45 minutes before I was to depart. This was plenty of time to offer the dogs a drink of water, pack my snacks and put boots on everyone. I adjusted all of the team's wind jackets including my own. It didn't seem very windy in White Mountain but I kept thinking about the forecast.

I got the team up to the line only a few minutes before our "go time". Last year I had gotten them up there way too early and they sat down and even got comfortable. This year we were even a little tardy. I think I left the checkpoint one minute late. This seemed like just the right amount of time to get all of us excited and ready to go!

Part Five – To the Finish



Wind

I ran with the team as they trotted away from the village. We all knew where we were headed. The team was still in the same configuration as they had been for the last 200 miles. They seemed to like their partners and worked well. Why change anything now?

The final run to the finish line is always emotional. I have made this run 13 times. It has always been challenging. But we've always made it. That was the mindset that I was in as we trotted up the Fish River and away from the White Mountain checkpoint.

It was somewhat windy, but not too bad. I even thought for a moment that I had made a mistake by dressing in my wind jacket. It was 4 in the afternoon and it seemed warm - perhaps I was over dressed? Of course I was ski poling with both arms and running up every

tiny embankment. I even thought about taking off some of my outer gear.

The trail was actually good for a few hours. That was surprising. There was a small amount of snow cover. Or at least, enough so that I could use my brake on down hills sections. I was whistling at the team and I had even put my iPod in my pocket and ear phones in my ears. I hardly ever listen to music on the race but I thought a little extra pizzaz might help me. I really wanted to catch Jeff and there was every possibility that I could. So, I worked my tush off.

I snacked the team pretty regularly but they were very quick snack breaks. I didn't want to waste even seconds of race time now. I was kicking myself a little bit for all the trouble that we had between Elim and White Mountain. I didn't want a repeat of that.

A few hours into my run Bridgett and Ryne passed me on their snow machines. They would get to Nome quite a bit faster than I would.

We ran up and down a series of barren ridges. There was less and less snow cover as we made our way towards the coast. The trail was a swath in the tundra that sometimes had a covering of ice and sometimes not. Soon we were on top of the last ridge, called Topkok. It seemed very tall and I felt like I was on the top of the world. It is the last large hill before the trail comes down and parallels the sea shore.

While on the top, I looked out at the horizon. It was still daylight and I could see for many miles. The ocean was directly in front of me and consumed my entire view. The ocean was big, dark and scary looking. There was no white pack ice covering the black open water.

I have run Iditarod a few other times when I had seen the black ocean from Topkok. But, as I stood there I looked as far as I could see, towards Nome, and there was *no* ice. Only water. It startled me somewhat to know that the shore ice was completely gone. But, it also made sense. When the wind blows as hard as it had been, it blows everything, including the ice, out to sea. This was something to keep in mind. We would soon be traveling along the sea shore for the next 25 miles and the open ocean was literally a stone's throw to my left.

We came down the steep hill and once again I regretted my decision to remove my drag. Stupid. Stupid. We were zooming down hill and completely out of control again. There was no snow or ice to use my brake. Again, I just stood on my runners and held on with a death grip. We came to the bottom with out a major spill. This trail was unreal.

We made the sharp right hand turn, passed the Nome Kennel Club shelter cabin and started west along the sea shore. It was still daylight and the lagoon out in front of us was a sheet of glare ice as far as I could see. The dogs tried to follow the markers, which had been drilled into the ice, but the wind was pushing them off to the left. I decided to give up trying to follow the markers - it was futile. Quito and I worked together and we skirted the western edge of the lagoon. I looked farther to my left - across 100 yards of sand dunes and driftwood - there was the open ocean. Yikes!

The area we were traveling in is known as the 'Blow Hole'. There are perfectly placed mountains and ridges to the north that collect and funnel the wind due south. That means that the wind blows directly across the trail - perpendicular to our route. The shelter cabin was built so that a musher, who could see a wind storm in the distance, could stay there and hunker down out of the wind. I have traveled in some pretty intense wind storms in this area before.

The thing that made this situation even more tricky was the fact that there was no snow on top of the ice to steer or control my sled. We managed to parallel the marked trail on the lagoon and not get pushed too far to the left. When ever I felt like we were drifting towards the ocean I would "Gee" the team and we would head due north, into the wind. I conscientiously tried to keep distance between us and the ocean. We got knocked around pretty badly into piles of driftwood and over sheets of ice. But we managed to maintain forward progress.

After an hour, the wind got stronger. Normally the 'Blow Hole' is the first 5 or 6 miles from the shelter cabin. I assumed that the wind would die down after that. We had passed the 'Blow Hole' and the farther west we went, the stronger the winds became. That was very unexpected.

Then it started to get dark.

For the next few hours, my team and I fought for every inch of forward progression. At times, it was unreal that we could actually continue. The wind was so loud and so strong that I felt like we were fighting a living monster. We were blown, so many times, out towards the ocean that I thought surely we would get wet at any moment. One time, I thought I could feel the ocean at my legs as I fell down an icy slope towards the sea. But, I must have been imagining it, because my pants never felt damp.

I saw trail markers sometimes and other times we just made our own way west. It wasn't always a benefit to stay on the trail anyhow. There are 8 foot tall telephone poles as trail markers. They have metal bolts sticking out of the sides for support. They were on the downwind side of the trail. We wrapped around several of these poles: 6 dogs in front of the pole and 5 dogs with a sled behind the pole. When the wind gust hit, the team would fold around the pole. It was almost impossible to unwrap the team against the wind. I could barely walk to unwrap the dogs. I don't know how I did it.

The biggest advantage I had was the mental fact that I knew where I was. I have been in this area during the summer and knew the lay of the land. I took great comfort in that and tried to navigate by memory.

The wind was relentless. Luckily my body core stayed warm. I believe that is only because my heart rate never dropped below 140 bpm for hours. My feet were warm too. My hands weren't so lucky.

I always keep my beaver mittens hanging on a cord around my back. They are easy to grab and when I don't need them I can snap them - out of the way - behind me. This has always been very convenient. What I never would have guessed is that the wind whipped the mitten cord into such a tangle, that I couldn't get them out from behind my back. I tried and tried but they were too tangled. I could not let go of my handlebar for fear of losing my team. I tried to grab them with one hand and then the other. But, most of the time I needed both hands to physically stay attached to my sled.

My left glove was a little damp, perhaps from sweat or maybe from handing out moist dog snacks. Regardless of the reason, my left hand started to burn. I have been very cautious to avoid frostbite during my mushing career. But now, I was in a serious bind. I tried to open my sled bag to find dry gloves but the wind instantly blew everything, not tied down, out of my sled. I still don't know all the gear that I lost in those few seconds. Right then and there, I knew that I was going to frostbite my left hand. There was nothing I could do about it.

We crashed so many times that I can't believe we stayed in one piece. That sled should have broken into a thousand pieces and dogs should have been everywhere. We hit driftwood and stumps harder than I have ever crashed. The sled runners flexed and bowed but never broke.

The sheets of ice next to the ocean were the most dangerous. As soon as the team stepped out onto them the wind would pick all of us up and hurtle us toward the sea. We would only come to a stop when someone or something hit. Mac and Sissy hit the hardest once.

We were stopped because the mainline was wrapped around a stump of driftwood. I couldn't get to the driftwood in order to free us. Whenever I stood up, I'd be blown away from the team. I could not walk. I tried to crawl and struggled for a while. But, my biggest fear was being blown away from the team and losing them. They were my only chance to surviving.

We weren't moving so the dogs had laid down and were facing away from the wind. Finally, I thought to tie myself to my sled with an thin spare line that I keep in a rear sled pouch for emergencies. I crawled on my belly over to the driftwood. I barely got the mainline untangled and the wind picked up the entire team and blew us 75 yards across the ice. I was drug behind them by my arm. The next thing I knew we were in a huge pile and Mac and Sissy were thrown up against a gnarly piece of driftwood. Both of their necklines were snapped from the impact and they were in a tangled mess.

I didn't waste much time. This is not where we needed to be. With darkness surrounding us all I could think about was the ocean just to our left. So, I crawled back out to Quito, grabbed her harness and she and I inched our way north directly into the wind. We found traction on a small strip of tundra. We struggled like this until we could regroup and head to the west again.

I could go on and on with this gruesome tale. I remember all of it like it was yesterday. But, the overall theme to this story is that my dogs and I pulled together in an amazing united effort. And, to be honest, Quito was really the main reason we made it.

Quito trusted me with her life. And I trusted her with mine. I have no doubt that I would have been lost to the storm with out her. During the worst of the white out, when I couldn't tell if we were still in Alaska or on the Moon, Quito kept going. She always tried to find the trail and when she couldn't, she did her best to go in the correct direction. When the cabin at Safety popped out of the white out blizzard, I was amazed. I didn't even know we were on the trail. Quito did that.

Shelter in Safety

When we pulled up in front of the cabin at Safety I was very concerned about three dogs: Pud, Chica and Waylon. So, the first thing I said when I arrived was "I'm staying." I didn't know anything about my competition. All I knew was my dogs had just saved my life and now I needed to take care of them.

If I had any thoughts of continuing down the trail they were eliminated by the wind. The wind was coming out of the north. It was gusting so hard that I couldn't stand upright. I don't know what that was. 50mph? 60mph? 70mph? When the Iditarod trail leaves Safety it turns due north. I knew that. So, I knew that it was physically impossible for me to continue into this wind.

I looked down to sign in on the time sheet and Jeff's name wasn't there. I immediately asked "Jeff's not here?" And I remember it as clear as day. She said, "Jeff's camping."

"Oh no. Jeff's not camping," I said.

There was no way anyone was camping in these conditions. No way. I am one of the most wilderness savvy, tough, extreme weather camping dog mushers in the world and I couldn't camp in that blizzard. I thought right then that Jeff and his team were in serious, perhaps fatal, trouble.

The Vet and the checker helped me park my team. At first, we just brought the team up 50 yards and parallel to the trail. But that was no good. I asked if there was anywhere out of the wind. That was a silly question.

Finally, I eyed the back of the checkpoint building. It seemed to give just a tiny bit of shelter. I grabbed my sled, picked it up and the two people helped me back up my team up until I had the sled tucked in behind the building. I asked the Vet for straw. He gave me a half a bale. I gave small amounts to every dog and it immediately blew away, out to the ocean. The dogs looked miserable. Sissy was actually circling in a panic. She was scared.

I voiced my concerns again about Pud, Chica and Waylon. Pud and Chica hadn't been 100% for the last hour or so. Waylon has such a thin coat that I was worried that he might be hypothermic. He had been on the wind side of his brother Willie. Ironically, Willie is the one with the thick furry coat.

As I gave the dogs a snack and tended to them, the Vet looked through everyone the best he could. I heard him yelling from across the team and I looked up. He said "Aliy, did you know that this dog's booties are full of snow?" It was Pud. Oh my goodness! I had no idea.

Now it made sense. The wind had been so severe that it had literally blown small ice crystals inside their boots. No wonder Pud had looked so poor. Imagine running a marathon with socks full of ice crystals and snow! I couldn't believe it. There was no physical way I could have changed dog booties during the last few hours. I took all their booties off and tried to rub their feet. But, in no time the dogs were curled up in little individual balls with their feet tucked up in their bellies. They still looked awful.

I thought about how puppies lay in piles when they want to stay warm. I began to "pile" my team together. The front pile was 7 dogs: Chica, Nacho, Willie, Waylon, Olivia, Boondocks and Quito. Quito was the last dog that I added to the pile. She got right on top and buried her head down into the dogs under her. I made two smaller piles of two dogs each: Pud with Clyde and Sissy with Mac. Sissy still wouldn't calm down so I went over to the Food Drop bags and dragged a few of the biggest ones back near her. I built a wall of Food Drop bags protecting her and Mac from the wind. It seemed to help. I comforted her until she laid down. The Vet started to build a larger wall around the front pile of dogs. I think we had 30 different labeled bags surrounding the dogs. The bags and dogs quickly got a thin covering of ice and snow.

I knew that I needed to rest. I had reached far past what I thought were my physical abilities. I walked around the building into the brunt of the storm. I leaned into the wind and tried to reach the front porch of the cabin. I got to the stairs, climbed to the porch, took one step towards the door and the wind blew my feet out from under me. I knew that I was beaten. I crawled on all fours into the front door.

What an incredible feeling to be indoors. There was no heat and there was no electricity, but there was no wind. Thank heaven.

I looked around and there were the two Iditarod Insider guys, the checker, the Vet and a couple who had been snowmachining from White Mountain to Nome. There was also a guy running around the cabin trying to fix the generator. Everyone looked a little shell-shocked. I made a little pile of 'Aliy stuff' off to the side.

I sat on the couch near the front door and immediately got chilled. Regardless, I needed to sit down for a short time. The checker was great. She brought me water, then a sandwich and some pudding cups. Everything except the water was frozen solid. (As a side note: frozen chocolate pudding cups are tasty.)

I quizzed everyone about Jeff's situation. I couldn't believe he was stopped in that blizzard. I was sincerely concerned for him and his dogs' lives. The Insider guys had been with him when he came to a stop. He was in the open, just to the north of the ocean and completely exposed to the wind. They said that it was still daylight when he couldn't continue. Jeff had tried to get two of his dogs inside his sleeping bag to protect them. Then he even laid down with his team. It was an absolute nightmare. I guess the Insider guys felt that they had to leave Jeff and his team when the conditions got worse and darkness was coming. They came directly to Safety to take shelter.

The couple who had been traveling on two snowmachines told me that they had stopped next to me while my team had been tangled around one of the tall telephone poles. It had still been daylight. The woman said she had yelled at me at the top of her lungs, asking me if I needed help. I never heard her or the snowmachines, and she was just a few feet away from me. She said her husband told her I could handle my team and that they needed to get to Safety as quick as possible. They arrived at the cabin before dark.

There was a flurry of activity and all of a sudden more people were coming into the cabin. I saw Jeff.

I remember telling him "I am so happy to see you!"

Then probably the most memorable conversations of my my life will be the following:

"Are your dogs here?"

"Yes."

"Mine aren't."

I could not believe what I heard. The only reason (*maybe*) I would leave my dog team was if I was sure that I was going to die. I have never been in that situation, but it was clear to me that Jeff had just been there.

He said "I thought that was non navigable."

I said "It was."

"You made it."

"I shouldn't have. It was impossible."

He needed to sort out himself so I left him alone.

The people who had arrived with Jeff were a family that has traveled the Iditarod trail for decades. Dick Newton has snowmachined Alaska's trails for longer than I have been alive. There were four of them. They had picked up Jeff a few miles before Safety.

Jeff had left his dog team and had been walking in what he hoped was the direction of the cabin. Two of the snowmachines had come directly to Safety. Jeff was with one of them. Because of the white out conditions, the other two had missed the cabin just 50 yards to the north. They passed right by it with out knowing it. They only knew they had passed it was when they saw a road mileage sign further on. They turned around and slowly found their way back to shelter.

All four of them found their place around the wood stove and tended to the fire. One of the guys said that he might stay for days if the wind didn't let up. Obviously the wind had really unnerved him.

The checker came over to me and said she had Race Marshall Mark Nordman on the phone. Apparently her phone worked only every once in a while. That phone was the sole means of communicating with the world outside. She couldn't charge the phone with out electricity, so she was using it sparingly.

I went into a small room and got on the phone. He asked "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

He asked me what my intentions were. I didn't understand what he meant. He asked me again what my plans were. Finally I realized he meant: *Are you leaving the Safety Checkpoint soon and heading to the finish line?*

Mark and I are extremely good friends and I couldn't believe he was asking me that question. I think I got a little miffed and asked him if he knew how bad it was out here.

I remembering asking him if he was watching everyone's GPS trackers closely. I hoped that Dallas, Mitch and Martin were not stuck in the storm. I told him two or three times that if he saw someone stopped out here, then that was truly a bad sign. Really bad. I told him that people could easily die out here tonight. He told me that they were monitoring everyone's tracker very closely. I asked him what the plan was to get Jeff's dogs. He said he was working on that.

I walked back into the main room and everyone was listening to a radio weather update. The blizzard was supposed to continue unabated for 36 hours. The Vet had walked out and checked my dogs while I had been on the phone. He reported that they were still in a pile, hadn't moved and looked as comfortable as they could be.

I had been at Safety for an hour and a half. The checker came back into the room with another phone call. She handed the phone to the Iditarod Insider guys. From the gist of the conversation, Mark was asking whether these two guys would risk going back with Jeff into the blizzard and find his dog team. I'm sure Mark had been able to give them exact GPS coordinates since Jeff's sled still had a functioning tracker. It was clear to me that this was not a media event. It was a rescue mission. As soon as they hung up, Jeff and the guys started gathering gear and preparing to go back out.

I chatted with the Vet after they left. He wasn't able to go out on the rescue because there was limited space on two snowmachines. It was very tense. I told him that I wished he could have gone to help if any dogs were hurt.

I saw that the wood stove was producing a small amount of heat. Everyone was hunkered around it. I tried to get closer and they cleared a spot for me on a chair directly in front. I sat down, put my head down on my knees and feel asleep. I remember one of the guys saying "I've never seen anyone sleep like that."

I must not have been sound asleep because I was tuned into what was going on around me. In 30 minutes, I heard people start talking about headlights in the distance. There was a window just to the side of the wood stove and if a person stood up they could watch the lights off in the distance. It was either Dallas or the rescue team returning. Either way, someone was coming towards Safety.

I had been in Safety for 2 hours. I decided to gather my gear together and I took my parka and pants down from where I had hung them up. They weren't dry but at least I wasn't chilled anymore. I put on my pants and laced up my boots. I should probably check the weather.

The checker and Vet ran out the front door and I knew that someone was here. I went to the front door and walked outside. I stood right on the porch where I had been completely unable to stand two hours prior. I watched as Dallas walked up his team and switched out leaders. He could walk with out being blown over. I looked closely at his dog jackets. While they were still blowing over to the side, they didn't whip around like sails. I watched Dallas for over a minute. He never saw me. He never even looked away from his team.

I came back inside to grab my gear. It was clear to me that the wind had died down enough that we could safely go. I talked to the Vet and told him that I was going to leave. I remember saying "It looks better out there." He followed me out to my team.

The dogs hadn't moved a muscle. I started to wake them up and get the team situated. I walked them forward so they loosened up. I put dog booties on most of the team. I knew Waylon had to feel better because he had been in the middle of the 'puppy pile'. He shook off and stretched. He looked like he had sleep well, considering.

Then I thought about my concerns for Pud. Clearly he had been "off" because he had boots full of snow. So, I was comfortable taking him to Nome. He was a tough dog and I really wanted him to finish.

I looked at Chica and I couldn't really remember why I had been worried about her. Did she have snow in her boots? Was she chilled? Was she tired? Scared? I couldn't place it. So, I told the Vet that I was going to leave her with him. I asked him if she could go into a dog crate or farther back behind the cabin. He said "Of course, I'll find a spot for her." I knew that he would. He asked me for a cable drop line for her. (This is a mandatory piece of gear that a musher must leave when they drop a dog.) I looked through my sled and nearly unpacked the whole thing. I couldn't find my bag of drop cables. I hadn't taken inventory of all the gear that I lost while opening my sled bag in the blizzard, but apparently they were gone. I told him that. He let me leave Chica there with out one.

The checker stood on the back of my sled as I regrouped the team. I put Nacho in swing without his sister. He would run to Nome by himself. Quito was in lead by herself as well. The rest of the team was waking up and ready to go. I was in a hurry, but I wasn't rushing. I didn't want to forget anything that I might regret. There were still 22 miles to go. Who knew what lay in store for us?

The Finish

When I left Safety, I had no idea how far ahead Dallas was.

The trail immediately turned due north, as I knew it would, straight into the wind. It was still gusting, but it had weakened. Thank goodness. We were actually making headway. I was so happy!

We traveled several miles and the team warmed up nicely. Soon we reached the bottom of Cape Nome, the last hill before the finish. I looked towards the summit and saw a headlight looking back at me. Holy cow! There was Dallas. I got excited. The dogs got excited! It was a new race. I got off my sled runners and ran up every inch Cape Nome. This was going to be fun!

For the next 2 hours I raced, smiled, urged the dogs on and tried as hard as I possibly could. I ran up every embankment and ski poled constantly. I'm sure my leg was throbbing but I don't clearly remember the pain. We loped down every descent. It felt like the dogs were flying. I think they were having fun too.

The weather on the other side of Cape Nome had no resemblance to the nightmare blizzard we had been in. No wonder Mark had asked if I was leaving Safety anytime soon. I bet no one even had the slightest idea of what we had gone through.

I kept my eyes on the trail in front of me. Every once in a while I saw Dallas look back to see where I was. I could tell that he was trying to cover up his headlight beam so that I wouldn't see him, but he failed. I saw him over and over.

We got to the familiar outskirts of Nome. We crossed several roads and there were fans screaming and shouting. I didn't know what time it was, but it was still dark. We crossed the Nome River and I knew that I had to shift into a higher gear or I wouldn't catch him. I ski poled and kicked with every ounce of energy I had in me.

But wouldn't you know the trail went back out onto the sea ice? The dogs immediately slipped and lost their footing. My sled slid across the sheer ice and dragged the team here and there. We couldn't get into a rhythm as we hit ice sheet after ice sheet. I couldn't even ski pole because that forced the rear of the sled in the opposite direction. The dogs would then have to struggle to pull it back. All I could do was stand on my runners and urge the dogs with praises and excitement. But, boy was I excited!

There were cars lined up along the street coming into Nome. People were yelling out their windows, honking and cheering us on.

We were less than a mile from the finish line. I peered ahead and saw the headlight again. It looked at me and then looked ahead. It looked at me and then looked ahead. It wasn't moving. He must have stopped! I was catching him.

The team got excited and picked up their speed the best they could. We rushed up to the headlight and it was a man standing along the trail on the sea ice. He was using his headlight to direct us up onto the road. It hadn't been Dallas after all!

We climbed off of the sea ice and up onto Front Street. Only 400 yards to go.

Then only 300 yards to finish this incredible race.

Only 200 yards and we were going to really finish. I couldn't believe it.

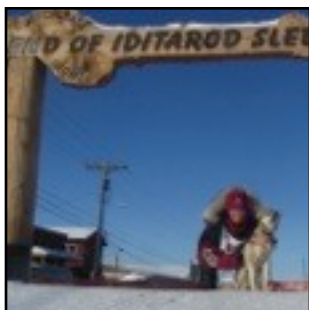
There were people everywhere! I couldn't tell where the finish chute started or where the finish line was. The crowd was as loud as it could be. There as no room under the burld arch for my dog team but we were headed into the crowd anyway.

As my team and I trotted down the last 100 yards of Front Street, I looked into the crowd and just shook my head. How could I ever explain to these people or anyone what had really happened on this race?

We were so close to winning but we were just as close to never reaching the finish line at all.



Nome Thoughts



Looking Back

I came in second place in the 2014 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. 2 minutes and 22 seconds behind the winner.

However, my 2014 Iditarod race ended in Safety. The 22 miles to the finish line was simply fun. Coming under the burled arch on Front Street in Nome was completely insignificant compared to reaching Safety.

Mostly, I have thought about *how* I managed to make it to Safety.

There is no way that I can truly describe the wind and do it justice. It was a demon with a power that I never thought I would be up against. In the past, I have seen videos of hurricanes and photos of tornados and destruction. But, *never*, had I pictured in my mind: a woman, her 11 dogs and her sled trying to survive and seek shelter in that wind.

I am amused and can just smile when people say, "Yeah, I've been in a blizzard and it can be rough." I will not begrudge anyone for their comments and their own personal thoughts. I know that if anyone has ever experienced what I did, then they would speak differently to me. We would have a true connection.

What stands out the most is: I never gave up - physically or mentally - and neither did the dogs. If even one of us would have faded in those crucial hours, we wouldn't have made it. Simple as that.

I am amazed also by the physical strength and determination that a human can have. That I have.

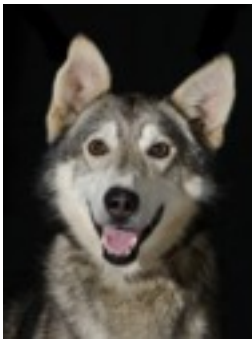
Looking Forward

For 14 years I have brought a team to the Iditarod starting line with the intention of winning. This team came the closest to that goal so far.

Every dog, this year, did the absolute best that they could do. Not one dog let me down, ever! That's an amazing thing to say for a team of sixteen individuals. But it's true.

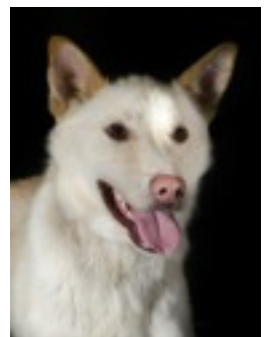
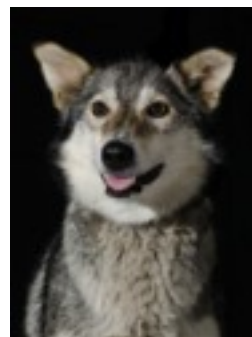
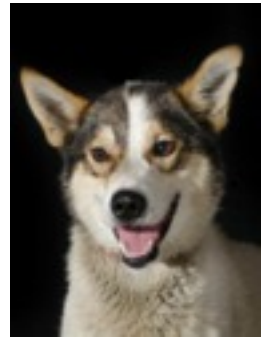
Here they are. Listed from oldest to youngest - the 2014 SP Kennel Iditarod Red Team:

- **Biscuit** is the heart and soul of the kennel. He is always inspiring and it was no different this year. Plain and simple he couldn't keep up on the fastest paced Iditarod in race history. He had just been part of a grueling 'slow grind' Yukon Quest win and switching gears to a 'sprint track' was too much to ask. I smile when I think of how well he did and his desire to never let up. He left the team at the halfway point and I missed his presence for the rest of the race.
- **Pud** is a dedicated soul. He has had health issues in the past that have kept him from being 100%. Ironically, on this race - one of the most challenging races in history - he was able to give 110%. It made me so proud to watch him because I knew, for years, that he had this ability inside of him. I was very worried about him before we arrived in Safety because he wasn't pulling. Crazy, awful thoughts went through my head about what could be wrong with him. In the end, booties full of snow was the simple answer. There will always be a soft spot in my heart for Pud.
- **Quito** ran in lead for 1,000 miles. I believe that she was the most talented dog on the 2014 Iditarod. She managed the team from the front and I managed the team from the rear. It took both of us, clawing for every inch, to make it to Safety. In winds that were too strong to even stand, I watched this dog crouch down and lean into the wind. Quito couldn't hear me much of the time but we had a communication nonetheless. I am at a loss for words to describe this amazing dog.
- **Nacho** once again was the 'back up man'. He was always one step behind Quito and usually ran together with Chica. These three siblings are unstoppable. Nacho always keeps a little pep in his step, even after hundreds of miles. This energizes me, as well as the rest of the team. He is a wonderful dog.
- **Chica** moved up to swing position near the start of the race. She takes a short time to 'warm up' but after that, she's on fire. Overall, she works harder than most dogs. It was my mistake to leave her in Safety - looking back, I can't explain why I did it. I have apologized to her. Thankfully, she is the kind of dog who graciously accepted my apology.
- **Olivia** is gorgeous and loved by all. There is a very good reason for that. Big "O" had a litter of 11 puppies in the summer, won the Yukon Quest in February and then came in second in Iditarod in March. Can you say Supermom? Olivia will run anywhere in the team and do everything. This race she ran much of it with her sister, Boondocks. I enjoyed watching them together.



DOG TEAM ROSTER

#	Dog's Name	Age	Sex
A	Nacho 083-302-335	7	♀
B	Scout 032-256-515	6	♀
C	Pud 109-615-581	7	♀
D	Quito 083-308-362	7	♂
E	Biscuit 097-350-572	8	♀
F	Chemo 088-004-553	3	♀
G	Olivia 032-090-099	6	♂
H	Schmoe 051-868-357	4	♀
J	Clyde 051-866-115	2	♀
K	Boondocks 046-612-377	5	♂
L	Mac 088-009-574	4	♀
M	Scruggs 051-871-572	5	♀
N	Sissy 051-877-286	4	♂
P	Willie 051-866-265	5	♀
Q	Chica 083-303-063	7	♂
R	Waylon 051-838-819	5	♀



- **Scout** drew the short stick on the Iditarod. After winning the Solstice 100, Copper Basin 300 and the Yukon Quest, Scout stumbled and strained his bicep only miles from the Iditarod starting line. That's like qualifying for the Olympic swim team and then tripping head first into the whirlpool before you start your race. It was dumb luck, plain and simple.
- **Willie** will make anyone smile. He often sits on his tail with his hind legs spayed out to the side. That's just shows his carefree character. He loves everyone and everything. Willie is also one of the most talented and athletic sled dogs in the world. What a delightful combination.
- **Waylon** is Willie's 'pain in the neck' sibling. Waylon is a loudmouth and an instigator. But he is always honest and I knew when I could run him in lead and when I should move him back for a rest. Quito liked the company of this little short-coated, big eared fellow. I think he entertained her. During the blizzard, I told Waylon that if he could make it, then a cozy spot in a bed was waiting for him when we reached Nome. You should have seen him take over a queen-sized mattress!
- **Boondocks** is a phenomenon. After years of winning races and competing at the highest levels, my competitors still shake their heads at this dog. Boonie certainly doesn't fit the mold of the: *'perfect 55 pound male sled dog'*. But... molds sometimes are meant to be broken. Boondocks and I will continue to try and break stereotypical molds and maybe even change some mindsets. Maybe...
- **Scruggs** is so important to the team that it is surprising we could still do so well after he left at Mile 600. He adds maturity and wisdom. He is not a 'crazy spirit' but more of a thoughtful teammate. He, like Scout, slipped and strained a muscle in a split second while trotting down the trail.
- **Mac** is now a confident man. He stands tall and proud. He knows what it took to finish this race and he was a big part of that. His true strength is unbelievable and when he tries 'his hardest' I can feel the sled move beneath me. Mac can be sensitive too and when I watched him and Sissy get blow across the glare ice and tumbled into a pile of driftwood I was horrified. Mac had a huge impact on this team both physically and mentally.
- **Sissy** can officially say that she graduated into 'big girl pants' after this race. She never had any hesitation on this incredibly challenging race course and that was spectacular to witness. She did not, however, like the wind. In Safety, she was nearly in a panicked frenzy until I piled bags in front of her to block the gusts. In the end, Sissy trusted me completely and she was a big part of the team.
- **Schmoe** was the "Chatty Cathy" of the team and never missed an opportunity to speak his mind. I loved hearing his "Woo woo woo" during the race. He has a lot of talent and a dedicated drive. Schmoe is also a sincere dog and a big sweetie. I was crushed to leave him at Mile 600.
- **Chemo** was the perfect worker. He would tip toe through the most challenging sections of trail. When I would stop for a breather he would look back at me with impatience, "Can't you hold up your end of the bargain?" It was glances that like that inspired me to try so hard. Thanks for keeping me honest buddy. Leaving Chemo at Mile 650 was certainly felt by the whole team.
- **Clyde** doesn't know how good he really is. As the youngest dog in the team, he sure took everything in stride. He skipped down the trail with his unique gait and fluffy white tail suspended high. Clyde zigged and zagged at all the right times. I think about how accomplished he is at such a young age and wonder what he'll be able to do in a few years!

In retrospect....

A man asked me a few weeks ago, “Why do you put yourself in danger, year after year, on the Iditarod?” The 2014 Iditarod was my 14th finish and my 17th 1,000 mile race completion. This is the only race that I actually felt in danger. I am accustomed to running sled dogs across frozen wind-swept tundra and down icy river beds. I feel comfortable on a dog sled at -30 degrees Fahrenheit. This is my chosen lifestyle and for lack of a better word... I *enjoy* it.

I believe that there are situations that we will find ourselves in during our lifetime that will be overwhelmingly challenging - mentally and physically. They will push us to our limits. Even beyond. There is no amount of planning, making lists or preparation that will keep these situations at bay. For me, it's simple: do the absolute best that I can do. If I can honestly do that ... then I will be satisfied.

Please read these notes purely for entertainment. Remember these are *my* memories and *my* story.

- Aliy



Most of the photos were taken by Sebastian Schnuelle during the race.