

## **Iditarod 2011 Recap**

Well, we all know this story has a sad ending. But at least the story is longer than the one from last year! Up until the very end, it was an incredible, wonderful journey, and I'd like to tell you about it. If you are interested in all the details, step-by-step, of my trip to Nome (almost), then read on. I don't have pictures - I never have any luck with cameras out on the trail. But I have great memories, and I'll try to show them to you.

### **The Line Up**

After last year's huge disappointment when my sled broke (for no reason!), my only goal for this year was to finish the race. I didn't think I had a particularly strong or competitive team this year, but I was sure I could finish.

The team this year just didn't give me any confidence. It felt more like a collection of dogs than a functioning team unit. After my knee surgery last summer, my budget and the amount of leave time I had from work were pretty limited. As a result, we weren't able to do much racing at all this winter, and many of the dogs had very limited experience with racing.

I had only seven experienced Iditarod finishers on the team; Aberdeen, Chase, Shotgun, Trouble, Flip, Mercedes, and Skeeter. I was fairly sure about each of them. Except Trouble, who had a long term wrist injury early in the season and was only just now starting to run on longer training runs. And Skeeter and Aberdeen, who both had recent wrist problems. And Mercedes, who might be coming in to heat. And Flip, who had injured his biceps during the Don Bowers race a month prior. What does that leave? Just two experienced, injury free dogs.

Sable, Azure, Cerveza, Luna, and Cutter had plenty of mid-distance race experience, but I was concerned that Sable and Azure, who are not good eaters, would get too thin during such a long race. Chisel, Spartan, and Hatchet were not only young, but they had very limited racing experience. In addition, Spartan, Hatchet, and Luna had all had injuries in the preceding weeks.

Fly had a groin pull, and although I couldn't imagine not taking him, it didn't seem like it would be fair to ask him to make the enormous effort required by Iditarod. At the last minute, and in consultation with the Iditarod chief vet, I left him home.

Who was left to fill that 16<sup>th</sup> slot? Razor, a loveable, goofy, and very athletic mess of a two year old. Razor, who pulls very hard – sometimes. Razor, who more often happily trots along with a loose tug line, not getting in the way, but definitely not contributing to the team either. A dog who doesn't bother to pull during training probably can't be counted on to work during a race either. But there was something about Razor that I couldn't up on.

While all the dogs on the team appeared to have recovered from any damage, it was likely the injuries would reappear and I would need to 'drop' the dog (leave it in the care of veterinarians until they could be flown home). The fact that I even considered Razor says volumes about my options. Overall, I felt like I had a number of marginal dogs, and very little depth of experience.

I told Varan that I expected to be down to 10 or 12 dogs within just a short distance, and to expect to see Razor very soon.

Boy was I wrong – about how many dogs would still be on the team far, far in to the race, about the team coming together, about how well these dogs would perform, and most especially about Razor. It's good to be wrong sometimes!

### **Leg 1- Willow to Skwentna (72 miles)**

The start went fairly smooth, although Hatchet (a rookie at only his second ever race!) bolted loose from the team and I thought we'd never see him again. Eventually we caught him, but that was a little too much excitement! Then Azure managed to chew through her tug line about five seconds from the end of our count-down. A very dangerous habit, and it was not the last tug-line she'd chew.

This run was almost entirely on rivers, first down the big Susitna River, then up the Yentna. It was a warm day and I worked on keeping the dogs at a slow, steady pace. The run up to Skwentna is always a riot. It seems like everyone from Anchorage and the Mat-Su valley is out with their snow-machines, airplanes, ultra-lights, helicopters, skis, and snow shoes, and they are all having a bonfire and a rowdy good time. I had Chase and Mercedes in lead, and they made the trip easy, working right on by all the crowds and offers of hotdogs, beer, candy bars, and muffins. Trouble, one of our shyest dogs, surprised me by veering towards each outreached hand, photographer kneeling in the snow, or small child waving a cookie.

As expected, Razor pulled only some of the time (usually when the team was excited or the terrain difficult – i.e. when I least needed it). But I figured half a dog was better than no dog, and maybe he could help us up over the Alaska Range – or maybe not, in which case home he would go.

It took us just less than 7 hours to reach Skwentna. As soon as we pulled in I got busy taking care of the dogs. The experienced racers ate and settled in immediately, and the less experienced dogs just went along with the program.

My checkpoint routine was lightening fast throughout the entire race. I was able to feed and water, get booties off, take care of feet and a few wrists, put down straw, get the dogs comfortable, repack my sled, and get their next meal soaking all in less than an hour. Being efficient really paid off, because it gave me more time to rest.

Every checkpoint is different. Skwentna falls into the 'luxury' category. Volunteers chop a hole through the ice to reach the river water, and then work round the clock to keep giant barrels of water steaming hot, which makes feeding the dogs a breeze. Up on top of the river bank at the Delia's house, still more volunteers cater to the mushers with warm washcloths, lots and lots of tasty food, and even wakeup calls for sleeping mushers.

Once I had the dogs taken care of, I headed up to eat and rest. I was able to get almost two hours sleep before I had to get up to get the dogs fed and ready to go again. We were stopped for just over 5 ½ hours, leaving at 3:45 in the morning.

## **Leg 2- Skwentna, through Finger Lake, to the bottom of the Happy River Steps (55 miles)**

I had several really good leaders in this team – Mercedes, Chase, Azure, Aberdeen, Luna, and Cutter are all experienced and reliable race leaders. Leading can be very fatiguing for a dog, as they have to really pay attention and make lots of decisions. Team dogs don't have to do much thinking, but can just follow along. I planned to rotate among leaders to keep them all fresh, so for the next leg I put my top two, Chase and Aberdeen up. They make an incredible pair and are usually my most reliable dogs up front. But not this time.

Leaving the team parking area we needed to swing sharply to the right to rejoin the trail. My team roared straight ahead. In their frenzy to run, nothing I did or said was getting through. Chase and Deen were gleefully barking and snapping at each other, and not paying a lick of attention to me. Off the beaten path the snow was soft and wouldn't hold a hook. All the dogs were full of vinegar, nipping at their partners, and playing around. Half the team was barking as they ran. We made a huge racket as we thrashed along the side of the river. This group was loud and happy! (Their driver somewhat less so.)

After many curses and threats I got the leaders to veer towards the trail. By then many of their booties had been sucked off in the deep snow. Once we were on the hard packed trail where I could set a hook, I promptly stopped the team. I replaced the mischievous Chase with the reliable and calm Mercedes. Well, she was calm in comparison – she was spinning and yapping, yet still a little more focused than Chase.

While I switched leaders, Azure promptly bit Cutter's tug line in half, and he sprinted up the trail. I had started with six spare tuglines. That was the third tug line Azure had destroyed so far, and we were barely into our second run. Azure is a good dog and a good leader – I really wanted her in my team. But when she is excited she can snap a tug line in about two seconds. I hoped she would calm down as we went farther, because if we got down to our last spare tug, she was going to have to go. It was close; she chewed through almost all of them, but eventually kicked the habit before I kicked her off the team.

Luckily Cutter really loves me and always comes when called. So after a brief dash of freedom he scrambled back to me. I managed to get him hooked back in to the team before they could destroy anything or rip the hooks loose and take off.

The trail from Skwentna wound up over hills and through open swamps. In the cool dark, we made good time, even though the trail was soft and punchy in spots. Whenever I spotted deep, wallowy snow I told the dogs to go easy. We work on the "easy" command all year long, but it is usually about as effective as the command for "whoa". This time, with the trail enforcing it, they were really listen to that warning and slowing down to pick their way through. The improved response would prove very useful further down the trail.

The sun came up and we had a lovely run through the dawn, arriving at Finger Lake at 9:00 in the morning. The dogs looked beautiful, and I couldn't believe that not one of the dogs I was worried about showed even the tiniest limp. The vets did a quick once-over and signed me off. I quickly grabbed fuel and half a bale of straw, and headed out.

We made good time over the next 15 miles, climbing up through the forested hills until we reached the top of the Happy River Steps. Here, the trail snaked down the side of a steep cliff and around a series of 180° turns. Going over the lip of the first drop, I told the dogs to go easy, and we just about walked down the ramp. The view over the edge was startlingly steep, and even at our slow(ish) my sled lurched towards the precipice before straightening out.

I was very glad to be out in front of most other teams and running this section before the trail was grooved and rutted by the brakes of the other sleds. I was able to keep our speed relatively sedate (for this section of trail) right up until the very end.

On the final steep ramp we began picking up speed. The last sharp turn pivoted over a steep drop off, and the sled and I were suddenly airborne. Midair, I looked up to see a scrubby little willow tree right in our trajectory. We were really flying and it looked like Flip, in wheel, was going to smack right into the tree, with the sled and me not far behind. I shouted “Whoa”, and the dogs paused long enough for me to jerk the sled to the right and keep us all out of trouble.

A clean run down the dreaded Steps! As it turned out, this year the Steps proved to be disastrous for many mushers. The Iditarod Insider posted videos of the carnage here – humongous crashes, smashed sleds, broken bones. Many of the best mushers in the world had trouble here, so I was doubly proud of myself and my dogs for coming through completely unscathed and with the runner side down.

I stopped to set up camp right at the foot of the Steps. The dogs were really full of it and I couldn't convince them to leave the main trail. I finally had to take the bale of straw, wave it in front of the leaders, and then heave it over to the side trail I wanted to camp on. It landed right in the way, but I didn't dare try to move it because I knew the minute I wasn't directly in front of my team, they would manage to rip the snow hooks loose and take off without me. Once the dogs saw the straw being unloaded I managed to persuade them to move off the main trail and quit trying to jerk the sled forward.

The bottom of the Steps was a nice sheltered place to stop away from the chaos of the checkpoints, which are absolutely crazy during these early stops. It was 11:00 in the morning, and a great time to stop to avoid the heat of the day. After seven hours of running, the dogs were happy, ate like crazy, and settled right down. I napped on top of my sled, enjoying the sunshine and warm temperatures.

Periodically I would hear the curses, screams, and splintering wood as other teams negotiated the Steps. Everyone who went by seemed a little rattled by that last drop; some had injuries or damaged sleds. I thanked my dogs for giving me such an uneventful trip down. Paul Johnson came by with an enormous branch wedged through his sled. Michelle Philips barrel rolled right over the edge of the cliff and spent a very long time trying to get her sled back up onto the trail. I could hear her dogs barking for what seemed like forever, and I was thinking I was going to have to hike back up to the top to help. Luckily another musher told me that she was getting help from one of the camera crews (they station them at the Steps to record the devastation). I was pretty

happy about that, because it was a LONG and STEEP way back to the top and I really wanted that nap.

I kept half an eye open for teams in trouble, and at one point I glanced up to see a team with no driver. I got up, stepped in front of them, and stopped the team. The snowhook was wrapped around and jammed through the runners, so it took some effort to get it free. Once the team was secured I untangled the team, which was a little balled up. They were really nice, friendly dogs, wagging their tails and cheerfully lining out when I called to them. They calmly waited as their musher, Rick Swenson, walked up the trail to them. He was cradling his arm and said he thought he had broken his collar bone. Despite his injuries, he stepped right back on the runners and off he went, one-handed. He made it all the way to Nome with his arm strapped down – pretty tough!

In spite of all the interruptions, we all got a little sleep and felt well rested after our five hour break.

### **Leg 3- Happy River, through Rainy Pass, to Rohn (55 miles)**

We left the Happy River behind at 4:00 in the afternoon. I put Chase and Aberdeen up front, and this time they did a great job for me. It was a bit warm, but the dogs were fresh and eager to go and we charged up the hills leading off the river.

It is 20 miles from the Happy River to the Rainy Pass checkpoint. After a long, steep climb out, the trail began to traverse across some steep side-hills suspended above a deep valley. There were sharp turns, steep drops and climbs, and lots and LOTS of sidehill. You really had to pay attention and be quick on your feet.

This year the trail was very deep and sugary. The dogs were almost swimming through the deep snow at times. Scattered throughout (and often hidden by the soft snow) were millions of roots and branches which the dogs had to leap and scramble over. This is very hard work for the dogs, and I was worried about them getting whacked and bashed by all the sticks, so I kept them going slow and easy. It sure was nice to have a team that was strong, but also cooperative (most of the time!)

We pulled into Rainy Pass after just over two hours, which was really excellent time for this difficult section. The dogs clearly remembered camping here for so long last year, as they tried to turn off into the exact spot we had been parked in. I jockeyed them past that area, and then they decided to be interested in the straw at the very end of the dog lot. They sure weren't tired, just being obnoxious. I had a stern discussion with the boys in lead, and we got back underway. I was glad to see the last of Rainy Pass!

After the checkpoint the trail climbed for ever over rolling, open tundra. The area is notoriously difficult when the winds blow up and obliterate the trail, but we had perfect, calm weather. The last time I came through here (2009) I had a wild bunch, and every time I tried to stop to snack or undo tangles, the dogs ripped the snow hooks out and ran me over. This time I had a much more disciplined group, but it seemed like I had just as much power. The cooler it got, the stronger the dogs became.

Razor was still in the team, and now I noticed he was really pulling his weight. He was happy (as usual), and seemed to be very focused down the trail. I was glad he was pitching in, because there was plenty of climbing to do to reach the pass.

The sun went down as we worked up through the most incredible and spectacular mountain range in the world. Once we crested the summit, the trail wound down through narrow gaps, twisting ravines, and forested areas. It seemed like we descended forever. With no moon, it was very dark. There were a couple of tricky side-hill sections, and one or two areas where the snow floor had dropped out, leaving a gaping hole to the creek below. The dogs skirted these gaps, and I was able to keep the sled out of them by jumping to the side and running along, yanking the sled to the side. There was one very large hole that was 10 feet across and absolutely bottomless that the dogs barely skirted, and I had to leap to clear it. Like the previous section, the snow was deep and full of branches, so I really had the dogs poking along. We were almost at a walking pace through the worst sections.

At one point as we threaded down through towering gaps I heard a loud CRACK followed by a long, ground shaking RUMBLE. The dogs froze for a split second. Avalanche! In the darkness, we couldn't tell where the slide was happening – above, below, or maybe even right on top of our heads! We didn't get buried, so we carried on. I hoped there wouldn't be another one near us. I hoped the trail wasn't completely blocked by avalanche debris. I wondered what would happen if all the mushers behind us were stopped by the avalanche and couldn't continue – we'd probably end up placing in the top twenty! Mostly I just hoped we were safe. And wondered where the heck the 'big drop' was – it seemed like we should have reached it already.

The infamous Dalzell Gorge is really only a couple of miles long. You know you are almost there when the trail goes down the 'big drop' - straight down a steep hill for what seems like a forever. Steep enough to use both feet on the brake. Steep enough that you worry you will overrun your dogs. Steep enough that you are really glad to get to the bottom, even if the bottom means you are now completely committed to running one of the most technical parts of the trail. The snow pack was excellent and made the drop easy this year, but I couldn't imagine how you would survive if the trail was icy – or bare of snow.

The Gorge, so famous for destroying teams, was a breeze. It twisted back and forth across the creek like always, but this year the trail was like a sidewalk – wide, easy, and absolutely fun. We zoomed out of the Gorge and down through the flats to Rohn, pulling in just before 11:00 p.m. after less than seven hours on the trail.

Rohn is one of those checkpoints that is a little more rugged. Cold river water is available, just a quick quarter mile hike away, and a treacherous scramble down a steep bank. Or you can melt snow in your cooker, which was definitely the easier choice this year with so much snow around.

After thawing out some soup for me and some meat for the dogs, I went inside the little BLM cabin for a nap. It is a fairly small shack, and was crowded with mushers and volunteers. I ended up lying in a corner on the floor. I woke up shivering and cold after only a short time. It took eating (again), and moving around outside while feeding my dogs (again), before I finally warmed up. I had time for another nap, but with only the chilly floor available, I ended up sitting

and listening to the chatter between mushers, vets, checkers, pilots, and everyone else who was crammed into the tiny shack. At least I was off my feet and resting, if not actually sleeping.

#### **Leg 4- Rainy Pass to the middle of the Farewell Burn (40 miles)**

We pulled out in the darkness at just 5:00 a.m. after a nice six hour rest. As we set off, I marveled that I still had all 16 dogs, healthy, happy, and pulling strongly. I would never have guessed we'd all get this far, and I imagined Varan was sitting back at home wondering at it too.

Directly upon leaving Rohn there are some very tricky sections – of course these happen when your dogs are fresh and full of energy and most likely to leave you lying in a heap. I put my calmest and most reliable leaders, Aberdeen and Mercedes, up front. We skimmed along quickly, traversing the glare ice on the river with no problems. A light trace of snow along the marked trail kept the usual scrambling and sliding to a minimum.

Next the trail twisted through a recently burned forest, full of stumps, downed trees, and gnarled roots. The trail breakers had obviously put a lot of work into this section and gotten a lot of mileage out of their chainsaws. With a good snow pack to work with, this section was much easier than it probably will be in other years.

I knew the dreaded Post River Glacier was coming up soon. At the Glacier the trail climbs up a steep (seems almost vertical) hill past some rocky outcroppings. A water-seep on the cliff face covers the entire hill with incredibly slick glare ice. Even the best mushers often have a hard time keeping their team headed in the right direction – down is so much easier! So I was definitely keeping an eye out. There are various different paths to get to the top; some relatively easy, some a true nightmare. Getting the dogs headed up the correct trail was really important, and I knew it might be tricky to spot the best trail in the darkness. I was planning to pause at the bottom long enough to preview my options before telling the dogs which way to go.

Instead I jerked out of a doze to see my dogs charging up the very steepest, slipperiest, trickiest section of the trail. The dogs were slipping all over the place. Yet somehow they were finding traction, and they were working well as a team to get over the obstacle.

As long as we were heading in the right direction, I decided to let the dogs do their thing. Just then my sled started skidding sideways into the rocky cliffs. I tried to step off to push the sled away from the cliff, and instead I slipped on the polished ice and promptly fell. I landed on the drag in between the front and back sections of my sled, and there I was stuck; unable to get up, unable to help the dogs on the icy hill, and unable to stop the team. No problem, though - the dogs took care of everything. They continued their charge up the ice and stayed on the trail. Once we hit firm snow again, I was able to roll onto the brake with my shoulder and the dogs slowed just long enough for me to get back on the runners. I was so amazed and awed by incredible team.

After the Glacier there was 20 miles of small spruce covered hills – just one little rise followed by another. There was the occasional bare patch or glaciated icy little creek crossing. On one short stretch of glare ice, my sled went flying straight towards a tree that was parked right in the middle of the way. My drag and brake had no purchase on the slick ice, and I managed to slam

BANG into the tree, then skid around to the far side of it. It took some work to pull the heavy sled, loaded with food and straw for camping, backwards against the pulling dogs. After a bit of struggle I managed to flip the sled over on its side so the runners would push us clear, and we slid past.

We ran only four hours until we reached the Buffalo Camp, an abandoned collection of platform tents and cabins. I pulled over and made a quick meal for the dogs. It was nine in the morning, the sun was up, and the temperatures were already warm. In keeping with my plan to run about 1.2 hours for every hour of rest, we only stopped at the Buffalo Camp for a little more than three hours.

### **Leg 5- Farewell Burn to Nikolai (32 miles)**

Sled dogs are designed and adapted to arctic environments. They are NOT happy in temperatures above zero, and they are truly miserable when it gets above freezing. Warm sunny afternoons are absolutely the worst time to be running. By the time I was ready to pull out at noon it felt like summer. But it wasn't going to cool off until the sun went down in the late afternoon, so we had no choice but to get going.

I put Cutter and Aberdeen up front. Cutter was doing a beautiful job lining down the trail. Aberdeen was lagging and goofing around, which is not like him. I decided Cutter must be pestering and annoying Deen whenever he moved up even with him. I replaced Aberdeen with Mercedes, and that combination worked as we slowly crawled towards Nikolai along the arrow-straight and flat trail.

The 35 miles in to Nikolai was probably the slowest run of the race. It was hot and the dogs were grumpy and balky. They hated their booties, tearing at them every chance they got. They poked along at a snails pace and took every excuse to pause and cool off in the snow. Someone has to pee? Then everyone should stop and lay in the snow! Leftover snacks in the trail? What a great excuse to stop and roll around! The musher coughs? Didn't that sound like she said "Whoa"? the one dog who was working cheerfully was Razor.

At first I was understanding and encouraging. I did what I could to keep them happy, and even took their booties off to help keep them cool – a calculated risk since sore feet can plague you for the rest of the race. But as the hours dragged on and on, I got impatient and frustrated. I was hoping for a quick, short run in, and instead it was taking twice as long as expected. They were definitely not coming together as a team. I KNOW that nagging and pushing doesn't help, but I was just as cranky as the dogs. None of us had any fun on that run.

That short little run took us over five hours, and even as we approached the checkpoint the grouchy team didn't speed up or look excited. Still, they were all still injury free, they ate well, and they did a good job getting liquids down, especially important after such a hot run.

Nikolai is another checkpoint that really strives to take care of mushers. They melt snow in wood fired stoves and the locals put a huge amount of effort into stockpiling enough wood to ensure a constant supply of nice hot water. The school is open and the cafeteria serves mushers a hot meal

for free. There is even a quiet dark room to sleep in (although this year the heat was turned up to sauna-level and I had to strip off all my gear to get comfortable).

Even though the dogs had not performed well on the last run, we stopped in Nikolai for only 4 ½ hours. Takotna was our next stop, and I planned to take our 24-hour break there. I hoped that a really nice long rest would make up for any tiredness or bad attitude.

### **Leg 6 - Nikolai, through McGrath, to Takotna (66 miles)**

It's a decent long 48 mile run from Nikolai to McGrath, and there are plenty of rolling hills along the way. Plus, I was planning on checking through McGrath and carrying on another 18 miles (mostly uphill) to Takotna. With my gloomy uncooperative team, I was assuming it would be long, slow run. I was hoping they wouldn't get any ideas about stopping in McGrath, because all my extra gear and food was waiting for us in Takotna.

At quarter to ten at night, it was much cooler and the dogs seemed refreshed. By the time I had their booties on they were bouncing around. Kristy Berrington's team pulled out directly in front of me, and my dogs wanted to chase them down. I held them back. Her team was much faster on the last leg and I didn't want to pass her, only to slow down a short while later. But after several miles the dogs were still barking and pulling hard to close the gap. (No one else's team barks when they are running – dogs usually need to breathe to run – but my team seemed determined to embarrass me with their noise.)

As I passed Kristy's team I told her I expected to see her again once we burned off some energy. Instead, we forged ahead with enthusiasm and excitement. Chase and Cutter in lead were playing and messing around with each other, and everyone seemed glad to be back on the trail. We rolled along at a good clip and Kristy's headlamp faded into the darkness. I never saw her again that night.

We reached McGrath after less than six hours on the run. The dogs were happy to see the lights and activity of McGrath, and blasted down to the check in area with a lot of power. We signed through and dropped back down to the trail on the river without any hesitation.

The trail to Takotna was one long grueling climb up into the hills, followed by a short drop to the checkpoint. I figured the dogs would be tiring and slowing, and calculated that it should take us close to three more hours to reach the checkpoint. The dogs had other ideas - they got stronger and stronger the farther we ran. What a difference from the last leg!

Everyone looked amazing, even Razor, who was charging hard. The way things looked now, he was going to lead my team up Front Street in Nome. I had some fun trying to imagine Varan's thoughts back at home as I continued down the trail with all 16 dogs.

The dogs may have been wired, but 3:30 in the morning is a terrible time for humans to try to stay awake. All through the climb I kept nodding off and jerking awake. I tried jumping up and down on my runners, running alongside, singing, deep breathing, everything I could think of to stay alert, but it wasn't helping.

After less than two hours I saw a cardboard sign announcing “Takotna 5 miles ahead”. In a trail with no real landmarks, it sure was exciting to see. But not exciting enough to keep me awake, apparently, because I still kept dropping off. The friendly little signs ticked by every mile, and I managed to miss at least two of them in my stupor. Even as we passed the final sign with only one mile to go, I just couldn't keep my eyes open. I was just about asleep on my feet when we roared into the checkpoint, only two hours and 20 minutes after leaving McGrath.

The checkers were very welcoming. They explained that my team was too long to park in the main area, so we would have to go to an alternate location. A group of orange vested volunteers grabbed onto the gangline and trotted us around the buildings and into a sheltered little spot just off the road. There was straw right next to my sled, and they brought all my dropbags and stacked them just behind me. The main dog lot area had a large wood fired barrel of hot water, but I didn't even have to walk that far to get water - they had a separate water barrel going just 15 feet away. That really made feeding and caring for the dogs easy!

I woke right up as soon as I got off the sled and got right to work. I wanted the dogs to rest warm and comfortably, so quickly - before they settled in - I stripped off their harnesses and put on their dog coats. Once they get down in their straw it is tough to get them back up for a wardrobe change. They would have more than a full day to eat and drink, so meals could come after everything else was squared away. As the dogs rolled and rooted in huge piles of fresh straw, I got booties off, added extra tug lines so they had more room to move around, and threw each dog a nice assortment of salmon, lamb, and other snacks. Once everything else was taken care of I got busy making them a warm, juicy meal. The dogs slurped up their breakfast and settled in for a nap as the eastern sky lighted with the rising sun.

I left all the other chores for later and went down to the community center for an enormous breakfast burrito. It was packed with bacon, eggs, cheese, and potato - delicious and filling. Then I headed up to the church for a nap. Of course, now that the sun was up I wasn't the slightest bit sleepy, but I had to at least try. I dozed a bit and finally gave up, heading down the hill for a piece of Takotna's famous pie. Having food ready-made and served to you at a checkpoint feels unbelievably decadent!

Eating well out on the trail is incredibly important to keeping up energy and mental focus. Mushers are known to lose 20 or more pounds in the week and a half of the race because of the incredible toll on the body, but also because eating is such a challenge.

First, extreme fatigue often causes nausea. Even when you are desperately hungry it can be hard to choke food down. You never know what will sound good at any given time, and food that was delicious at the previous checkpoint may seem absolutely impossible at the next. I sent out a wide variety of different foods to each checkpoint, all of them delicious, tempting foods that I love. Contra-intuitively, spicy foods are often the most appealing on the trail. I loaded each meal with as much flavor, fat, protein, and calories as possible; it was extra cheese, extra butter, extra bacon all around.

Another challenge is that every bite of food is frozen solid. During breaks I can thaw out a meal in the boiling water in my cooker. Big bulky items like burritos or steaks just don't work. When

we are preparing everything to send it out for the race each meal is cut up into bite sized pieces, packed into vacuum sealed bags, and flattened out thin so it will quickly thaw in the cooker.

Sometimes during long runs it can be 12 or more hours between actual meals, so snacking along the trail is vitally important. I try to eat a little something every two hours, just like my dogs. And any other time I felt a twinge of hunger I took an extra dip into my bag of trail snacks. Just like for the dogs, human trail snacks have to be small pieces that can be eaten while frozen. My snack bags are filled with a huge variety of goodies all designed to be packed full of flavor and tempting, but also easy to eat while frozen. For each leg of the race I shipped out a ziplock full of trail mix, beef jerky, cheese sticks, homemade cookies, mini-brownies, honey mustard pretzels, gummy fruit candies, peanut butter or cheese crackers, and mini candy bars (all unwrapped ahead of time so I don't have to fumble with them or take my gloves off out on the trail).

Whenever I snack, I also make sure to drink. Keeping liquids actually liquid is another challenge. I have a large drink jug padded with extra insulation and connected to a piece of insulated tubing that makes a long straw. Filled with hot water, my giant "sippy cup" keeps things from freezing up for many hours, even at temperatures well below zero. And I don't even need to get it out of the sled bag to get a drink – just lean over and grab the straw as we go on down the trail. Being able to sip almost constantly is a real advantage to staying hydrated. I send out lemonade powder and other drink mixes to add in. It is surprising how good hot lemonade is on a cold day.

In 2009 I had been shocked by the intensity of my hunger. My body was so insistent on being fed that I could barely think or function until I had taken care of my hunger. I would wake up out of a dead sleep and need to rush to get food into me. This year I was certainly ravenous and I was consuming a ridiculous amount of food, but it was nothing like last time.

In addition to feeling less wildly starved, I was not feeling as physically wrung and tired either. I didn't even get the painful splits on my finger tips that always make booting so painful – the spines in the Velcro always slice right into the splits. I couldn't figure out why. Cold can really take it out of you, but temperatures had been similar to this point. I never had any major crashes or got really banged up; I had a remarkably easy trip both times. I was probably getting a similar amount of sleep on this race. Even though our rest breaks were shorter, I was insanely efficient this time, and getting a greater percentage of the break to rest. I might have been sleepier on this race, but not as weary and worn out. After an entire summer off to recover from my knee surgery I wasn't even as fit and strong as I had been in 2009. I am not sure why this trip was physically easier for me, but it held true right up until the end.

In between eating and trying to rest, I filled the long 24-hour break at Takotna with chores and dog care, cleaning up and repacking my sled, and making sure all my gear was dry and ready to go. The dogs ate and drank everything I gave them and were in great spirits. In the dark of the night I was up and about with my dogs. The neon northern lights blazed up behind the cabins and lit the sky. I gave each dog a short walk to stretch their legs. They all hopped up happily and weren't even as stiff or sore as I was. So much for having a banged up, half-healthy team of cripples. The dogs were simply amazing.

This year I brought along a pair of camp booties so that I could take off my big arctic boots and still have footwear to pad around the checkpoint. I fell in love with those booties – so comfortable and warm, with enough traction that I could easily take care of chores, move around the village, or step out to use the bathroom without having to put on the monster boots. I was to find those booties even more important farther down the trail.

At six in the morning I started getting ready for my departure. Dogs up, out of their coats, back into their harnesses, booties on, sled cinched up, and we headed out.

### **Leg 7 – Takotna, through Ophir, to Don’s Cabin (57 miles)**

We left Takotna just before seven in the morning – a wonderful time to hit the trail in the cool morning light. The dogs were happy to be going again, and it felt like we were moving lightning fast. The trail climbed for a long while up a wide, well packed road. As we churned up the hill, I dipped into the sack lunch that the volunteers had tossed on top of my sled. Ham and American cheese on white bread with lots of mayo has never been a favorite of mine, but it was just about the most delicious thing I had ever tasted as we cruised along.

I figured it would take us somewhere close to three hours to reach Ophir. After two hours I stopped to snack and replace a couple of booties. The dogs were wild and not cooperative about stopping, and I wondered if they could already smell the checkpoint. I pulled the hook after just a short stop, and off we roared. Right around the corner was Ophir. We made the 23 miles in only two hours! In one sense I didn’t want the dogs to burn off their energy too quickly, but in another sense I really didn’t want to put a damper on their enthusiasm.

Ophir was just a quick re-supply stop and then we off again, trotting strongly. The day was beginning to warm up but there was just enough breeze to keep me cool as I helped pedal over the rolling open tundra. There was so much light and fresh air and such wide open scenery, I thought of Varan and wished that he was there to share it with me.

It is almost 100 miles from Takotna to the Iditarod checkpoint. I planned to stop half way at Don’s Cabin, an abandoned shack that is one of the few landmarks on this long, long stretch. The day promised to get even warmer and I wanted to stop the dogs before they got hot and unhappy.

We finally reached Don’s Cabin around 1:30 in the afternoon – later in the day than ideal, but still pretty good time for the distance we’d come. Lots of teams were clustered around the cabin (and even one team camped out in the trail). There was obviously no place for another team, and I decided the dogs would get better rest away from all the other teams anyway. Another five minutes down the trail, and I found a nice wide spot to pull over. The dogs had been working well, but they were happy to take a nice snooze in the sun.

A few other teams came by as I took care of the dogs, and I sure was glad I had my dogs down and resting during the heat of the day. The dogs curled up in their straw beds and I tried to get some rest myself. But it was the middle of the afternoon, and we were just coming off a long break. I wasn’t particularly sleepy.

I lay on my pad for a short while next to Flip and Chisel, who snuggled and cuddled and were very happy for the extra attention. Chisel has a way of burrowing his head in your arms that is as close to a dog hug as you can get. Later I moved down the line to Mercedes and Luna. Luna is an attention hog, while Mercedes pretends she doesn't notice you - until you stop petting. Even though I didn't sleep during this break, lying down and spending time with the dogs always makes me happy.

### **Leg 8 –Don’s Cabin to Iditarod (42 miles)**

After a nice five hour break we got back on the trail around 7:00 at night. The trail had been easy coming across from Ophir and I figured it would be more of the same all the way in to Iditarod. I had been relying heavily on Mercedes, Chase, and Aberdeen, and I decided to give them a break from leading. I put Cutter and Luna up front.

For the first few hours we rolled along at a good pace. I caught up to Nick Petit, whose dogs were warming up slowly, but would eventually speed up and pass me again. A bit later I caught and passed Matt Hayashida, who would tail me all the way in to the checkpoint.

We were making good time when suddenly out of the darkness my dogs swooped to the left, off the trail. I could see the problem. Ahead, the trail traversed 100 yards of steeply slanted side-hill glare ice. Luna has always hated ice, and will do almost anything to avoid it. Apparently teams in front of us had tried to avoid the tricky slip-and-slide too; there was a narrow path slashed through the trees on the downhill side, and each dog in my team seemed to have found their own personal bush or tree to wrap around. Huge tangle.

Behind me I saw Matt’s headlamp sweep around the corner, so I called warning to him and then began creeping forward across the ice to untangle my team. First I moved Chase and Mercedes back up front; I wasn’t going depend on a goof ball and a youngster to get me through trouble. As I was working through the knots Matt came up to give me a hand. Working together we got the team reasonably lined out on the new “trail”. It was about 18 inches wide, and twisted violently back and forth through the trees. “Is this even possible?” Matt asked.

It didn’t look like it, but we were in the middle of it, so I eased the team forward – one tree at a time. At each turning my sled slammed into the tree in front of it and wedged there. Matt and I would heave the sled over onto its side to free it up, and the dogs would lunge forward to wedge it into the next tree. Right about then I was really wishing for a more resistant brush bow that would help the sled slide off of obstacles. In between freeing up the sled, we also worked to untangle dogs who mostly managed to go on the wrong side of each tree.

Finally after 20 minutes of work, the team and I were free of the pinball course. I set both my hooks well and went back to help Matt negotiate the obstacle. His team deftly threaded the needle, and he wove his way through the narrow twisty section without a pause – so much for being able to return the favor! I jumped back on my sled to get out of his way and quickly left him behind. At least for a little while.

Twenty minutes later the trail crossed a swamp where seeping water had overflowed the trail for about thirty feet. This happens all the time at home on Sheep Creek and I had all the confidence

in the world that my dogs would trot right through. They didn't. They knotted up at the edge. I scolded them, and they did nothing. I picked my leaders up and chucked them into the water. They did their best to scramble back to dry snow.

I went back to my sled and pulled tall garbage bags over my feet. Now prepared for wading, I grabbed my leaders and this time I dragged them forward into the water, which was only about 18 inches deep. They were not cooperative. They dodged to the left, looking for dryer ground.

No way was I letting go - we were going across this pond. I hung on tight. But my slippery plastic footwear gave me no traction, and I was yanked over into the water, face first. I was up and out of the water fast, but by then my arms and face were sopping wet, and the trash bags over my feet had filled up with water.

The dogs had not found drier ground - the snow bank they ran towards was bottomless slop on top of even deeper water. What they did find was a small spruce tree to wrap around. So now I had to wade over through crotch deep slush to untangle the dogs.

By now, Matt had caught up to us again. He helped out by pushing my sled right to the edge of the water. As I hauled on my leaders he encouraged the rest of the dogs to follow. With 16 dogs all pulling back, for awhile it didn't look like I was going to get them across. After a lot of cussing and nagging some of the dogs finally started to move forward, and I towed them out to the middle of the water. I left my leaders half way across and hoped they wouldn't try to come back with me. I trudged back through the slush and slop to my sled.

After some more encouragement (and cussing), I managed to get my team to plod through the ice water to the other side. Matt's team, of course, trotted right through, and he was able to keep his feet up out of the water. I was more than frustrated with the dogs; I really expected better from them. But there was no use letting the frustration affect the rest of my run, and it sure wouldn't change the outcome.

On the other side I quickly stripped off the dog's sopping booties, removed my sodden socks, squeezed my boot liners as dry as I could, and changed my gloves. The dogs rolled in the dry snow and seemed invigorated by the bath. At least it wasn't bitterly cold (at least it didn't seem like it, I had no real way of knowing). I guessed it was somewhere close to zero. My feet were still warm in my giant arctic boots, even if they were completely wet.

With Matt right on my tail I didn't want to take time to re-booty the entire team. I spent the next hour and a half fretting about the dog's feet and worrying about whether their wet harnesses were chaffing. I also plotted out each step of my upcoming stay in Iditarod, because I knew I would have to be extremely efficient to get all my gear changed and dried and still stay on schedule.

We pulled in to Iditarod just after midnight after five hours on the trail. Matt was right behind me. I figured we had wasted at least an hour in the pinball section and negotiating the overflow. We had still made decent time, considering.

It turns out I was not the only person to have problems on this section. While some people had traversed the overflow area while it was still frozen, others had gotten as wet as I had. Dee Dee Jonrowe had flipped her sled over and been completely submerged. Robert Nelson showed me the hand that he had mangled in the pinball section. So we were in good company.

I was planning to stop for just over four hours, and I had plenty to do. As soon as I had the dogs taken care of I went straight into the cabin and stripped off my wet boots. I had spare boot liners packed away in my sled, so all I really needed to do was get those overboots as dry as possible. Lucky I had those camp booties to wear while my big boots dried over the cabin stove! I took the wet liners, wrung them out one more time, and packed them back in the sled - I was hoping to get them dried out later on so I would have a back up pair if I ran into overflow farther on down the trail.

I stripped off my bibs and parka. They had done a good job of shedding water, and my underlayers were basically dry. By then it was around 20 below and all my outer gear was frozen up, so I was able to smack the icy bibs against the railing and get rid of most of the water. I wasn't smart enough to leave my outerwear outside though, and the remaining ice melted and soaked into the fabric while I had it hanging up inside. Still, it was just my outerwear, and it didn't make much difference as long as I kept my inner layers dry.

Once I had my gear all hung up, I headed back out to clean up and repack my sled, melt some more snow for the dogs, and get organized. By then I only had about an hour left for sleeping. Try as I might, I just couldn't fall asleep. It is sort of ironic that during the wee hours it can be so hard to stay awake on the sled, and yet nearly impossible to drop off to sleep in a checkpoint.

### **Leg 9 – Iditarod to Shageluk (56 miles)**

We hit the trail again after only 4 hours and 15 minutes of rest – I was trying hard to stick to my run-rest ratio. Once we got going we almost flew over the hills. And it was nothing *but* hills all the way to Shageluk.

In the cool darkness the miles went by quickly. Once the sun came up, though, it got hot. We left Iditarod at 4:30 in the morning and by 11:30 we were really slowing down. I stopped frequently to let the dogs cool off, and ran or pedaled up every hill.

Spartan really started to lag. I stopped briefly on a steep hill to let him cool off. I took the time to remove everyone's booties. Even though the snow was granular and rough on their feet, an overheated dog is much more of a problem than a sore-footed dog. The Iditarod Insider cameramen came up behind me and said that, according to their GPS, we still had about 15 miles to go. NOTE – Do **not** trust GPS information out on the trail!

Even after our short break, Spartan was still not looking too good. He had worked very hard in the early part of the run, and he just couldn't handle the heat. He is a VERY large dog. We call him the baby orca, and for good reason. He is the most enormous sled dog I've ever seen.

Convincing him to ride in the sled was not easy. Pushing a sled loaded with 70 pounds of tired dog up the steep hills was also not easy. After another half an hour I decided it was just not fair

to the dogs to keep pushing through the heat for a run that was going to take several more hours. I pulled off the trail and hooked down. I unloaded Spartan out of the sled and gave everyone another 45 minutes to rest and cool off.

At 1:00 I was just thinking it was time to head out when Robert Nelson came along and pulled over to chat. According to his GPS he figured we had another 10 miles to go. We decided to run in to the checkpoint together. We figured it would take an hour and a half due to the heat and sticky conditions. NOTE – Do **not** trust GPS information out on the trail!

We rolled down a long open hill and into a narrow gap, and there was Shageluk – right there, less than ½ an hour from where we had taken our break. If I had any idea how close we were, we could have gotten in to Shageluk much earlier. Still, our on-trail time of eight hours wasn't too bad for such a tough, hilly run during the heat.

I declared my eight hour break as I pulled in to the checkpoint. I wasn't sure I wanted to take my mandatory break here or farther down the trail, but I wanted to keep my options open, and we could always head out early.

The Washeteria is the center of many villages – a place for locals to do laundry, take showers, and get water for the household. The Shageluk Washeteria was right next to the dog parking area and had unlimited hot water right out of the tap – so convenient.

While I was there, I took the time to dry my sopping spare boot liners in the Washeteria dryers. First I had to find someone in the village office to sell me quarters, then I had to stay around to keep feeding money into the dryers, so it took me quite awhile to get finished up and then find time to rest and eat.

After a nice long nap I went out to visit with Spartan. He had bounced back and was full of energy. He was excited to see me and jumped up for a kiss and nibbled on my sleeve. He looked fully recovered, and the next leg of trail didn't have any hills. Still, I was nervous about having to pack a dog his size again. With 16 dogs, I had the largest team on the trail. I decided I could safely send him home. I was sorry to see him go – he is such a fun, silly dog, and really good company. He's also a heck of a hard worker. It made me laugh to think of Varan at home, expecting the first dog home to be Razor, banished for not working. Instead, he'd been pulling like a demon and was definitely going to stay in the team!

Based on running eight hours, and resting some on the trail, I could have reasonably rested six to 6½ hours in Shageluk. It is always a good idea to get the river sections done with while the weather is good, so I thought it would be best to put off taking the long mandatory eight hour break until farther down the trail.

I decided to cut it short and leave before the eight hours were up. But as I walked over to the team with a bucket of water I realized I felt weak and breathless. Maybe the dogs were good to go, but I didn't feel too hot. I spent some time looking at run times and schedules, trying to figure out how best to avoid the heat of the day. No matter how I figured it, we were going to get

caught running in the sun. It didn't really matter if I took a bit more rest now and finished up my eight-hour layover. Back down for more sleep.

### **Leg 10 – Shageluk, through Anvik, to Grayling (43 miles)**

We finally pulled out of Shag at 9:30 p.m., headed out for a relatively short run with no hills in sight. The first 25 miles rolls through sloughs, swamps, and lakes until it reaches the little town of Anvik. It took us just over three hours. This wasn't a lightning fast run, especially considering it was cool and dark. We checked in and out of Anvik quickly and headed back on to the trail up the Yukon River.

After about 10 miles on the River I could see the lights of Grayling. It seemed like it took us forever to close the gap. The trail hugged the right side of the River, and I kept waiting and waiting for the markers to lead us across to the lights. The dogs didn't seem at all excited to approach another checkpoint – just did their job and kept on moving until we got there. A ho-hum kind of a run at a ho-hum kind of a pace. It took us 2 ½ hours to complete the 18 miles from Anvik. That was just over seven miles an hour, even slower than we had gone through the Shageluk hills. I was not impressed, but also not too worried - the dogs were steady. It was 3:15 in the morning, a good time to stop to rest.

I headed inside the school and took a nice long nap. I was really tired even though I had gotten extra rest in Shageluk. I almost always wake up before my alarm ever goes off, and this time was no different. I woke up just four minutes before the bell, but so and incoherent I almost staggered down to the bathroom. The heaters in the bathroom were set on full blast, and it was a warm and quiet place to sit. Ten minutes later I jerked awake, hardly able to believe that I had fallen asleep while sitting up on the toilet. It took me a few extra minutes to pull it together and get outside to the dogs.

### **Leg 11 –Grayling to Yukon River Camp One (35 miles?)**

We had run 5 ½ hours to get to Grayling. After their lackluster performance during that run, I gave the dogs an almost equal amount of rest. It was 8:30 in the morning by the time I pulled the hook and asked the dogs to head back out on to the Yukon River. Some of the dogs were not too excited about getting up off their straw, but once they were up they moved out willingly at a reasonably good pace.

It was going to be another hot day and I knew it would take us a very long time to run the 55 miles to the Eagle Island checkpoint if we tried to push on through the heat of the day. Right then I made one of the best decisions of the race. Instead of two fairly long runs made on a bad schedule (55 miles to Eagle Island and then 62 miles to Kaltag), I decided to break up the trip on the Yukon. I would make three separate runs - one short, and two longer. It would mean we could avoid running in the hottest part of the day. It would also mean camping out on the river twice, but with the great weather we'd been having that seemed like a good gamble.

Our first run would be short – only four hours. By 12:30 when the day started to heat up and the dogs started to slow down I was already looking for a good spot to pull over. The dogs were surprised when I asked them to move off the main trail. I had to get off the sled and walk over to the snow machine track on the left to show them that I was serious about stopping.

We had a nice afternoon break in the sunshine and pulled out again after 3 ½ hours. It hadn't yet started to cool down, but I knew it wouldn't be long.

### **Leg 12 –Yukon River Camp One, through Eagle Island, to Yukon River Camp Two (45 miles?)**

There are really no landmarks on the Yukon River – it's just a wide, white expanse. In 2009 the wind was insane, the trail was invisible, and there were deep drifts everywhere. This time the sun was out, the trail was packed, and the trip was easy. A completely different experience!

We reached Eagle Island at 6:30 p.m. after only about 2 ½ hours of easy running. The checkpoint was perched on a small bench above the river. The trail up the river bank was steep and narrow as it wound between small trees, shelter tents, and piles of drop bags, gear, and straw.

I wanted to get in and out quickly, and I was moving lightning fast and incredibly efficiently. I had already scoped out the location of all my supplies and plotted my plan of attack. I quickly grabbed my drop bags, sorted through to find what I wanted, and loaded up my sled. I tossed the remaining items into my return bag and tied it shut. On my way to the return pile I grabbed several bottles of Heet for fuel on the trail and a bale of straw. Back at the sled I cut the bale of straw in half, placed one half off to the side, cinched my half down tightly, and strapped it on top of my sled, and I was ready to go. The dogs weren't

Of course by then my wiggly front end was tangled. Of course every time I stepped off the trail as I worked on the tangle, I went waist deep in snow. Of course my dogs had to help by licking me, wiggling around, and tying themselves up in the nearby willows. Of course the dogs who weren't harassing me were ripping their booties off left and right. Five minutes to load the sled, ten minutes to get re-organized and back on the road.

The trail back down to the river wound through narrow trees. Most of the booties the dogs had not already stripped off were sucked off their feet as we wallowed along the upper bank and back down the drop to the river. Once we hit the nice flat trail again I had to stop to replace booties, which took even more time...My quick get-away was not so quick after all, but it hardly mattered as the dog's energy level ramped up with the onset of night.

We moved down the trail into the coming darkness. The checkers at Eagle Island had warned me that the wind might come up a bit, so as we ticked closer to the seven hour mark I started looking for a sheltered place to stop the dogs. I was hoping the trail would cross over an island or get close to a bank where we might find a little lee, but it didn't look like that was going to happen any time soon. The trail was marching right up the middle of the mile-wide river, which I knew from experience could become a wind tunnel of incredible force.

Paralleling the trail, though, were snow machine tracks that had left a sunken pathway in the deeper snow. Just right for dogs to hunker down out of the wind if it came up. We pulled over just at 11:00 p.m. – a perfect time to stop. The dogs enjoyed their cozy little trench, especially after I piled extra straw in front of them to make little wind breaks.

While the dogs were happy in their nice soft beds, I was getting worn out trying to take care of them. The deep, soft snow beside the trail made it difficult to move around. I had to pack down little side paths out to each pair of dogs. Using these paths I got them their straw, took off their booties, distributed their food dishes, and brought them their wet meal, kibble, and meat snacks. It was a lot of trips in the deep snow and I was whipped.

A good meal and plenty of liquids helped, but I really needed some time off my feet. It was getting colder, although the wind never picked up beyond a fresh little breeze. I got out my sleeping bag to cover up while we rested. I wondered if I ought to put blankets on the dogs. I couldn't really tell, but it didn't seem all that cold. Frankly I was just too tired to make another exhausting trip wading through the deep snow and wrestling each sleepy dog on to their feet to get their jackets on – not unless it was necessary. I decided they were pretty warm in their straw and would be better off getting undisturbed rest. I took a nap.

### **Leg 13 –Yukon River Camp Two to Kaltag (40 miles?)**

We rested 5 ½ hours until 4:30 a.m. Like the last few runs, the dogs didn't have much enthusiasm, but still kept up a good pace. We trotted along the river as the sky slowly lightened and the sun came up.

After being outside for several days you get to where you really can't tell what is "cold". It seemed chilly, but I really didn't know. I decided I had to figure out a way to carry a thermometer without breaking it, because I really wished I knew how cold it was. In the absence of any way to measure temperature, I carefully watched the dogs. Under normal running temperatures they will pant lightly as they run. If it is really cold and they need to conserve their body heat, they quit panting. My dogs were panting just a bit, so I decided they were OK without their coats on.

A few hours into the run, we crossed over a small island. When we came out on the other side we were in the middle of a violent wind storm! The chilly temperatures combined with the wind presented a real risk of frost bite for the dogs, so I stopped immediately and fished out the dog coats.

It took me a good twenty minutes to get coats on all the dogs. They were all huddled down on the snow with their backs to the wind, and not too cooperative about standing up to have the belly bands of their coats put in place. I was trying to put the coats on with one hand while I hung on to the bag with the rest of the coats with the other hand. Every coat I pulled out of the bag was the wrong size for the dogs near me, which meant trudging up and down the line to fit it on a different dog. After lots of heaving and pulling and tromping around I finally managed to get the dogs all set. They got up - willingly but without any real enthusiasm - and we moved on down the trail.

Ten minutes later we were out of the wind, and now I was wondering if I should stop again to remove the dog's coats. I watched the dogs. They weren't panting any more than previously, and as we continued up the river it felt like it was getting colder and colder. I pulled up my neck fleece and tightened down my parka ruff around my face. I couldn't decide if it had really gotten

chilly or if I was just a wimp and accustomed to the warm temperatures we had been running in. I really need to get that thermometer!

After less than six hours we could see Kaltag approaching. For the first time in awhile the dogs got excited and started sprinting towards the checkpoint. It was a little after 10:00 in the morning by my watch, so when the checkers told me it was actually 11:00 I was completely confused. Did it really take us that long? Had I lost an hour? Was my watch messed up? They explained to me that the clocks had all changed for Daylight Savings Time. People suffering from sleep fatigue should not have to try to figure out how to reset their watches!

Kaltag is a small town, only 230 people. Every single one of them seems to own a snow machine and spend all their time racing around the village on it. The village is a like a stirred up bee hive, snow machines flying up and down the streets at high speed and screaming revved up engines. All the noise and activity makes it hard for the dogs to rest, but there isn't much you can do about it. I was glad to be parked close to the village community center, hopefully out of harm's way, and also out of the wind.

Kaltag offers cold water, just down the way in the firehouse. As I stepped out of the building with my full bucket I glanced at the thermometer - it read 30 below. The sun was up and warming the air. We were also up on the bank, out of the cold river drainage. That meant it must have been 40 below or more down on the river. Guess it was cold after all.

Taking care of 15 dogs on the trail is a lot of work. I had already decided coming in to the checkpoint that I needed to drop a couple just to lighten my workload. Shotgun had pulled inconsistently on the last few runs. He is an experienced veteran and an honest hard worker, so I knew something was up. I had seen him take a couple of funny skipping steps on his right hind leg, so I guessed maybe he had a light injury to his psoas, which is the muscle that swings the leg forward during the stride. The vets could find nothing initially, but eventually detected a little irritation on that right psoas. They were surprised I had been able to diagnose the source of the problem just from watching, but it was exactly the same problem that had knocked Fly off my team so it was fresh in my mind.

The next selection was a bit harder – everyone was fit and healthy. I finally settled on Azure. She had not done a good job eating in the first few days, and had lost quite a bit of weight. Even though she was eating like a starving wolf now, she was never going gain back any weight during the race. The vets said she looked just fine, but I had to pick someone, and the skinny dog was it. I was a little hesitant to drop a good leader, but I hadn't used her in lead so far, and I stil had lots of other leaders to choose from.

Right before we left I realized that Mercedes was stiff and limping. I unclipped her from the gangline and walked her around to see if she would loosen up, but she was really sore. It was strange for her to have an injury now, since the last three runs had been flat river running on well packed trails - easy on the dogs.

A nearby vet came over and determined she had a slight shoulder injury. I would be able to effectively treat her injury with massage and heat at the next checkpoint, but it was too late to

treat her now before our next run. Instead of taking the chance of having to haul a dog over the challenging terrain that was coming up, I opted to drop her as well. Dropping one of my most reliable leaders REALLY made me nervous, but after I saw the next part of the trail I knew it was the best decision. She never would have made it over the next 20 miles with a shoulder injury and the other dogs would have had to work twice as hard hauling her.

#### **Leg 14 –Kaltag to Old Woman Camp (51 miles)**

We pulled out of Kaltag at 4:30 in the afternoon. After our chilly morning run, the sun had gone to work. It was now 20 above and the sun was blazing down, baking all of us in its glare. It was miserably hot.

We left the checkpoint loaded down with supplies for camping. After about half an hour I decided that any comfort the dogs would get from straw would be far out shadowed by the extra effort it would take to haul it. I unbuckled the bungee-straps holding the half-bale in place, and jettisoned it over the side.

The trail wound upwards through large trees. It was a mess of enormous moguls, one after another, after another. These large bumps in the trail are common in areas with high snow machine usage. They are murder on a dog's shoulders. The sled slowed to a stop as it crested each hill, and then popped forward suddenly as it crashed down the other side. No matter how hard I worked at jumping off to ease the sled over the tops, the dogs get jerked and slammed around as the gangline slackened and then tightened. It went on for wretched mile after mile. I would later hear that many dogs came up with shoulder injuries after this section. All of mine trooped through this brutal section without a hitch, but I was doubly glad that Mercedes had not tried to run it on her sore shoulder.

In many places there were side trails braiding back and forth with the main trail. The side trails didn't have bumps, but it was impossible to tell if they had set up and become firm enough to run on until you were in them. It was a constant guessing game. Sometimes we found good, smooth trail and other times we floundered in soft, mucky snow, but it seemed like anything was better than crashing around in the moguls. Chase and Aberdeen, in lead together again, did a great job listening to my last minute commands as I tried to find the easiest path for us. Sometimes they would decide, making it clear when they had a preference. They were always right – the side trails they chose were invariably good ones.

We stopped frequently to cool off. Luna was looking a little frazzled, and I took off her tee-shirt that is designed to prevent harness rubs. Better a few chaffed spots than an overheated puppy dog. Once she lost her shirt she seemed to perk up, but I kept an eagle eye on all the dogs for any signs of hyperthermia.

Even though the trail was challenging, for the first time I felt like I had a cohesive group of dogs all working together for a common goal. Somehow dropping down to a smaller team of 12 seemed to be the magic recipe to make a team. While the dogs had worked honestly through most of the race to this point, after Kaltag there was a sense of purpose to our team.

Finally after several hours of thrashing around, we topped out into the open, wind-blown tundra. The breeze helped to cool things down and the sun was also losing strength. The team picked up speed.

I started making calculations. If we reached Old Woman Cabin in less than five and a half hours, we'd run straight through to Unalakleet, a 10 to 11 hour run. The dogs were running strongly and could do a long run, but I wasn't willing to push it much longer than that. If it took us longer to reach Old Woman, we'd take a break there. But for how long?

If I followed the normal plan, we'd rest about four hours Old Woman, and then another four hours when we reached Unalakleet. But I was tired and wanting a real sleep. I thought the dogs might benefit from longer break too.

As the hours clicked by I realized we were definitely going to stop at Old Woman. I decided to stop for only two hours - just long enough to feed the dogs, eat, take a quick nap, and replace their booties. To make up for the short rest, we'd take a nice long break at the next stop.

We pulled in to the cabin at 10:45 p.m. after just over six hours on the trail. Not great time, but the conditions had been pretty tough. Pulling in to the camp area I noticed a couple other teams parked. I was trying to decide the best spot for my team when a large man came leaping over the snow. He was clad only in long-johns, enormous furry slippers, and a halo of flying hair and wild beard. He cheerfully introduced himself as Joe, and asked if I would like help parking. He grabbed my leaders and chattered away about the cabin, the other mushers who were already inside the cabin, his team, the trail, the weather, and where to find the outhouse. It is common for other mushers to help teams in and out of camp areas or checkpoints, but I really did not recognize this man. Was he a musher? An unofficial checker? I was confused.

I looked to my right, and saw a line of absolutely humongous white dogs chained off near an enormous freight sled the size of a small bus. I started to wonder if I was imagining this wild man and his oversized team. But I was feeling pretty alert and I didn't think I was having hallucinations (very common for mushers during long-distance races).

I asked him if he was out running a trap line, but he said he was just out for a recreational run. With his strong but slow Malamutes and heavy sled, he was days from anywhere - the things some people do for fun!

### **Leg 15 –Old Woman Camp to Unalakleet (36 miles)**

We pulled out of Old Woman at 12:45. The middle of the night is a tough time to be running, but there didn't seem to be a way to fix that short of taking extra rest at each stop to keep us in sync with the sun - and we were on a race, not a camping trip.

It is simple torture trying to stay awake while running in the small hours of the night. The dogs were strong and happy in the cool temperatures, but in my fatigue I just couldn't stay awake. Sitting down was not an option - I would doze off and fall right off the sled. But standing up proved to be no better. Usually I jerk awake just as my knees begin to buckle. On this run I actually went all the way to the ground more than once, with my knee slamming into the snow

next to the sled, before I woke up. Somehow I still had a death grip on the handle bar every time I came to, but I knew it was just a matter of time before my hold slipped. And this team was not going to stop just because I fell off - they were running strong.

I sang, I jumped around, I pinched myself, I slapped my own face, and still I was fighting to stay awake. Even though I was battling fatigue-induced nausea, I tried eating from my snack bag and sipping lemonade from my insulated jug. Nothing helped, and I just kept praying that I wouldn't wake up on the snow, watching my team roar off without me.

Eventually we wound out of the hills and onto the river sloughs. When we began seeing cabins I knew we were getting close. Finally we rounded a hill and I could see the village out across the sea ice. The closer we got the more confusing it became, with trail markers leading off in several different directions. I knew where the checkpoint had been before, but I also knew they had made some changes for this year. I really wasn't sure where we were supposed to go.

I carried on up the ice toward the old location and finally I could see parked teams. But we must have missed a turn somewhere, because they were on the other side of a large snow berm. We couldn't get there from where we were. A few people were milling around and trying to wave me over, but I couldn't hear what they were saying over the scrape of my brakes. I couldn't even set a hook to stop the team on the rock hard ice. Finally I noticed a small gap in the berm, and called to the dogs to turn left. Thank heavens for good leaders - they headed straight for the opening.

After running 11 hours with only a two hour break the dogs were still fresh and happy. The vets commented on their appetite and attitude, as they had been throughout the race, and gave us all a clean bill of health.

Unalakleet had made some really nice changes. They had straw and drop bags to me in no time, and pointed out a large hot water boiler only 20 feet away. Much easier than the long trek up the hill to the community center for water like last time (although hot water is a great thing no matter what, even if you have to hike for it).

My mom and our friend Joan had been tracking me on-line, so they were right there to greet me even though it was only 5:30 in the morning. I fed and took care of the dogs, changed my runner plastic, and repacked the sled. As usual, my drowsiness had evaporated the minute we saw the checkpoint and I was right back on my ultra-efficient routine. It didn't take me long to have everything squared away and head up to the community center.

Last time the only place to sleep in Unalakleet was a corner of linoleum in the brightly lit and bustling community center. This time there were several individual rooms framed out - dark, quiet, and with air mattresses or cots to lie on. I had a six hour rest planned, and had a luxurious three and a half hours to myself to sleep. Usually two hours of sleep is refreshing, and anything longer just puts your body into a fuddle of exhaustion that is hard to waken from. Still, I knew my body needed the rest, and I planned to use every minute of it. I staked out a soft, double wide cot and was out like a light. But not for long.

I woke up after an hour and a half and needed to use the bathroom. Then I decided I was hungry again, and got something to eat. Just as I was dozing off again, a vet woke me to say that one of my dogs was loose and they couldn't catch it. I hopped up - this could be a disaster. The vet said they were worried the dog would run off into town or out onto the sea ice. She said it was "sort of black and white spotted" - which didn't describe a single dog in my team, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

As I approached the dog lot, here came Chase - wiggling up to me very pleased with himself, and very glad to see me. He had slipped out of his harness and decided to roam around instead of resting - obviously not too tired. He sashayed right up to me and then rolled around on my feet in an excess of good spirits. I couldn't be mad at him for coming right to me, even if he had disturbed my nap. I clipped him back into the team, thanked the vets, and headed back up the community center to try for another nap.

By this time it was after 9:30 in the morning, and I was pretty wide awake. So I ate again, then sat up chatting with Mom, Joan, and Kathy Gonzalez (Ray Redington's mom, who lives in Unk). I showed them my trail notes, which I carry with me to remind me about the upcoming trail, distances, and landmarks. I also explained my run-rest chart, a table I used to figure out how long to rest depending on how long I had run. Soon it was time to get up and get going again.

**KALTAG TO OLD WOMAN**

**13**

**51 Miles 6½ hours**

**TAKE Straw & Heet & Drop Bags for Old Woman**

Well-used trail. Wind, whiteout can be dangerous.

First ½ - hill climbs with some side-hill

35 miles out - Tripod Flats cabin

51 miles out - Old Woman cabin – just off the trail

**CAMP at Old Woman Cabin**

Run	Rest Ratio		
	1.2	1.4	1.5
4.0	3.3	2.9	2.7
4.5	3.8	3.2	3.0
5.0	4.2	3.6	3.3
5.5	4.6	3.9	3.7
6.0	5.0	4.3	4.0
6.5	5.4	4.6	4.3
7.0	5.8	5.0	4.7
7.5	6.3	5.4	5.0
8.0	6.7	5.7	5.3
8.5	7.1	6.1	5.7
9.0	7.5	6.4	6.0
9.5	7.9	6.8	6.3
10.0	8.3	7.1	6.7
10.5	8.8	7.5	7.0
11.0	9.2	7.9	7.3
11.5	9.6	8.2	7.7
12.0	10.0	8.6	8.0
12.5	10.4	8.9	8.3
13.0	10.8	9.3	8.7

**Leg 16 –Unalakleet to Shaktoolik (35 miles)**

My team was looking fresh and happy after their nice, long six hour break. Again, we were heading out during the heat of the day, leaving at 11:30 a.m. but there wasn't much I could do to alter the schedule, so off we went with Razor and Chase in lead.

Although the distance from Unk to Shak is not far, the trail goes up one seriously long hill after another. My notes said that there were three major hills to crest before a long, steep descent back to sea level. I remembered that there were lots and lots of big hills, so I only counted what seemed like the really giant ones. And still, every time I thought we were done with climbing we'd be faced with another peak.

But the dogs were really churning along and were cheerful. Razor was having a ball up in lead, and we were really moving. The team was so happy to be on the trail and so beautiful that I couldn't help by smile through tears of pride and admiration.

Eventually we found that long, long descent that goes all the way back down to sea level, and I rode the brake all the way to the bottom. We dashed up the last flat 12 miles to Shaktoolik and ended up completing that section pretty quickly in comparison to other nearby teams.

As I settled the dogs into their straw it was 5:30 in the afternoon and the temperatures were finally cooling down – our schedule was completely out of sync. The dogs were rolling in the straw and looked very happy with themselves. Not a single dog had so much as a sore toenail, and my chores were over quickly. Rick Swenson, who was parked next to us, looked over and asked if we had found an "easy trail" over from Unalakleet. Nope - the dogs were just hitting their stride.

I decided to rest only four hours. The next section was flat sea ice; while it can be mentally challenging, it is a pretty easy run physically as long as the weather holds. A four hour rest put us almost to 1.5 run-rest ratio, but I thought we'd be fine after our long break in Unalakleet.

I didn't realize until I reviewed my checkpoint data when writing this summary, but I somehow miscalculated my departure time and we actually only rested 3 hours and 40 minutes. This put our run-rest ratio for this section at almost 1.6 – stretching it a little bit for us, although no big deal for many of the competitive teams.

### **Leg 17 – Shaktoolik to Koyuk (45 miles)**

Despite the short rest, the dogs cheerfully got up and got moving right at 9:00 p.m. The cool darkness was a nice change from the last run. It was a crisp, clear night with no sign of the wind and ground blizzards that often make this leg of the trail difficult and dangerous.

The trail pulled out around the building, crossed the road, and headed immediately onto the wide open whiteness. Part of the trail covers open tundra, but most of it crosses the frozen Norton Sound. There was no way to tell whether we were travelling over land or sea on the frozen expanse. In the first several miles there was plenty of shallow overflow – just enough to get booties damp, not enough to discourage the dogs. A little disconcerting to see water of any sort when the trail is crossing open ocean.

After several hours the dogs were moving well, but had started refusing to follow the marked trail. They wanted to trot on the wind packed crust, which was smoother off to the side. They constantly veered to the left to try to avoid the roughened snow-machine trail. At every trail marker the dogs would jerk back right and go around to the other side of the lath. This behavior was completely bizarre and I just couldn't figure out what the heck they were doing. I later heard from other mushers that they thought their dogs had lost their minds on this section – we were all playing at pole-weaving.

As we wandered back and forth I had to constantly yank the sled over to avoid breaking off the trail marker – mushers behind us would really need to know where the trail was, especially if the weather got nasty. I also had to keep calling a warning to my wheel dogs to pay attention, as they were in danger of running right in to the markers. Dogs in the team can trot along on autopilot, and I could tell that sometimes they weren't aware that they were about to run right into a wooden stake.

The constant vigilance to avoid the markers was tiring and as the night wore on I found myself dozing more frequently. At some point Chase and Aberdeen quit moving back to the trail and just started veering off across the ice in one direction or another. When I'd jerk awake I would frantically look for trail markers. There was no chance of getting lost – the lights of Koyuk were visible for the entire run. But there was definitely a danger in wandering around on the sea ice away from the marked trail – deep cracks can form in the ice, and even open leads of sea water.

We trotted along on the featureless terrain for hours and the lights of Koyuk never seemed to get any bigger until the final twenty minutes of the run. We pulled in to the checkpoint at 3:20 in the morning, and once again got great reviews from the vets who watched my dogs inhale their meals and then happily scramble around making nests in their straw. This time we stopped for just over five hours, which put us right back on our 1.2 ratio.

### **Leg 18 –Koyuk to Elim (44 miles)**

We pulled out of Koyuk at 8:30 in the morning. Most of this run would be over before the sun really got cooking, which was good because it was already getting warm. From Koyuk the trail moves west along the beach. It can be windswept and difficult, but it was just nicely breezy for our run.

The sun was rising behind the mountains, and the whole world was lit up. The Iditarod Insider crew was shadowing us, catching footage of the team backlit by the brilliant sunrise. The trail wound through sloughs and inlets, over glare ice and shallow overflow, across windy little rises and over deep ice cracks. At one point it went directly across a little cove where the ice subsided into a shallow depression. It looked like smashed-in safety glass, all sunk in to a crater and shattered, but still holding together. I was glad the Insider snow machines had gone across it first – at least I knew it would hold me and the dogs.

About ten miles from Elim, the trail turns right and runs in a perfectly straight line for several miles right up to the foothills. The sun was well up by then, and it was getting warm. Right about this time I noticed that Luna was flagging. She is a very hard worker, so if she was acting tired it was genuine. I gently loaded her into the sled. She deserved to take a break before she became truly miserable.

We hit the foothills, now hauling an additional 45 pounds. Here the road turned west again, and followed a wide, plowed road up an endlessly steep hill. All the way up that long, hot climb I pumped and pedaled, trying to help the dogs. It was now 2:00, and blazing hot. We took frequent rest breaks to catch our breaths. I rubbed snow on the dog's bellies to help them cool off. By 2:30 we had topped out at the summit and began the short, icy descent down into town.

The checkers told me they would pull me over to a nice sheltered spot that Martin Buser had just vacated, right next to the spot that Rick Swenson was parked in. That brought me up short – when we started this race I never imagined we'd be running anywhere near these legendary mushers and pushing the top twenty! I hadn't been racing to be competitive. I had just been trying to stick to my schedule, with runs that were a little bit longer than rests.

There were mobs of excited children clustering around the teams, playing on the snow berms, and asking for autographs. I love meeting the locals and always want to encourage interest from kids, but I finally had to put a stop to it because I really needed to take care of my dogs and go in to eat.

Once again, the dogs inhaled their food. Several of them were playing around, scratching the snow and goofing around in the straw before settling down to rest. Vets said they looked better than most teams they'd seen coming in. After seeing how energetic the dogs were, I pulled out my run-rest chart to do some thinking.

It had taken us six hours to do that last section, and I figured it would take six or seven to do the next 44 mile leg in to White Mountain. That leg would be followed by a long mandatory eight hour break. If I rested only two hours in Elim, and then eight hours in White Mountain, that would be a total of ten hours of rest for 13 hours of running; very similar to what we had just done coming in to Unalakleet, and averaging a run-rest ratio of 1.2. The barking dogs, constantly disturbed by the active kids all around them, convinced me that more rest in Elim wasn't going to benefit us much.

Knowing I had only a short time to rest and prepare, I went in to eat, refill my drink cooler, and get prepared. I unloaded any items that I knew I wasn't going to need for the last few legs of the

race – extra harnesses, spare equipment that I could get by without, and any other excess weight. I also decided not to haul soaked commercial food on this leg. Hauling soaked food is very heavy, but my dogs were always most willing to eat immediately after stopping so I liked to have a meal ready to give them as soon as we stopped. For this run, though, I knew they would have plenty of time to eat and stoke up during our long break in White Mountain.

### **Leg 19 –Elim to White Mountain (44 miles)**

We took off at 4:30 in the afternoon. It was still warm, but there was a fresh breeze and the dogs were feeling good. As soon as the checker guided my leaders past the piles of straw and lined us out on the outgoing trail, the team hit their stride and began eating up the miles.

Leaving Elim the trail heads straight up a mountainside. I didn't check my watch, but it seemed like we must have climbed for at least an hour before gliding down the far side of that hill. I had forgotten how challenging this section was, with some of the toughest climbing of the entire race. Even if I had remembered, I still think I would have made the same decision to push on. But it is easy to second guess it now, a month later.

After the first endless climb we dropped down, and then climbed another long hill. And then another, and another, and another. Everyone always talks about the mountainous Alaska Range, and assumes that the rest of the race is relatively flat – but believe me when I say, this race is littered with mountains – the Shageluk hills, the Kaltag portage, the Blueberry Hills leaving Unalakleet, this horrendous section which included the infamous “Little McKinley”, and then the wind-swept Topkok Hills on the last leg to Nome. Hills and mountains – everywhere!

We went up hills and then down again in a repeating pattern that went on for hours. The constant hills were occasionally broken up by a short traverse around the side of a mountain. I spent the entire time either pumping hard, running along and trying to help push the sled, or hanging off the side of the sled with all my weight to counterbalance the side hills. I really had forgotten what a tough run this was!

We stopped often for snacks and pets. I made sure to eat and drink too, as I could feel my energy level draining quickly. Luckily only the first 20 miles or so were hills. Once we cleared the final hill there was a long glide back down to sea ice. I stopped to snack the dogs and tell them how wonderful they were - they had pulled like a freight train through the hills. As I went down the line petting and talking to the dogs, I was really feeling whipped – tired, dizzy, and a little light headed. I sat on my knees, quietly petting the dogs and thanking them for their hard work in the hills. Chase and Aberdeen came back towards me from their position out front for a quick snuggle and a little lick to the cheek. I felt like they were reassuring me that we were all doing great. I had a few gulps of lemonade, nibbled on some cheese, and shook it off – we were almost there.

The dogs seemed to have flattened out a little bit, but that was reasonable after the run we'd just done. We had only another 20 miles of easy, level terrain. With no wind or ground blizzards, I felt like we had made it through the worst.

Eighteen miles from White Mountain, the trail passes through the little town of Golovin. It is notoriously hard to get a tired team to continue through a village and back out on to the flat, featureless sea ice. But my team had never faltered as we had skipped through Finger Lake, Rainy Pass, McGrath, Anvik, and Eagle Island. And as we got closer to the village lights, the team got excited and began barking and running hard – clearly there was plenty of gas in the tank to carry on a few more hours.

We blasted right through town and back onto the trail. I started calculating how far back my nearest competitors were, and whether they would have the speed to catch me in the final leg to Nome. I started thinking I might, miraculously, pull off a top twenty finish. I had been so, so wrong about how good this team was! There was nothing to hold us back now. Just a few more hours into White Mountain, and then a nice long break to get recharged.

About a mile outside of Golovin, the dogs began to slow from a lope to a trot, then from a trot to a jog. I told them to pick it up, and they did for a short while. I watched closely to see if I could identify anyone who looked more reluctant than others. Finally, they all just ground down to a halt. No one started the mutiny that I could see, the team just stopped.

I told them to get moving, and got no response. I switched leaders around, and got no response. I walked in front of the team, and they followed, but would not continue without me. After an hour of struggling, I was drenched with sweat and getting chilly. My dizzy head was worse, and I could see that we were going nowhere fast. I pulled the team out of the way of the trail and then went back to the sled and snacked on some jerky to try to rejuvenate myself.

Eventually Rick Swenson came trotting by. I grabbed my dogs and tried to get them to follow his team while he called to them in encouragement. Nothing. I sat back in frustration, knowing we were going to be stopped for awhile.

I just didn't understand it. Half the dogs in my team had finished Iditarod in 2009 under horrendously difficult conditions and had never once faltered. I had seen teams that were obviously tired, that needed to be led from each checkpoint, that had to be physically pulled up off the straw to get them going. Those teams didn't quit, so why would my team, who seemed so full of energy and who'd been so willing all along, refuse to go?

That was when my legs started cramping up. I knew I needed to take care of my dogs, but I also realized that I was too tired and cold to do much, especially with my muscles cramping. I needed to take care of myself. I did just the bare minimum for the dogs - got booties off to allow circulation in their feet, and dog coats on to protect them from the rising wind. I fed them some snacks but decided I would have to wait to make them a meal - I was really spinning, and staggering every time my legs cramped up. I got my pad and sleeping bag out and lay down next to my leaders.

I woke up some time later, shivering and icy and feeling even more light-headed. I was too cold – I needed to get dried off and warmed up right away. I pulled my sled over to make a wind break, and put my pad down behind it. I got warm dry gloves on, then pulled off my damp boots and got dry socks and chemical foot warmers on. The entire operation was made more difficult

by the cramps that were twisting through my legs. Finally I was all set, back in my sleeping bag and zipped up. I figured I'd give it an hour or so – if I was still cold I would have to strip all the way down and completely change my thermals for the dry set I had packed in my sled.

I dozed off and woke up feeling much warmer - still exhausted and dizzy, but not shivering anymore. I had just about decided to get up and make a meal for the dogs when I saw a headlamp approaching. My friend Allen Moore stopped his team to see if I was OK, and I asked him to let the checkpoint know that I wasn't doing too good and might need some help to get in. Allen was having none of that. After making sure the team and I were basically OK and getting me up to walk off my muscle cramps, he tied my leaders off behind his sled. I got the dogs up and sorted out while Allen stuffed my sleeping bag and got my sled back upright. What wonderful person Allen is – he is gaining a reputation for taking care of people out on the trail, and I was sure glad to have his help.

Allen took off, and with no choice but to follow, my team was off and running too. There was no lack of power - I spent most of the run in to White Mountain on my brake to keep from over running Allen. We pulled in to the checkpoint at 4:30 in the morning, and I got busy feeding and caring for my team. It was not easy with my cramped up legs giving out, and the volunteers were really helpful in making sure I had everything I needed. They even brought me some water and juice to try to help with my cramps. It didn't take long to get the dogs squared away, and I headed (slowly) up to the steep hill to the community center.

I assumed I was automatically disqualified for tying off behind Allen. But apparently not, since the situation was considered an emergency. I would be free to continue down the trail once my eight hour break was up at 12:30 in the afternoon.

So I was still in the race. We had actually only lost about five hours, but I knew the situation was tricky - once a team quits it can be very hard to get them going again. Still, I was days ahead of the back of the pack, and I could keep trying until I got somewhere. I got permission to call Varan and let him know the situation, and that I didn't plan on scratching – I would keep on trying.

After a good meal and a good nap I went back down to feed the dogs again. I sorted through my sled and loaded in plenty of extra fuel and food for both me and the dogs in case we stalled out again. Just before heading out I took each dog for a walk to pep them up and let them get done with any poop breaks ahead of time. I took Aberdeen, Chase, and Cutter on a much longer walk, all the way up the trail and around the corner, so they would know where we were headed.

When it was time to go, I got the dogs all pepped up, barking and howling and excited. The checkers helped walk the team out to the trail, and then I shouted "Okay, let's go". Nothing. I talked to them, I shouted at them, I switched leaders around in every combination. We weren't going anywhere. I walked in front of the team and they followed, getting tangled every few minutes as the dogs in the rear over took the dogs in the front. I switched dogs around, led the team, and worked on tangles for almost an hour until I became soaked with sweat and completely light headed.

It was obvious that we weren't going to go anywhere this time. I hoped that, with a little more rest, they would get so antsy that they'd want to go down the trail. I turned around to head back. In retrospect this was not the best idea - I should have camped where we were, even though we were almost within sight of the checkpoint. I should have waited them out until it was more appealing for them to go down the trail than to continue to squat on the ice. But it is just so much easier at the checkpoint, and it seemed like the best thing to do at the time.

Once I turned the dogs around, they had plenty of drive - we started to sprint! I stopped and swung the dogs around, hoping we could boomerang off down the trail in the right direction. But no. Once we were heading north again they simply stopped and looked at me until we turned once more for White Mountain. We ran all the way back at top speed, and parked in the spot we had just left.

By now my dogs were getting restless – chewing on the gangline, squabbling with each other, and managing to get loose to run around. Clearly they were well rested and getting bored. But still they refused to go down the trail. Each time I tried to leave they simply refused to go.

After four attempts and no luck, my confidence in the team was shot. Even if we got going long enough to leave the checkpoint, there was no guarantee we'd keep going. It is a long hard trudge in to Nome, and I had no faith in my dogs. What if they quit again in the blow hole? What if they quit going through Safety? What if they quit going up Cape Nome?

After more than 24 hours in White Mountain waiting for my team to agree to the final 77 miles of the race, I gave up. My only goal for this whole long year was to finish the race, in whatever place we took. Just finish, and not have to live through the heartbreak of scratching again. All I wanted was to get to Nome. We came so close, and had such a beautiful run. I could hardly believe this was the end, but I didn't see any way around scratching once more.

Looking back, it's easy to say “so what” if we did stop - eventually we'd get going again, or at least we'd be no worse off than we were, just stuck in a different place. We'd been ten days on the trail to that point - another day or two camped out would be nothing. It's easy to say I should have kept trying, no matter what – I was still days ahead of the last mushers. It's easy to second guess how hard I had run the team, or how short I had rested them. It's easy to know better when I've had a full night's sleep, when I've eaten regular meals, when I'm not trail weary.

But even after agonizing hours of reflection, reliving the race in my head, and analyzing every move I made - even after all that, I'm not sure that I would do anything different if I was in the same position again. Somewhere I misjudged, somewhere I missed a clue that would have told me the dogs were at the breaking point. Somehow I should have figured out how to get those dogs moving again. But I still don't know what those missing pieces are, or what I failed to see. I still don't know what I did wrong. I still don't know how to prevent it from happening again. I still don't know how to rebuild a team that has quit.

It's going to be a long year.