

Iditarod 2012 Recap

Oh my gosh, this has gotten out of hand. For most casual fans, this is probably WAY more detail than anyone could possibly be interested in. But when I try to cut it down, I really can't find anything that I want to get rid of - all these details are necessary to explain what it is like out there. Actually, when I go back over it, I keep thinking of more details that should be included. So I better stop now before it mushrooms into something truly enormous. Next year maybe I'll just do highlights. It's taken ten times as long to get this all down on paper as it did to run the darn thing...

My goal this year was just to finish, finish, finish! I took a very conservative approach with lots more rest. And so, eventually, we did finish. But I have to say, though the dogs were incredible, though the trail was challenging, though the scenery was amazing, though the people were marvelous - I did not enjoy the race nearly as much without the racing! I need to learn from my friend Ed, who enjoys the trail, enjoys the dogs, enjoys the race without constantly worrying about position or progress.

This year the trail was much harder and held more challenges, at least for me. As a rookie there was a horrendous blizzard and wind storm, but over all it was a pretty easy trip. Last year was an incredible, wonderful journey with few challenges (well right up until the end, anyway). But this year... well, there were no 'impossible' stretches, but there were many that tested me and the team.

In these first few 'chapters' I give a lot of background information on the dogs I took, checkpoint routines, and care and feeding of dogs and musher, etc. If you just want to get right on the trail, go ahead - it won't offend me.

The Line Up

For the first time ever, I have more dogs fit and ready to race than I need. I've never had the luxury before of choosing my top 16, I always just took the ones I had that were still healthy and able. This year I have 24 dogs, the maximum amount allowed, to go to ekg and blood work a few weeks before the race. We only have 26 racing dogs in the kennel! And I have 20, the maximum amount allowed, at vet checks a few days before the race. What a difference from last year, when I had less than half a team that I had any confidence in.

With all the snow and breaking trail we had to do this year, we have lots and lots of miles of slow trudging, and hardly any miles of loping down easy trails. And when the Copper Basin 300 fizzled out and was cancelled, we got less racing miles in than I would have liked. But all in all, I think I have a very strong team.

We have been basically injury free all season, and none of the dogs have even a hint of a problem - just a solid, healthy, very fit team. Right up until blood work, that is. In mid-February all the dogs get an ekg and a serious panel of blood tests to make sure there aren't any hidden problems. That's when Lyra's blood work shows a low red blood cell count. That is usually due to bleeding. If there has been no obvious trauma, in racing dogs it is usually due to a gastric

ulcer. This is very serious news, because these ulcers can be deadly. And I desperately want Lyra on my team.

The entire season I had been fairly unimpressed with my 'hot new leader' Lyra. She could lead, but didn't show any strong desire. She didn't seem to know gee from haw, she didn't line out, and she was forever stepping over the line and getting tangled up. Consequently, I often ran her near wheel as it is much easier to run up and untangle a dog who is closer to the sled. During the Northern Lights 300 I decided to give her one more chance - if she would lead near the end of the race when dogs are often tired and less enthusiastic about leading, I'd keep her. Otherwise I would find out if Ryan wanted her back.

About 10 miles from the last checkpoint, and 60 miles from the finish, I put her up in front. And she turned into a different dog! She had been trotting along strongly all during the race. Suddenly she was rearing and lunging and barking to go! She was dying to lead the team, and was excited about going down the trail. She suddenly knew her directions, and never once got tangled up. Another case of a dog that really only shines when you race. After that performance, things between us changed. We started communicating and she was in lead far more often. Now, for Iditarod, I really want her in my team!

But with this blood work showing a problem, it seems unlikely I will be able to take her. I immediately start working with our local vet to treat the ulcer. Two weeks and three blood tests later, her red cell count is right back up there and we get the go ahead to include her in the team!

So Lyra was definitely in. Then I had to start weighing all my other options. It is so hard to decide who to choose and who leave home! After sifting through the lists of the fittest, toughest, and most experienced dogs, I finally come to a solid decision on Chase, Cutter, Mercedes, Lyra, Aberdeen, Bree, Trouble, Doc, Mars, Hatchet, Razor, Fly, Chisel, Flip, and Spartan.

Besides Lyra, I have three other new dogs in the line up as well; Doc, Mars, and Bree, and all of them leaders. Doc has a reputation as a strong, experienced leader who knows the trail to Nome and can be counted on to lead through all sorts of difficulties. Many different mushers have run him over the years and all had great things to say about him. I am really excited to have such a strong leader to rely on! I am not sure of the race experience of the other two, but they were very capable in training.

The rest of the dogs on the team - Aberdeen, Chase, Spartan, Fly, Flip, Hatchet, Cutter, Razor, Chisel, Trouble, and Mercedes - are each Iditarod veterans. This team is loaded with experience and trail knowledge.

Not only that, but I have an astounding 11 strong leaders. Flip, Fly, Chisel, and Trouble are the only dogs on the team that don't have serious miles in lead - race miles, not just training miles, when almost any dog can handle the pressure of leading.

But wait a minute - that's only fifteen. Who will fill the last slot? I weigh my choices again, and decide it must be between Luna and Harp.

Luna is a strong leader. She is an experienced Iditarod veteran. She is a hard worker. She is also from a bloodline that is not as tough and doesn't handle cold very well. She will do a great job, but is likely to be dropped and sent home at some point before the end of the race.

Harp is young, strong, and shows incredible potential. She loves racing and new experiences. She proved herself when she led the last leg of the brutally cold Northern Lights 300 with my other team. She is from the Fly-line; dog's who have Fly for a daddy are guaranteed tough. But she is only a yearling and has only a little bit of racing experience. She is also very unlikely to go the whole way, especially because I won't push a baby hard - as soon as she quits having fun she will get a plane ride back home.

I waver back and forth between taking one more experienced dog and giving a great learning opportunity for a future leader. In the end, I realize that I have loads and loads of experience and more leaders than I could have imagined. I gamble on the future, and Harp is on the team!

Food and Drink

Everyone always wants to know what we eat out on the trail. The quick answer (for dogs and humans) is lots of protein, lots of fat, and lots of variety.

The dogs need about 12,000 calories per day when racing. That's about six times the number of calories an average human needs, all going into a 50 pound canine. The severe cold takes a surprising amount of energy, and to top it all off we run something like 100 miles a day, but it is still a pretty impressive amount of food.

To get this much food down, I have to feed high power, calorie dense food. The dogs have to be bred and trained to inhale food. And I have to provide lots of variety and delicious options to keep their interest high.

The dogs get a large meal each time we stop to rest. If we stop for anything over 6 hours then they will get more than one meal. A meal starts with top quality commercial kibble, with 37% protein and 25% fat. Your average house dog would need only a couple tablespoons of this food to go all day! We call it rocket fuel. Added to the commercial food is about half a pound of fat and beef per dog.

Hydration is incredibly important when exercising. This is especially true at cold temperatures when everything is all frozen and the air is so dry it seems to suck the moisture right out of your lungs. Every meal is served as a soup; the meat, fat, and commercial are topped with hot water to thaw the meat out and make a nice sloppy stew.

Just eating during rest breaks is not enough to keep up. So the dogs also get trail snacks every two hours while we are running. These are small chunks of frozen meat, about a quarter pound each - small enough that the dogs can easily chew the hard-frozen meat up. Meat snacks might include salmon, halibut, beef, lamb, bacon, chicken skins, beef fat, tripe, or any other delicious meat I can get my hands on (this year someone gave me some freezer burned crab chunks and boy was that popular with the dogs!) I might also soak some commercial kibble in water and

give them a nice sloppy pile of wet food on the trail. "Popcorn balls" are also very popular - that's commercial food mixed with bacon grease, and rolled into a two-bite ball.

Eating well out on the trail is just as important to the musher for keeping up energy and mental focus. In my rookie race I was shocked by the intensity of my hunger, something I never encountered in the shorter 200 or 300 mile races. 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. Now I plan ahead more and make sure I always have a little something on hand for those intense bouts. Musher's 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 send out a wide variety of different foods to each checkpoint, all of them delicious, tempting foods that I love. It sounds weird, but spicy foods are often the most appealing when your stomach is turning due to exhaustion. I load each meal with as much flavor, fat, protein, and calories as possible.

This year I couldn't get enough of home-made macaroni and cheese. I think it was the buttery crumbs on top that really got me going. Teriyaki chicken and rice, and thick cheesy, bacony, potato soup were also high on the list. For some odd reason, the barbecue beef that was my top favorite last year was inedible this year. You never know what will go down, so having several options at each meal can make a world of difference.

Another challenge to getting good nutrition 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, so every meal must be prepackaged already cut up into bite sized pieces, packed into vacuum seal bags, and flattened out thin so it will quickly thaw in a hot water bath.

Sometimes during long runs it can be 12 or more hours between actual meals, so snacking along the trail is also vitally important. I try to eat a little something every two hours, just like my dogs. And any other time I feel a twinge of hunger I take 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, cookies, gummy fruits, 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 two quart water-cooler-type 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 - and it does a good job covering up the flavor of any swampy tasting water that I might end up drinking.

Rest Breaks

For the musher, finding a way to get as much rest as possible is one of the most important things you can do. Being very efficient at checkpoints means extra time off your feet, and I have my routine down to a science. Each time the team stops for a break, I kick in to high gear. The routine is pretty much the same no matter where we stop, with slight variations depending on the amenities of the checkpoint; hot water ready to go, or microwaves inside the community center can make the routine a little bit easier.

Once I pull in to a checkpoint and sign in, I make careful note of the time. The checkers guide us to a parking spot and tell us where we can find essentials like drop bags, straw, and water if it is available. Immediately upon reaching the designated parking spot, I pull out my vet book and set it on top of the sled where the veterinarians will be able to spot it right off. I grab my leader hook and a bag of snacks, and head to the front of the team. I hook out my leaders to keep the team lined out and headed where they belong. On my way back, I toss each dog a chunk of meat from the snack bag.

Getting hot water to feed the dogs is the chore that takes the longest, so I don't do anything else until I get the cooker going and get that water started. About half the checkpoints have cold water, often from a hole in the river ice. About half have the luxury of hot water, usually from a large barrel heated over a wood fire and kept going round the clock by volunteers in the village. A few checkpoints, and all of the spots we camp between checkpoints, have no water - here we must melt snow. This takes considerably more time and fuel.

Once the cooker is firing well, I kick off my big boots and slide into camp booties. It makes walking around to do chores much easier, and those little slippers are toasty and warm even at 30 below or more. I go grab my drop bags, drag them back to the sled, and cut them all open at once. I fish out a trash bag and head up the line, removing booties and checking in with the dogs. All the used booties get tossed in the bag to be sent home later.

Next comes straw. The Iditarod provides luscious golden straw at each checkpoint. If we are camping between checkpoints, I can take some with me, lashed to the top of my sled. To save work, I haul the bale to the middle of the team before I cut the strings off - that will make it easier to distribute a nice thick flake to each pair of dogs.

There is a reason I do everything in the order that I do; cooker first so the water can be heating while I do other chores; booties before straw so I don't have to disturb the dogs and haul them up out of the straw to take their booties off. Each trip up the line of dogs is paired with a chore I can do on my return trip - I try not to waste any time just walking.

While the dogs are busy celebrating the arrival of straw and rearranging it to suit their tastes, I check on the cooker, then grab a heavy plastic compactor bag and line my feed bucket with it. Then I pour meat, fat, and kibble into the bucket, just waiting for nice hot water to make a tasty

soup. During this time the vets are usually checking over the entire team, so I will take a few minutes to confer with them and sign off on the vet book.

As I wait for the water to get good and hot, I dump out my drop bags and get organized. One empty drop bag becomes a trash sack, which I usually clip to my handlebars to keep it from blowing away. When we are going down the trail I generate an amazing amount of trash. I stuff all my food wrappers, dog snack bags, and other garbage into the cooler bag I sit on, which makes it quick to retrieve and dispose of when we camp.

I have one 'Return' bag that I fill with items I want sent back home - my trash sack full of used (but probably still useable) booties, wet gloves and socks, spare hand warmers, and any other gear that I don't need any more.

The things I will need for the next run - snacks and booties and a fresh set of gloves - get piled out of the way in the 'foot well' of my sled (between the handlebar and the rear seat area). At some point I find my personal food, and dump a couple of packages into the cooker to thaw. Hopefully at least one of the selections I sent is appetizing.

I repack and reorganize my sled, and by then the water should be hot and ready to go in the bucket. While that soaks and the meat thaws out, I head down the line to distribute food bowls. If any dogs need a wrist wrap, massage, medication, or other care, I get it on my way back down the line.

I grab my ladle and full bucket and give each dog a nice bowl of dinner. Some dogs will eat everything I put in front of them immediately, some dogs will wait until later - they almost seem to prefer it frozen. They get as much food as they want (except for a few crazy eaters like Fly, Razor, or Flip, who would eat until they popped).

With the dogs comfortable and fed, chores are almost done unless I have to repair my sled, change runner plastic, or sign a dog over to the veterinarians to go home. I grab a few items to take inside; my personal meals (now thawed out), my headlamp and fresh batteries, my lemonade powder and drink cooler, my toothbrush, a few more personal meals to thaw out for later, my big boots (which need drying out).

If I am very efficient, all of my arrival chores are accomplished in about an hour - less if there is hot water available, more if I have extra chores or need to melt snow.

After I get up to the checkpoint building I get my outer layers and big boots hung up to dry, change my headlamp batteries, then try to eat the thawed out meals I have stuffed inside my bibs to keep warm. Some checkpoints will have food on hand to feed the mushers, which is always wonderful. But I never count on it. Some checkpoints will have running water or even a bathroom to clean up in. But I never count on that either. Cleanliness is not much of a priority on the trail, although the occasional tooth brushing feels absolutely incredible!

Now I have to do some math, which is always hard when you are short on sleep. I will need to decide when I want to leave, usually based on how long it took us on the last run. If our rest is

going to be less than 6 hours (almost always), I will need to get up an hour and a half before departure. That will give me half an hour to get functional, get dressed, and get outside, and an hour to do a few last minute chores and get the dogs ready. So on a four hour break I will get about 1 ½ hours to eat, go to the bathroom, and grab a nap before I need to be up and moving again.

If we are stopping for six hours or more, the dogs will need a second meal. I don't really get any more rest on a six hour break, because I need to get up 2 ½ hours early to feed the dogs. I will usually make their second meal ahead of time and let it soak while I rest. This means another 20 minutes or so up front while I make yet another bucket of hot water. Making food ahead of time only works if there is somewhere inside where the bucket won't freeze. Otherwise I will have to get up even early to make the food. On these longer breaks, the goal is to get the dogs fed two hours before we are scheduled to leave.

Once I have figured out my schedule, I usually have to state my departure time and my wake up time out loud several times to try to make sure I remember it. Often as not, my brain slips a cog and I have to refigure it anyway. It helps if I can ask someone nearby to remind me what I just said. Clock math is hard, especially around noon or midnight. Sometimes it works best to take my gloves off and use my fingers to count.

As odd as it sounds, given the extreme lack of sleep we are working under, it can be really hard to fall asleep after all that rushing around. Other times, I can sleep in the middle of a crowded barroom floor with people stepping over me and bright lights flashing. You never know. Even if I can't sleep, I try to make myself lay down and rest as much as possible until it is time to get going again.

Even though I set my alarm every time I lay down, I have some sort of weird internal clock that wakes me up 5 minutes before my alarm almost every time. I can think of about three instances on races where I didn't. Don't know how that works.

A two hour rest will leave you feeling refreshed and ready to go. Still tired, but generally alert and functional. If you sleep more than two hours, it is going to hurt when you wake up. You will be fuzzy, groggy, and barely mobile. All your sore muscles and your brain will stiffen up. Don't know how that works either.

Once I get my hour or two of sleep, I give myself half an hour to put my boots back together, get completely dressed, grab one of my meals (that hopefully thawed while I slept, or maybe there is a pot of water or microwave inside the checkpoint), and get outside. I normally wake up and get functional almost instantly, but the middle of Iditarod can hardly be called normal.

To give the dogs as much rest as possible, I take care of everything else before I disturb them. I pack up my sled and close the flaps. I seal up my return bag, trash bag, and any spare food I didn't use, and deposit them in the designated piles. I make sure I have my parka, dry gloves, and everything else laid out and ready.

Once I am completely ready to go, then I begin to rearrange the team. I like to switch leaders frequently to keep them fresh and happy up front. I also like to switch wheel dogs for every run. Especially on the rougher sections of trail, these dogs work the hardest to keep the sled pointing in the correct direction. I also may need to switch out partners that aren't working well together, or bring a dog farther back in the team for closer observation.

Getting the dogs up and moving them around signals the team that we are getting ready to go. I grab the bags of booties, and go down the line tossing the correct sized footwear next to each dog. On my way back down the line, I get each dog up and put their booties on. Bootying takes about 20 minutes, regardless of how many dogs in the team. Early in the race I have more dogs to take care of, but I am also moving much more efficiently. Later in the race there are fewer dogs, but it takes me longer to get things done as I become more and more exhausted.

The last step is to pull my leader hook out and stow it in the sled. By this point the dogs are usually up and jumping around and making a racket. Often a checker will come help guide the team out of the dog lot and back to the trail. Especially early in the race, they will also help by standing on the brake to make sure the team doesn't bolt while I am finishing up. As soon as I step on the runners, we head back on to the trail for the next leg of the race.

Taking care of a team during a race is lots of work! Most of it very physical - hauling full buckets of water or food, lugging around heavy drop bags, carrying bales of straw. A lot of times I get more rest, if not sleep, while running down the trail. For every leg of the race, when I talk about chores, or getting the dogs settled for rest, or ready to go, now you will know exactly what I am talking about.

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Prelude - Anchorage Ceremonial Start

Getting to the Anchorage start on Saturday morning is a pain. We have two options. Option One; we pack up the entire team and gear, food, supplies, etc, find somewhere to squat in Anchorage, find someone to house sit and take care of the dogs that are still at home, and leave Friday afternoon so that we don't have to rush around too early on Saturday morning.

Option Two; we stay at home, relax on Friday, take care of last minute chores, then get up at 3:30 the next morning to get the dogs fed, loaded, and on the way to the big ugly city. We usually go with Option Two, because even though getting up that early is really a pain, the logistics of Option One are more than I want to deal with when I really need to focus on the race itself!

Saturdays' start goes off without a problem, and we enjoy our parade through the streets of Anchorage. Not exactly what I want to be doing just before kicking off a 1,000 mile race, but that is part of the circus of Iditarod.

Leg 1- Willow to Skwentna (72 miles)

On Sunday, getting to the Willow start from our place is a breeze! We are only 20 miles away, and we are coming from the north, where there is no line of traffic extending for hours and hours. We just leisurely get up, pack up, and head to the start line around noon.

I usually stay really relaxed right up until it's time to harness the team. Then the butterflies kick in. But by then I have things to do - harness, booty, hook up the dogs, check my sled - which keeps me focused and prevents the nerves from really tuning up.

Every year our friend Bryan Bearss comes to help us get underway. He's done the race and he has this great, calm presence that helps me remain focused. He always helps me to ignore the chaos and keep my head on straight.

This year (and probably the last few years too, if I could remember), I feel like my sled is way too heavy. Bryan helps me go through each item in detail, and we decide that I really don't have any nonessentials that I should jettison. Everything in the sled; from tool kit to headlamps, spare food to an extra harness, dry gloves to hand warmers; is vital. I've got my packing list whittled down to essentials. It all stays.

One heavy item I have this year that I don't usually carry is a gun. The 10 mm Glock is big enough to stop a moose, and has enough rounds in the clip make sure of it. In the deep snow, the moose like our trails as much as we do and they have been very aggressive this year. We've had a few run-ins and close calls during training. Even though the firearm is heavy, there is no way I'm going down the trail without it this year.

All too soon, it is our turn to go. The start is perfect. We have good, experienced handlers and we just walk up to the line, in control and perfectly cool. I wave to the crowds, and it is time to launch.

From Willow Lake, the trail drops down on to the river system. As usual, the entire way is lined with parties and bonfires. I have Cutter and Chase in lead, and they power on down the trail, oblivious to all the ruckus of the cheering crowds.

The run up to Skwentna is easy and uneventful. We trade lead several times with Ed Stielstra, which tells me that our teams are almost evenly matched. Ed is always fun to travel with - he is always cheerful and happy and he has some really great insights with the dogs, so I was glad to see him. I got to run quite a bit with Ed this year, all the way up to Galena, where an unexpected delay put us well behind his schedule.

It takes us 7 1/2 hours to reach the checkpoint, a bit longer than last year, but not surprising given the deeper, softer snow conditions. Being efficient is really easy at Skwentna, where they keep a barrel of water heating around the clock. Straw and drop bags are right at hand, and the dog teams are parallel parked to make it easy to get in and out.

Once I have the dogs taken care of, I head up to the Delia's old cabin to eat and rest. It is a steep climb up rickety stairs to the top of the river bank, but worth the effort. They provide a great meal in the tiny cabin, and even a warm (if crowded) place to rest.

We stop for a total of 6¹/₂ hours, leaving at 5:15 in the morning. This puts us almost 1¹/₂ hours later than last year. Our run:rest ratio is 1.2, same as last year, but I'm already feeling like we are way behind. I keep telling myself it doesn't matter, because we aren't trying to keep up with our top twenty pace from last year, but I am not quite convinced.

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

Our departure from Skwentna is perfect. I don't even ask a checker for help getting the team lined out. I simply pull my hooks and the dogs charge forward, then merge onto the outgoing trail as if they never played ridiculous games with me here last year.

One thing that remains the same - my dogs bark as they go down the trail! Most teams shut up and run, but there are three or four in my motley group that just can't contain themselves. Farther in to the race, when the dogs are bit more mellow, they quit their infernal racket - at least while we are running. But for now they are determined to bring attention to our progress.

The trail from Skwentna winds up over hills and through open swamps. The trail is in beautiful shape. In my rookie year this section was soft and bottomless and filled with deep grooved out "sugar holes", but this year it is a pleasant, easy run. Even so, Doc - my fall back plan, my bomb-proof, go-to leader, my sure thing - manages to step in a hole and come up limping. He is still pulling hard, but it becomes obvious that he has pulled a muscle and can't continue with the team. We are less than 100 miles into our race, and have already lost a key player!

We pull into Finger Lake at 10:15 (a slightly faster run than last year!), and I send Doc off with the vets to receive massage, rest, heat packs, anti-inflammatories, and a quick ride home. I hurry to grab fuel and half a bale of straw. It is warm, and my entire team is gleefully ripping booties off. By the time I replace boots on one dog, two more have theirs off. The straw I grab is an untidy heap, with a loop of string barely wrapped around it. I know if I leave with it in this condition, we'll have almost nothing by the time we get to our camp spot. But there isn't any other string nearby, and with dogs tossing booties left and right, I just strap it as well as I can and head down the trail with my ragtag group hardly dressed. At least we aren't going much farther - it's only about another 10-12 miles to the Steps.

This year the Iditarod Trail Committee made the momentous decision to route the trail around the infamous Happy River Steps on a new bypass trail. Then at the last minute they determined the other trail was overrun with snow, and we were actually going to do the drops. It makes no difference to me. In my three trips down the Steps I have never had a difficult time. While any part of the trail can destroy you, I have no particular worries about the Steps. This time is the easiest yet, like jumping down a series of pillowy tracks to the river bottom.

We hit the Steps just past noon after a seven hour run. This year the dogs remember that we usually camp here at the bottom. It doesn't take any convincing at all to get them to turn off the main trail and take a little break. We have a nice five hour nap, starting in a wet sloppy snow

storm, but ending in afternoon sun. The bottom of the Steps is a beautiful, peaceful location, out of the wind and away from the chaos of the checkpoints. There isn't any hot water and no one is cooking food for me, but I still love to stop here.

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

We leave the Happy River behind at 5:00 in the afternoon. I put Mars and Aberdeen up front, wondering how the shy Mars will handle this tough section of trail. He is fantastic, taking us all the way to our next stop through some really challenging trail. Deen, of course, is always a pro, but Mars is new to us so it is wonderful to find out that he is made of tough stuff.

It is a bit warm and the trail is slow and sticky. We pull out of our camp spot just as Mike Suprenant passes with his team. Instead of pausing long enough to let my fresh and rested team go ahead, he goes by without stopping. We have to slog up the steep climb off the river behind his team, and I have to stop my energetic team to wait every time we catch up. I am finally able to pass up on the lakes above the river, but it is certainly not a smooth pass. Mike is known for having 'alligators' in his team, and we definitely find this to be true as we try to maneuver around him in the deep lake snow.

It is just about 20 miles from the Happy River to the Rainy Pass checkpoint. First there is the long steep climb up off the river. Then the trail begins to traverse across steep side-hills, suspended high above a deep valley. The trail is usually fairly challenging. With all the deep snow, the challenges are different this year. It is easier to keep the sled and team at a controlled speed, but it seems like it is taking a lot more physical effort to wrangle the loaded sled and keep it headed in the right direction. I work up a good sweat, and I can feel my muscles straining as I wrestle the sled down the trail.

We motor along in good fashion, getting to Rainy Pass in just over 2 hours. The checkers ask me whether I am staying, if I need my drop bags, or what they can get for me. The volunteers on Iditarod are unfailingly amazing - cheerful and helpful to everyone, regardless of what time you pull in or how many mushers they have already helped out. With the exception of water for me to drink (which they don't have on hand) I don't need a thing, so we sail on through the checkpoint with barely a pause.

After the checkpoint, the trail climbs and climbs over rolling, open tundra. The area is notoriously difficult when the winds blow up and obliterate the trail. So far in three trips I've never seen this area at its worst. I've only ever done this run in the clear, calm twilight of the evening.

The team feels strong and sure as the night descends. The trail is in good shape and we work along steadily through spectacular, towering mountains. For the first time ever, I actually see the metal sign proclaiming the peak of Rainy Pass. The trail is nice packed powder with just a few rocks poking above it here and there. We crest the summit, and start descending.

We wind down through narrow gaps and twisting ravines, and flatter areas sprinkled with forests and scrubby willow patches. Again there is deep snow, and again I feel like I wrestle the sled all the way to the bottom - hours and hours of sweat wringing, hard labor. Finally we cross the last

little swamp and hit the big drop that shoots you right into the dreaded Dalzell Gorge. The drop is a long steep chute that goes on and on, steeper and steeper, until you think you just can't stay off your wheel dog's butts any longer. Then suddenly you find yourself in the bottom of a narrow, cliff-lined canyon. I get lucky this year again with the deep snow. I shudder to think what this would be like if the drop was hard packed and icy. I guarantee you'd get to the bottom faster, but maybe not all in one piece.

The Dalzell Gorge is famous for tight twists and turns and narrow (or broken out) ice bridges across the creek. This year there is great snow and the bridges are fine. But, for some reason the Gorge is more challenging than ever before. I keep finding myself sliding into the outsides of the turns and banking off the willows. I actually tip over a couple of times, a first for me in this section.

When we finally drop out of the canyon on to the Tatina River, I am sore and tired, and pretty glad to be out of there. The last few miles on the Tatina River always seem to take forever, but this year they are over in a flash, and we pull under the arch into Rohn.

We arrive just after midnight. So far, every run had taken almost an identical amount of time as last year - the run into Skewntna was only slightly slower. But the race was much faster this year, despite the slower trails. Essentially the same runs last year had me in the mid twenties, and this year I was in the middle of the pack. I kept feeling like we were moving really slowly. That is obviously wrong, but the fact that we are much farther back from where we had run previously is undeniable.

Coming in to the checkpoint, Razor and Chisel both had minor little unevenness in their gaits. I ask the vets to check them out so that I will have a really good idea of the best treatment. I assume they have sore wrists, which can usually get better on the trail with massage and compression wraps. The vets tell me that they don't see any problems at all with Chisel, who was limping the hardest. However, Razor, who barely even showed a sign of problem, has a very sore wrist. The vets don't recommend taking him further, since the run from Rohn to Nikolai is long and it would be tough to pack a dog that far if his wrist became worse.

Bad news. Razor is one of my strongest leaders, and I am really looking forward to seeing how he has progressed since his first leading experiences last year. Instead, I have to drop him and send him home. I am already down to 14 dogs and we're less than 200 miles into the race! Last year I still had 15 dogs in my team in Kaltag, almost 600 miles farther! There is nothing to be done but hope the rest of them remain healthy and keep on going.

I am completely inefficient at Rohn. Maybe it has something to do with adjusting to true fatigue, because this happened to me last year too. It takes me a long time to get the dogs fed and taken care of, and then even longer to get their next meal soaking. There is plenty of snow around to melt, but my cooker doesn't seem to be working too well. Probably a clogged burner hole, and not for the first time. Reminder to self - do a thorough overhaul this summer and really blast out the holes in the burner!

As I am bumbling around taking extra steps and forgetting what I am doing, I run into Scott Jansen. He looks like he is in shock, and when I ask him if he is doing ok, can barely speak. Coming down the drop into Dalzell, one of his dogs choked on snow. He had no pulse and no breathing until Scott brought him back using chest compressions and breaths. The dog is now with the vets, and appears none the worse for the wear. Not so with Scott, who is ragged and sounds close to giving up.

I listen to him recount his story and try not to imagine how I would deal with one of my own dogs going down. I give Scott a hug and tell him he really needs to eat, get some water in him, and rest. I tell him his dog is in good hands, and now he needs to see to himself. I remind him that everything is better after food and sleep. I see Scott farther down the trail, and I'm so glad he kept on going that I don't even mind his deafening snores, or the way he keeps catching up to me after I leave him behind.

After finally getting my act together, getting the dogs fed and meal number two ready, repacking and getting organized, and getting Razor all set to go home, I make it inside for a really good nap. I am planning on staying a bit longer here - enough to make the last two runs equal out to a 1.2 ratio. That means 8 whole hours. By the time I wake up to feed the dogs again, the entire cast of mushers had changed, and I feel like I am drifting farther and farther back in the pack. As usual, the longer rest leaves me staggering and bleary, but I manage to leave right on schedule anyway.

Leg 4- Rohn to the middle of the Farewell Burn (40 miles)

We leave right at 8:00 a.m. The sunrise lights the cloud-topped mountains and sparkles off of every snowflake and ice crystal, surrounding us in shimmer. I have 14 happy, healthy dogs chuffing along and enjoying the rising day.

The river is, as usual, slippery with ice. But it is not long before we start twisting through the burned out forest. There is very little snow, and every stump and root sticks out, just waiting to grab my sled and yank it to a stop. It takes some agile sled driving to traverse this area, not without a few very sudden stops as the sled jerks from snag to log jam.

The Post River Glacier is famous for causing problems. Teams get turned around, tangled up, or refuse to climb the steep, slippery ice fall. The driver can't set a hook and can't hold the team, so there isn't much they can do but stand on the runners and shout as their dogs spin themselves into a giant tangle. My dogs have always charged right to the top, and it is no different this year. They make me so proud the way they take such difficult challenges in stride.

At the top the trail flattens out onto a bare dirt track that weaves among some large humps and hills. I make it through easily, with just a little bit of dancing and jumping around to keep the sled pointing straight. Going face down in dirt and rocks, and then getting dragged is not something I really look forward to!

The dirt, stumps, and roots continue after the glacier too. At one point I slide sideways into a stack of poles and sticks. One of the logs manages to spear right between the stanchions on my sled, and there is no going forward. I work to drag my sled sideways off the logs, but between

the slippery ice, the steep sidehill, and the weight of my fully loaded sled, I can't dislodge it. I contemplate getting my small folding saw out, but it is buried under the straw, food, and other supplies I am hauling for camping on this stretch. Then I remember my axe; it sits upright in the back of my sled, and I can grab the handle and wiggle it loose. I pull out the axe and make quick work of the chunk of wood. Of course, as soon as they are free the dogs charge off. I manage to hang on to the sled, the axe, and my balance all at once and get back on board.

Somehow in the scuffle with the tree I bashed my knuckle, which is bleeding all over the place. I cram my glove back on and completely forget about the gash until later when I take my blood soaked glove off at our campsite. The cut has scabbed over by then, so I don't give it another thought. It is amazing how easy it is to ignore injuries on the trail; unless they are actively interfering with your ability to proceed, they are not really worthy of any attention.

Zoya Denure left Rohn at the same time I did, stating that she wanted to run with someone through the next section. For the first part of the run, her team is right on my tail; she has decided to run just behind me and use my team to pace her speedy dogs. Consequently, each time I hit an obstacle and have to work to free the sled, there is her team just behind me, screaming their heads off. Lots of times she doesn't get stopped quickly enough, and half her team surges up next to mine, making for tangles and additional problems. It is starting to get really frustrating!

Finally after a couple of hours I stop to snack and booty. I take an extra long time with the booties, and encourage her to go on by. But it is not the last time I will see Zoya's team this day!

Soon after Zoya passes me by, I hear barking. Up ahead is a wide open area, completely iced over by a small creek. I can see a couple of teams balled up on the slick ice. Trent Herbst is directly in front of me. He manages to tie his team off to a tree and goes up to see what the problem is. Zoya and another team have found the icy creek area a challenge, and have somehow managed to get their two teams completely tangled together. I sure am glad for my earlier break, because if I had been still stuck in a convoy with Zoya, I would likely be in the middle of that mess too.

I am stuck back in the thin snow with no way to hook my team off, so I have to stay put, waiting for those ahead to sort out their problems and get going again. Mike Santos pulls in just behind me, and there we wait, and wait, and wait. The dogs are getting really restless, and Mike and I have our hands full walking up and down the line to keep the wiggling, barking beasts from destroying whatever they can reach.

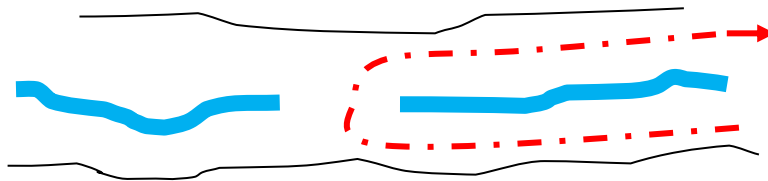
On the brittle ice the mushers have no way to hook down their teams so they can work out the snarl. Good thing Trent is there to solve the problem! While they hold their sleds, he works to sort out the tangle and get them going again. After what seems like an eternity, first one team, and then the next is finally able to get free and make their way across the ice to the other side.

The trail seems to branch, and from what I can see from my spot down the trail, the left side zigs and zags sharply around a wide hole, open to the creek below. The right side winds between some enormous dirt humps. None of the teams seem to want to go left around the ice hole, but

when Trent turns right and goes into the dirt mounds, I see his sled pitching and cartwheeling end over end.

I decide maybe the left trail is the better choice. Although the hole in the ice is a tricky obstacle, my clever little leaders just tiptoe on by, and I let my sled skid wide around it. I frantically motion to Mike behind me that left is definitely an improvement over what I saw Trent doing. Mike tells me later that his dogs were heading left, but suddenly turned, so he ended up going to the right anyway.

We are all glad to be in motion again - standing still on a perfectly good trail just doesn't make sense to a sled dog. But within just a few miles we are at another creek crossing, and all at a standstill again. In this tricky little section the trail makes a sharp U-turn on the ice, first going up one side of the creek, then back down the other side. There is open water down the middle of the creek, all except where the trail hops across it, and slippery ice all around.



Trent's team has become confused as they make the crossing. Instead of continuing to turn sharply to the right and come down the far side of the U-turn, his dogs try to go left. He stops the team and corrects their path.

As we watch, the team suddenly jerks hard back to the right with his sled still on the far side of the creek. The team is now pulling his sled - and his wheel dogs - right into the open water. Mike and I stand helplessly watching. There is no place to secure our teams so we can lend a hand. As we watch, the ice starts to break out underneath Trent's sled, and his wheel dog scrambles for traction, trying to avoid being dragged over the lip.

Trent calmly surveys the problem. He puts his weight into pulling on the gangline, trying to direct the sled away from the edge, but there is just no way to overcome the slope and the pressure the dogs are putting on things. As he works, more ice cracks away.

Trent is undeterred. He takes one of his snow hooks, pulls as hard as he can to the side away from the ice, and anchors his sled to keep it from sliding farther in. Then he releases the other snow hook, which allows the team to pull the sled forward until it catches on the hook that is already set. He works his hooks in this step-wise fashion until he is clear of the obstacle. I have to say, I would have been really flustered in this situation, but it is a pleasure to watch Trent calmly and methodically get himself out of a jam. I just wish I could have done something other than watch with my heart in my throat.

Once Trent is clear of the obstacle, it is my turn. Even though it isn't really a difficult turn, my heart is pounding away after what we just saw. I call the dogs up, and let my sled skid around the

U-turn. The momentum carries me well away from that crumbling edge. Of course, in my nervousness I call "Haw" instead of "Gee", and almost blow it. The dogs, always excellent with directional commands, immediately turn left, the wrong way. Luckily they are very cooperative about swinging back right as I shout "Oh shoot, Gee. I mean Gee!"

It isn't long after that before we reach our planned camping spot, the Buffalo Camps. Many years a group of hunters comes out to the tent cabins and sets up a nice camp where they welcome teams. This year it is abandoned, but it still makes a really nice place to stop, down in a sheltered hollow. It is right about noon and the sun is starting to heat up, so it is a great time to rest.

Leg 5- Farewell Burn to Nikolai (32 miles)

We pull out of the Buffalo Camp at 5:00 p.m. after a nice four hour break in the sun. It is breezy, which helps keep us cool until the sun goes down. The trail unrolls quickly under the dogs' steady trot and we make good time at first.

With about 20 miles to go, the trail crosses some open swampy areas. The wind has really swept through this area, and suddenly the trail is gone. We can see markers, but the trail is blown in with deep, packed powder. The dogs have to work hard to break trail, and it really slows us down. Even though I know there were teams not far in front of us, there is no sign of their passing - all is drifted in. In every open area, the wind sweeps across the trail, filling it in with foot-deep packed powder. Lyra and Mercedes are working well together up front, lunging through the deepening snow. Even though we are crawling through the deep snow, every time we get onto a nice packed trail in the sheltering trees, our pace picks up to a lope, so I know the dogs are feeling good.

About 12 miles from Nikolai the trail makes a couple of tight turns, and then crosses Sullivan Creek on a rickety contraption of branches and packed snow. The teams in front of us have taken their toll on this snow bridge, and my dogs have to leap and maneuver to avoid stepping into the gaps between branches. Coming around the blind corner, I barely have time to slow us down before they have all jumped safely across, and we are back to negotiating the drifted trail.

It seems like this short little run always takes longer than expected for one reason or another. It takes us 5 ½ hours before we finally roll into Nikolai. That is longer than I had planned, but I am still very happy with how the dogs handled the challenging conditions.

The checkpoint is flawlessly run, with plenty of volunteers to help me park, deliver my drop bags, Heet, and straw right to my sled, and keep the fire going under the hot water barrel. It takes almost no time to get the dogs bedded down and taken care of. This is great, because I have extra chores to do here.

After our long run across dirt and rocks, I need to change my runner plastic. My new Matrax runners are a snap to change plastic. On my old runners I used to have to laboriously scrape even a tiny film of ice from the runner surface and the channel in the middle in order to get the new plastic to slide on. With the new runners, I just knock any thick ice clear, and it slides on effortlessly. Little things make such a big difference under tough race conditions.

I also need to do a little work on the dogs. Both Spartan and Chisel seem to have sore wrists. These boys are both enormous – much bigger than your average sled dog. I dread thinking what it would be like to have to haul one of these monsters in the sled. I hope that a little massage and a compression wrap will help them heal up. In this case it does, but I have to continue with the massage and wrapping throughout the rest of the race.

By the time I finish all my chores and get up to the school, it is 11:45 at night. The kitchen where they make delicious moose stew for the mushers is closed. But I have packed several meals up with me, and I quickly heat a couple up in the school's microwave. Along with the running water to wash up in, and the dark, quiet, heated room for sleeping, Nikolai is quite a luxurious checkpoint!

The dogs had almost equal rest all the way along the last few runs, so I aim for a slightly shorter rest here. We are up and ready to pull out by 3:40 in the morning after just over 5 hours.

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

The run to Takotna is long. Since I am planning a nice long rest there (our 24-hour break), I figure we can just plug away until we get there. So we plug, and plug, and plug. There are still some deep areas of snow, but mostly the team just seems very slow.

Actually, they don't just seem slow. They are slow. Other teams that we should have been able to keep in front of are passing us. The sun comes up, the day gets hot, and that doesn't help anything. We've been running seven hours and we still aren't even to McGrath. The dogs plod along, cheerful enough, just slow as molasses.

Ed Stielstra's team comes along, slowly catches us, and then passes. Our teams match speeds for a short while, and we chat as we moved down the trail. I really love how Ed interacts with his dogs, and I respect his knowledge, so I ask his opinion - what is more demoralizing for the dogs; doing a long 10 or 11 hour run in to Takotna, or stopping for a break in McGrath, and then having to get up and get going again. Ed and I agree that the long, hot run is more likely to bum the dogs out than taking a nice break to cool off, grab a snack, and rest in the sun. Although it can be hard to get going again after only a short break, I decide to stop for a few hours in McGrath.

We finally get to McGrath at 11:40 in the morning, after eight hours. A far cry from last year's speedy six hour run. The checkers help me turn the team and stop in 'short term parking' in front of the community center. The dogs are surprised - we've always gone straight through this checkpoint. When we stop to check in they are barking and ready to keep going. I start second guessing my decision not to push on to Takotna. Any rest in McGrath is really just lost time, since the dogs will be completely recharged during our long break in Takotna. But it is too late to change my mind now, so I just grit my teeth and get the team comfortable.

And decide that next year we will really focus on long runs during training. We haven't done more than a handful this year. I know the dogs are physically capable of 10-12 hour runs, but mentally, it might take more out of them than I want at this stage. Next year they are going to be so used to doing long runs that they won't even think twice about it.

Since we aren't stopping for long, I give the dogs a very light meal. Getting the dogs to rest is just about impossible. We are there in the middle of the day, and it seems the whole town and all of the Iditarod fans who flew out to this major hub are out to greet teams and meet mushers. Kids are out of school and asking for autographs. The press is taking photos and asking questions. Teams are pulling in on the trail just in front of us. Small children are sledding down the snow piles just 20 feet from the team. Still, at least we aren't moving, and the brief rest seems to perk the dogs up a bit.

With all the hubbub going on around us, I cut my two hour rest down to an hour and a half. I have just enough time to take care of the dogs, grab a bite to eat, and sit down on my sled for a 15 minute rest before it is time to boot up and get moving. The dogs seem a little unsure about what the heck we are doing.

Trent Herbst is getting ready to depart right at the same time, but for some reason he stops just on the side instead of carrying on over the bank and down to the river. All the checkers are busy with him, but I figure we can get go straight ahead to the trail all on our own. With a couple of minor hitches, where I have to encourage the leaders to get moving so the rest of the team can too, we hit the trail.

It is just after one o'clock, the hottest part of the day. Still, it feels like we are moving much better and even though I pulled out in front of Trent, he doesn't catch up to us. We make our way up over the hills to Takotna in two hours and forty five minutes, which is a reasonable fast time.

Takotna is jam packed with teams. I have never pulled in here so far back in the pack before. The only spot available is on a side hill above Paul Gebhardt's team. It has the advantage of being close to the community center and hot water, and the disadvantage of being impossible to walk on. The dogs aren't going to get any rest if they have to struggle to keep from rolling down the hill. They can't lay down without sliding, and they definitely can't relax. So the first thing I do after getting booties off is to go grab a snow shovel and start making little platforms for the dogs.

Once the dogs have a good foothold, I get them as comfortable as possible for our long stay; harnesses off, dog coats on, a nice deep bed of straw for everyone, and extra long tie-outs so they can move around easily. I give everyone a nice pile of food - commercial food, fat, beef, salmon, and even some bacon, followed by a nice stew made with more beef and fat, and plenty of water.

It is still only afternoon, so of course I am not the least bit sleepy. I massage and wrap Chisel and Spartan's wrists. I sort through my sled to re-organize and repack it. While I work on my gear, the veterinarians do an extra thorough check of each dog. They discover that Lyra has developed mastitis (infection) in her back teats. Dogs often develop milk a short time after their heat cycle, whether or not they have pups. Lyra had indeed 'bagged up', but the milk usually re-absorbs after a short while. Hers did not. The vet spends a good twenty minutes extracting smelly, cloudy fluid out onto the snow. Lyra doesn't seem to find it painful, or maybe she is just tough. Either way, it is sure a long process!

In order to control the infection, the vets tell me I will have to give her antibiotics twice a day and strip all fluids out of the teats four times a day. That just makes me laugh. We spend most of our time running down the trail, which makes it sort of impossible to stop and spend a long time milking a dog multiple times each day. I know it is important, though, and I will least be able to work on her every time we stop to camp. It will take time away from my sleep; getting all the infected material out is not easy and it takes time to really do it right. But without it she would need to go home, so I will have to do it – all the way to the end of the race.

The medications are going to take careful management too. I am already giving each dog Prilosec to help control stomach acid, which can be overproduced during the rigors of racing. Prilosec has to be given on an empty stomach and at least an hour prior to any other medications or food; the antibiotic needs to be given with food.

Finally, after working on Lyra with the vets and getting all my chores done, I decide to go get something to eat. Takotna is famous for taking great care of mushers and teams. The cost to fly all the food to this remote location must be astronomical, and I don't really know how they manage to have almost anything you could ask for, but they never disappoint. I start with a cheeseburger, fries, pasta salad, green salad, and pecan pie, all washed down with cup after cup of water and Tang. Normally I hate Tang, but I drink a lot of it on the trail. It really hits the spot when you are thirsty (and the local water tastes a little like dirty socks). I am not sleepy so I sit inside and shoot the breeze with the other mushers who are killing time.

Inside the Takotna community center is a large flat screen linked to the computer. Normally it displays the most recent updates showing which mushers have checked in to each checkpoint. This is great, because we all want to know what is happening during the race. While I am eating, the Iditarod staff decides to load up one of the Insider videos taken on the trail. It shows Ray Redington traversing the summit of Rainy Pass, some 150 miles back. His sled snags a rock on the barren, craggy summit and cartwheels off the screen without the musher. Then Ray appears behind the rocks, grabbing his head in defeat as the team leaves without him.

I am sitting next to Ray while the video plays; he has not seen the footage before. Reactions across the room are hilarious, as all the mushers groan in sympathy at the crash and potentially disastrous aftermath. I sure am glad the wind had blown hard after they went through, because (if you recall) when I crossed the pass, the trail was nice packed powder with just a few rocks peeking through.

I go out to feed the dogs again and realize that Bree is going to be a problem. She obviously isn't tired, and since she feels like playing, no one else is allowed to rest either. She is messing around, mounting every dog she can get her paws on, jumping on them and trying to get them to play. Even the boys are getting tired of her constant harassment. I move her around with different dogs that I think would be able to back her down, or at least put up with her. Chisel, Flip, even Fly give up and get frustrated with her. If I didn't know better I would think she was coming in to heat. But I do know better - she was in heat just a couple of months ago. So she is just being obnoxious! Finally I have to make her own little spot back by the sled. She doesn't get any more rest – she just barks at the rest of the team. But at least everyone else can ignore her now.

I'm hungry again too. I go for breakfast this time; eggs, sausage, bacon, hash browns, and more Tang. Finally I feel like I could sleep. I head up to the church for a nap. It is jam packed with smelly, snoring mushers sprawled all over the floors and in between every pew. I finally find a small spot near the back wall and curl up under my parka. The sleeping bag that I carry on the race is rated for 40 below, and it's a true rating (unlike so much of the gear out there – ever try wearing 40 below boots when it is 10 above? It should be just fine, but it is actually hard to keep your toes from freezing). Anyway, my sleeping bag is enormous, very warm, and not too practical for indoor use. Not to mention that unpacking and then repacking it is a royal pain. Unless I really think I'm going to be cold, I hardly ever get that thing out; my bibs and parka usually keep me comfy if I have a spot indoors.

I often have trouble sleeping more than a few hours at a time when I am out on the trail, but this night I sleep all the way through. In the morning I get up, feed the dogs, feed myself (breakfast burrito) and then spend a couple of hours taking each dog out on a leash to stretch their legs and play. By the way, sled dogs do not walk well on a leash - all they know is to pull with everything they have. Everyone was in great spirits and full of bounce, so they thoroughly enjoyed dragging me off my feet and up and down the hills of Takotna.

At 3:30 in the afternoon I start getting ready to go again. This 24 hour break has flown by, probably because I actually slept through much of it.

Leg 7 – Takotna, through Ophir, to Camp Spot (50? miles)

We head out just after 4:30 in the afternoon. The dogs are energetic and happy to be going down the trail again. They pull strongly going up the hills out of Takotna, and we make good time.

Coming around a corner, a couple of ptarmigan explode off the trail right in front of the team. The dogs surge forward in a micro-burst of energy. I am watching as Lyra, in lead, leaps down the trail. She takes three big lunges, then makes a funny step, yelps, and comes up limping on a back leg. Oh no! Keeping this dog in the team is starting to seem impossible.

I immediately stop the team and check her out, but I can't find anything. Continuing down the trail, I watch her closely. Every quarter mile or so, she takes a funny limp on that hind leg for a few steps. I move her back in the team where I can see her better. Sure enough, she IS limping on her hind leg. But only every so often. She doesn't seem fazed by it and her tugline stays tight, so I let her continue down the trail, watching closely.

We pull into Ophir, 25 miles down the trail. Lyra hasn't shown any problems for several miles, but I am still worried. I have never done the Northern route before, so I am not sure what the next leg of trail will be like. I do know that it is a long 70 mile run in to Cripple. I ask the vets in Ophir to check her out closely. They really give her a thorough examination. While they do that, I load up my drop bags for camping, grab some Heet, and start to work on splitting a bale of straw in half. Of course, while I work on loading my sled and the vets check over Lyra, the rest of the dogs manage to make a humongous knot. But at least only Fly pulls his booties off.

The vets can't find anything wrong with Lyra - it can be really hard to diagnose a tough stoic husky. After discussing exactly what happened a little more, we decide she just gave her knee a

little twist. One of those things that stings when it happens, but that you shake off quickly. It isn't long before we are back on the trail, heading towards the setting sun. And to my relief, Lyra never takes another bad step the rest of the race.

I plan to travel four hours after passing Ophir. The team rolls along an easy trail, and within a few hours we cross the Innoko River for the third time. Based on my trail notes, we are making good time.

Just before midnight I start looking for a good place to stop the dogs. I find a snow machine track off to the left. It isn't until the entire team has pulled over and I am off the sled heading up to secure my leaders that I realize the side trail was made very recently. Probably by that snow machine that passed me 15 minutes ago. The snow has not had a chance to set up and get firm, so I resign myself to wallowing around in knee deep snow, with occasional plunges up to my hips.

I am still watching my two big boys carefully. Spartan seems to be fine and shows no limp at all as we move down the trail. He does insist his wrist is sore when I check him out, so I continue to wrap him carefully at each stop.

Chisel is another story. He is just fine when we are running. The problem shows up when we stop moving – as soon as he cools down he starts hobbling on three legs. He looks dreadful. I take time to massage and stretch him prior to each run, but he looks as though he won't be able to make it a mile down the trail. I am completely resigned to having to drop him soon. But each run he surprises me by warming up and running happily and well. Within a minute of leaving after each rest, Chisel is back to a sure, even trot. He has only the slightest head bob, which I can detect only because I am looking so carefully. Despite his soreness he is pulling like a maniac. So I keep treating him, and keep watching him, and keep hoping that his condition doesn't get any worse

After getting the dogs fed and comfortable, and taking care of Chisel and Spartan's wrists and Lyra's mastitis, I lay back on my sled. I'm not too tired after all that sleep in Takotna. It is cold enough that I pull my sleeping bag out for the first time, and I snuggle under it, peering out to watch the bright northern lights brewing around the full moon. The entire landscape is highlighted. Every so often a team jingles by, headlight off to run in the moonlight. I get a couple hours of rest even though the cold sinks in and keeps me from sleeping much.

Leg 8 –Camp Spot to Cripple (40? miles)

After a nice five hour break we get back on the trail around 4:30 in the morning. Just as we are getting going, Zoya's speedy team roars up from behind. I find a nice wide spot to stop and pull over to the side, then pull my team off into the deeper snow to give the passing team some room. It isn't long before my team warms up and hits their stride, and we slowly catch up to the headlight in front of us.

The trail continues up a nice open valley with rolling hills, all gently visible in the moonlight. During the dark the dogs are really moving. I decide it must be fairly cold because the front of my legs are getting chilled, even through my bibs, quilted pants, and thermals. That never happens unless it is more than 30 below.

We idle along behind Zoya for a while. There is nowhere good to pass, but eventually we are able to get by on a long straight away by wallowing through the deep snow on the side. Some of my dogs get tangled up trying to make their way in the deep snow, and I have to walk up and help them get loose, and then help pull the sled free of the clingy, sticky snow. Several of the dogs lose booties during the pass, but I want to put some distance between the teams before I stop, so we carry on until we leave her lights behind.

Eventually I think we have built up enough of a lead to take a quick stop. I need to go to the bathroom by now anyway. By the time I take care of business and get booties back on the dogs who had lost them, here comes that headlight again. Off we go to try to get our lead again and stay out of her way, and again we manage to pull ahead. After an hour or so, I stop to snack the dogs, and her team catches up again.

Once we get going again, Zoya's team stays with us, right on my heels. Zoya doesn't want to pass, but after an hour of her leaders barking right on my butt, I find a nice wide spot in the trail and motion her to go on by. I help her leaders past the team, and then wait a short while to let her get clear before pulling the hook. Zoya's team quickly pulls ahead. But just as my dogs are settling in to a rhythm, I hear her team barking up ahead. She is busy loading a dog into her sled, so we wait while she finishes up, give her a head start, and then get going again. A few minutes later, I hear barking again, and come up a hill to find Zoya moving dogs around in her team. We stop, wait, and then get going again.

Over the next hour, we stop and wait seven times. Each time the dogs get more and more frustrated and antsy, and each time it takes longer to settle into a ground-covering steady pace. Finally I tell Zoya I just can't keep stopping and starting, and that I need to pass. She isn't too happy with me, but she stops to let me by. Like last time, it was a terrible place to try to pass - narrow trail and deep snow. I have to help my leaders, who are wallowing around trying to make headway. I decide, given the circumstances, that I am going to stop and replace the booties this time - in the cold it is best to keep the dog's feet covered at all times.

We carry on down the trail with Zoya's leaders barking at my heels all the way in to Cripple. With all the passing, stopping, and messing around, the run took much longer than I expected, over six hours. Still, the dogs look great, and the sun is up, warming the land. A perfect time to stop and let the team rest in the sunshine.

Our friend Brad is manning the checkpoint, and it is a welcome sight to see a friendly face. He makes sure we know where everything is and that we have everything we need. Cripple is a remote camp, and we have to melt snow for the dogs. There is plenty of snow around to melt, but my cooker is not working well. Even though I had poked all the jet holes out back in Rohn, it doesn't seem to be drawing right - rust may have clogged up the spaces in between. Whatever it is, it takes me an hour and a half to get a meal for the dogs. In the mean time I sort, organize and repack my sled. Once I have a meal ready, I also spend a lot of time poking wire in all the jets and trying to unclog my cooker. There is no way of knowing how well that worked until next time I need it, but I hope I have done enough to get it working well again.

While I work on getting a meal going, the vets do a really thorough check of the dogs. Even though I had left Takotna the day before with a glowing, healthy team, now the vets have a whole list of issues they are concerned about; many of the dogs are slightly dehydrated (typical at the end of a long run), several have minor diarrhea (being treated), Hatchet has a tiny bootie rub on one paw, Lyra's mastitis continues.

None of the issues they raise are news to me, or even very troubling. But somehow I am completely shook up by all the negative information coming from the veterinarians. In retrospect, I know the vets are just trying to be very thorough. These are new vets on Iditarod, and I don't think they are aware of just how easy it is to deflate the mushers late in the race when we are fatigued and easily stressed out. But in the moment, I am completely overwhelmed. I worry about the team, worry about whether I should try to make the next run in one go, worry about how heavy my sled is, worry about my team getting sick.

Zoya reminds me that my dogs are fine. She points out that I won't need to haul straw - so many teams have gone before us that there will almost certainly be camp spots that already have straw. And I can decide whether to camp along the way, depending on how the run is going. Just as suddenly, I snap out of my blues. I am energized and encouraged and ready to go. Emotions are funny that way out on the trail.

I stay up a bit longer to melt more snow and get a meal ready to take with us. While the cooker is going, I take care of dropping Harp and getting her settled behind the vet's cabin. She has done a fabulous job all along, and has been happy and excited about the trail up until the last run. Now she is showing signs of a stomach bug and isn't her usual perky self. Since the next run is a long one, I decide it is time to send her home and not ask too much of my tough little youngster. She is just a yearling on her first big race, and she made it all the way to the halfway point - I am proud of her!

With all my chores finally done, I have less than an hour to try for a nap. It is broad daylight and I am just not sleepy, but I make myself go lay down in the brand new musher cabin that Brad helped build. They have insulated the heck out of that place, and it is roasting hot! I drape all of my frosted layers around the (hotter) top bunks hoping they will dry out, and lay down on a (cooler) lower bunk to rest. Between Scott Jansen's snores, and the various mushers coming in and out of the cabin I don't really sleep, but at least I am off my feet for a time.

Leg 9 – Cripple to Camp (40? miles)

We pull out of camp right at 5:00 p.m. The sun is blazing down, but it is cool enough that the dogs are not overheating. This is real spring weather; 30 or 40 below at night, and almost warm during the days. For the first hour or more, the trail gradually climbs upward through rolling hills.

As the sun goes down, the dogs speed up. Pretty soon we are flashing down the trail, with Hatchet and Aberdeen in lead, and me singing songs and having a great time driving along through the willow thickets and little drops. After an hour and a half we pass the Sulatna bridge, which my notes told me was 15 miles out. We are making such good time that I think it is really likely we can run all the way in to Ruby.

A short time later I stop to snack the dogs, and I see a headlight coming up. I figure it is Zoya, who left Cripple right behind me. It isn't though - it is Trent. He goes on by while I work on replacing booties, but it isn't long before we catch right up. I stay behind him for a time, but my dogs are gathering steam.

We hit a wide open road. My notes say there will be mile markers to take us all the way in to Ruby now, but obviously the deep snow this year has covered everything. It is nice to be able to measure your progress, but now I will just have to guess.

Just as the road starts to climb Trent says he is planning to stop soon, so we pass on by and zoom upward. I know we are about half way to Ruby at this point, but I cannot imagine trying to stop my excited, powerful team. The northern lights are out, intense colors morphing quickly from shape to shape, and the night is cold and crisp and bright. I am singing and pumping up the hill, excited to get to the top. We crest the hill, take a short swoop downwards, and start up the next hill. I can see the trail markers climbing steeply in front of us, going up out of sight. I think nothing of it, and the dogs charge forward.

We are already more than half way there, and the dogs are really pumped. I check my trail notes. When we hit the old abandoned town of Long, there is only another 30 miles to go. Since there aren't any mile markers and I don't know of any other landmarks, I hope I will be able to see the town from the trail - I have never been this way before. I decide that if I hit Long within six hours, then we could push on to Ruby and expect to get there in another 4 ½ hours. Otherwise, I will pick a nice spot where another musher has left straw, and we will take a short break. I know my dogs can do a 10 hour run, especially on a night like tonight!

The trail keeps climbing steeply, the reflectors on the markers marching upwards until they blend with the stars. My notes don't say anything about unending hills, so I figure there can't be too many more of these hell-hills. Boy am I wrong. The trail does nothing but make one heartbreaking, steep, long climb after another. Every time I expect reach the summit, I see another set of markers heading off into oblivion on a steep angle.

I pass a couple of teams camped out on the side of the road, but now I am seeing fewer and fewer decent camp spots, and no abandoned straw beds. I start counting the hours, checking my trail notes, and second guessing myself. It has been over an hour since I have seen a place where it was possible to get off the trail to camp, and we are still trudging up one hill after another hill. I hadn't counted on the trail being so tiring.

I am starting to feel shaky and queasy. I nibble on snacks and drink as much as I can, but I can feel my energy draining. I feel really feeble. I start retching, and lose whatever food and liquid I had gotten down. I know I need to take care of myself soon.

Before long we pass some rugged old buildings, so I know we only have 30 more miles to go. But the dogs are slowing, disheartened by the constant steep hills and sensing my growing shakiness. We are going to have to stop at least for a little while, but I can't find anywhere to get off the trail. I'd still like to find some used straw if possible, or at least a spot near some spruce

trees so I can cut the dogs some branches for a bed. There is nothing, not even a way to get off the trail to stop without breaking out the snowshoes, and I am in no shape for that kind of exertion.

Finally, at around midnight, seven hours from Cripple, I see a slight track right next to the trail. There is no straw, there are no trees nearby, and the track is just a narrow little depression next to the trail. But I need to stop. The dogs huddle in their jackets and I work to pull off their booties and give them the meal we have been carrying. At least I don't need to try to fire up the cooker and melt snow.

By the time I am done with the essential chores I am sick and chilled. I force down some snacks and a bit of water, and crawl into my sleeping bag, where I shiver miserably. The dogs seem fine curled up in the snow, but I can tell the temperature is dropping and I wish I had handled this run entirely differently.

Trouble is sitting up unhappily - Bree won't let him cuddle next to her and he can't find a place to relax. I pull him up on the sled on top of me, and he snuggles right in. It helps me warm up a bit too, but it is sort of hard to get comfortable with a 50 pound dog laying on your chest.

Leg 10 – Camp to Ruby (30? miles)

After three hours I realize I just need to get going again. I am not getting any warmer, and the dogs aren't getting any quality rest huddled by the side of the trail. I force myself to eat and I drink the last of my water. Then I pull the dogs onto the trail.

I can tell it is cold; 30 or 40 below. There is a real risk that the dogs' feet can be injured at these temperatures. As much as I am worried about their feet, I am too dizzy to even attempt to put booties on 13 dogs. It is less than 30 miles to Ruby, and I just have to hope they will be OK.

Hatchet and Aberdeen, still in lead, are not excited about moving out. The break may have done them some good, but we have all stiffened up and getting going again is hard. I am not upset with them - they did an amazing job on the previous run and deserve a break from lead. Bree is in swing, just behind the leaders, so I swap her up to the front. She just looks at me and tries to melt back into the team. Same with Mercedes. I know if I work hard enough I can talk them into leading the team. I am not worried about the team quitting, I just need to get them in motion and it will all be fine. The only problem is I am so sick and dizzy. It would be nice if they would just carry me on in to the checkpoint without a lot of effort from me.

I look around to see who I can put up front. Chase, back in the middle of the team, is barking his head off. Obviously someone is excited to get going! Cutter is bouncing around too. As soon as I put those boys in lead the team surges forward up the hill. It is 3:00 a.m. We are on our way again.

I sure am glad we stopped. As crappy as I am feeling (and it hasn't gotten any better), I don't think I was in any shape to pump up any more hills. Fresh from their rest, the dogs are now pulling strongly and I am able to collapse on my seat and try to conserve energy.

The trail keeps stretching upward. As we move along, each succeeding trail marker becomes visible, climbing ever towards the sky. Each time the next marker glimmers into sight we know we haven't reached the summit yet. I know the dogs can see the reflectors, too, but their spirits are good and the miles wear away.

We pull in to Ruby at 6:00 in the morning, having spent a total of ten hours in motion and three resting. Pretty good time for that section of trail, but I am a mess. I am staggering dizzy and queasy. I am also desperately thirsty, having drunk all my water a few hours back. But the closest drinking water is down the hill at the community center. It's not worth the time to go all the way down there to take care of my problems and leave the dogs waiting on the ice. I have to just tough it out and get them fed and cared for first.

Luckily for us we get a great parking spot, close to my drop bags and right next to the building set aside for mushers to sleep in and where they have barrels of water ready for us. The water is cold, but it heats up quickly in my cooker (my repairs in Cripple have done the trick!) The dogs luxuriate in their warm straw and the rising sun.

I ask the vets to really look closely at their feet; I am worried I have done real damage by running in the cold with no booties. It is 35 below in Ruby at this point, and it was probably quite a bit colder up in the hills overnight. The vets tell me the dogs all look fabulous, are keeping their weight on great, and all have nice, healthy feet. What a relief! I bundle each dog under a pile of straw and wish them sweet dreams.

As soon as the dogs are settled and fed, I head down the hill to the community center. My mouth is dry and I am desperate for a drink of water. As early as it is, volunteers are ready and waiting. They welcome me in, get me something hot to drink, and ask me what I want to eat. I am too frazzled and queasy to formulate an answer. They take this in immediately and quickly make a decision for me - breakfast is in order. It isn't long before I am digging in to eggs, toast, and bacon, with a big glass of orange juice to top it off.

Full, hydrated and warmed up, I go back up the hill to check on the dogs. They are all sleeping in their little haystacks, so I go inside with my pad to get a nap too. I am taking my mandatory eight hour break here, so I get a nice long sleep followed by more good food.

Between the quiet, warm place to sleep, the water ready for the dogs, the great food, and the friendly locals, Ruby is a wonderful stop on the trail. The view out on to the river from the village clinging to the rocks above is pretty nice too. I decide I really like it here, but by the end of my eight hours I am up and ready to set off. I'm not feeling 100%, but I am functional.

Leg 11 –Ruby to Galena (50 miles)

We leave Ruby at 2:20 in the afternoon. Usually it is important to avoid running during the heat of the day, but with the temperatures we are having it really doesn't matter. There is a light breeze blowing in my face. Somehow it is blowing right inside my hood and freezing the top and back of my head. My beaver hat doesn't help at all. Try as I might, I can't seem to pull my hood down tight enough or shield my face. I have run in cold and strong wind many times without problems, but this little breeze is really freezing my head.

On the southern route you travel upriver with the wind in your face. One of the advantages to running the northern route, like we are this year, is supposed to be that the wind blows at your back as you go down river. I guess you couldn't call what we are facing a wind, but it sure is making me miserable. I huddle, and the dogs move along.

Once again, we aren't setting any speed records, but we are making decent progress. We are holding steady at about 45th place. Even my rookie year I wasn't this far back after the halfway point! At least we don't see another team the entire cold run down the flat river trail to Galena.

I notice Spartan is lagging a bit. He isn't really limping, but he just looks like he has had enough. That last eight hour rest should have refreshed him. I wonder if I will need to drop him at the next checkpoint or if his attitude and desire will bounce back after a couple of nice easy runs on flat terrain and some good rests.

About twenty miles outside of Galena, I notice that my handlebar feels kind of loose. I look down to see what is going on, and realize I have a problem that is going to be hard to fix. I am missing a couple of crucial bolts in a very hard to reach spot. I am going to have some extra work to do in Galena.

We get to the checkpoint just after 9:00 p.m., after about seven hours on the trail. After our long rest in Ruby I am hoping to rest only six hours here. But sled repairs derail that plan drastically.

I get busy taking care of the dogs. There are LOTS of interested kids hanging around the dog lot, even this late at night. They politely wait until I have seen to dogs before they ask for my autograph. They ask if they can pet the dogs. I tell them sure, as long as the dogs seem like they enjoy it. These kids are great - respectful of the dogs, really paying attention, and asking good questions. As the dogs finish eating, I pile nice warm straw on top of them. I explain to the kids that when it is cold, the dogs like to be buried in a 'haystack'. The kids know they are not supposed to help, but they can't resist tossing a little straw on top of each dog they pet. I don't think the race judges are going to get too upset about this assistance.

Once the dogs are sleeping, I tip my sled over and start to work on replacing the loose bolts. If you want to know the short version, it was a pain in the butt and took way too long! If you want to know the details, read on.

Each wooden stanchion, or upright on the sled, is bolted to an aluminum bracket. The bracket is then bolted through the aluminum runner. The cross section of the runner is shaped like an **H**, with a track or slot along the top side, and a track or slot along the bottom side. The stanchion bracket bolts through the runner and threads into a weld-nut, which is a flat rectangle that slides into the slot on the bottom, and has a threaded hole in the middle. The runner plastic also slides into that bottom slot, so it is important to have exactly the right length of bolt; too short and it won't hold the bracket on, too long and it will be impossible to get the runner plastic on.



As I start repairs, I immediately run in to challenges. First of all, it is 40 below. That always makes working with metal parts and tools a challenge, especially small pieces like these that virtually require bare hands to manipulate. I have to stop frequently to warm my hands. And of course every time I fumble a socket or a small piece of hardware (which is depressingly often), it disappears into the snow and I have to fish around until I locate it again.

Second, the stanchion makes it impossible to get a wrench or socket onto the rear-most bolt on the bracket. The stanchion has to be completely removed to work on the bracket. This requires unbolting the stanchion from the bracket (1 bolt), the bed of the sled (2 bolts), the plastic gusset plate where the two main stanchions join (3 annoying tiny philips head bolts that are mostly stripped out), and the handbar (2 more bolts). It is just about impossible to do all this with a sled bag in the way, so I have to unload my sled entirely and remove the sled bag from the back half of the sled before I can even begin.

Third, while I carry a really good repair kit, I am only carrying one spare bolt of the correct length. In all the years of running my Black River Sled, I have never seen these particular bolts come loose - they are always tight whenever I check them. But somehow I have lost both bolts that hold the bracket. I have some bolts that are too short, and some that are too long. Even if I could find a tool to cut off the long bolt, I need to be able to thread it into the weld-nut, so that is probably more than I can accomplish with the limited set of tools at my disposal. We still have over 400 brutal miles to go, and the sled isn't going to stay in one piece without all its fasteners holding it together. I put the rear-most bolt through and tighten it, but can't see a way around the problem of just not having a second bolt.

After working for over an hour, I give in to my need for food, sleep, and warmth. Plus, I need to find out if anyone has a spare bolt that might work for me. I head up to the checkpoint and inhale some food and Tang. I talk to a very helpful volunteer who goes off to look through his toolshed for any bolts that might work. I finally lay down to sleep about midnight. There are mattresses scattered all over the back half of the gymnasium. They are so soft and cushiony that I drop off to sleep almost before I lay down.

I intend to sleep for only an hour and a half, but for the first time ever, I sleep right through my planned wake up time and never even hear my alarm. I wake up groggy and disoriented around 3:30 - two hours later than I had planned.

The helpful volunteer is nowhere in sight, but there is a small pile of bolts sitting on the table next to me. I bundle up and head out to my sled with high hopes. Angie Taggart, a friend and fellow musher, is there volunteering at the checkpoint. She comes out to give me a hand.

Unfortunately, we quickly realize that none of the bolts are the right size or thread pattern - I still have a big problem on my hands. But since I am all dressed up and out in the cold, and since I had already replaced the rear bolt on the bracket, I can at least put the stanchion back in place and reload my sled. This will leave only one last bolt to locate and install.

Of course, the stanchion replacement doesn't go easily. At forty below, nothing cooperates. The holes in the gusset plate, where the two main stanchions join, just won't line up. The holes were already a tight fit that required screwing the bolts through. Try as we might, with Angie pushing and flexing, and me trying to drive the screws back in with just my Gerber tool, we cannot get the dang thing pieced back together. So now I have two problems to solve. First, I need a drill to enlarge the holes on the plastic gusset plate. And second, I still need to find a bolt that will fix my stanchion bracket to the runner.

Meanwhile, it is time to feed the dogs again. We are obviously going to be in the checkpoint for awhile longer. That taken care of, I head back inside. John Korta, an Iditarod veteran who lives in Galena, is inside and immediately understands my dilemma. I take him outside to show him exactly what I am lacking, and he heads home to see if he has any spare bolts that might work. I eat and drink, and fall asleep with my head on the table. Eventually John comes back with some likely looking bolts and a drill motor.

We make quick work of the gusset plate – with the holes wallowed out just a bit, we are able to force the stanchions back into place and tighten the whole contraption. But all of the bolts he brought for the bracket are too short. As we are working together to try to get a too-short bolt to catch the threads, I realize there is a solution to the problem. We can take one of the long bolts I have, and stack a bunch of washers on the top side of the runner to take up some of the extra space. I start digging through my parts bag. I have spare washers – three or four. I need about eight or ten. I need another plan.

I sift through my parts bag again and realize we can probably use a spare weld-nut as a spacer. This turns out to be trickier than expected because the threads on both the nut we were using as a spacer and the nut that is holding the whole thing together have to be exactly the right distance apart on the shaft of the bolt to make it work. After a lot of repeated attempts, we eventually cobble it together. It looks like it just might hold.

Finally! Back in business with a functional sled. Thanks to the help of the wonderful checkers in Galena! I still need to collect the dog dishes, pack my sled, eat more, and fill my drink jug with hot lemonade before I get the dogs up and start bootying. By the time we are ready to go, we have been in Galena 11 hours - almost twice as long as I had planned. There is no point in fretting over lost time now, and the only way to make up for it is to get moving. The sun is up and the trail is calling.

Leg 12 –Galena to Nulato (45 miles)

Chisel, as usual, limps alarmingly when he gets up off the straw. But after a short walk to stretch, he is bouncing to go. I can't decide if he is basically fine and just being a big baby when we stop, or if he is really very sore and is just being incredibly tough when we get going. On the vets' continued recommendation, if he wants to pull and is not limping heavily on the trail, he can stay in the team.

We pull out around 9:15 in the morning. The dogs should be really well rested after two long breaks in a row. The next section is more easy river running. Sure, it is cold. But the trail is flat, packed, and well marked; there is no wind; and the day is gorgeous. We make pretty good time. We pass Koyukuk, 25 miles out, after just 3 hours.

I notice Spartan is fading again. I probably should have dropped him in Galena – he is much too big to risk having to carry! But after our long rest I figured he would bounce back strongly. Not so. He isn't limping, but his tug line clearly isn't tight. I encourage him and promise to let him go home to rest if he can just tough it out for a few more hours. He makes it another hour or so before he starts balking and looking back at me and tripping over his own feet. In his mind he just can't take any more - he is done.

Not every dog is built to go the whole distance, and he has been a great asset to the team over the hills and across 600 miles of a tough trail. I don't hold it against him at all. But I do have to load all 72 pounds of him into the sled and apologize to the remaining 12 dogs for the extra heavy load.

Spartan doesn't want to run anymore, but he sure doesn't want to ride in the sled either. I velcro and strap and zipper him in snugly, and he jerks and lunges and tries to force his way out. I have to swat his nose every time he finds an opening and tries to wriggle loose. After half an hour of tussling he finally lays down and rides quietly.

As we move down the river, the trail butts up next to the steep banks on the west side. I can see a red fox up ahead, cleaning up some left over snacks on the trail. When it sees us it scampers up the steep cliffs and out of reach. The dogs never see it, and don't even react to the fresh scent when we pass its trail. A mile farther I see another fox, this one black, also taking advantage of the bounty left on the trail. Again, the dogs don't react at all. I think it is sort of strange, since the smell of fox usually really gets them going. They don't seem tired or depressed, but it is odd that they aren't excited by the foxes.

Spartan's extra bulk certainly slows us down. We pass a sharp 90 degree right turn in the river. According to my trail notes, this means there is only 11 miles left to go. But it still takes us more than an hour and a half to pull those last few miles. The dogs are willing, but we just can't get up any speed while hauling such an enormous extra load in the sled.

Eventually I start seeing boats pulled up on the shore, and know we are close. So do the dogs. They really perk up when they realize that our run is almost over. We charge into Nulato barking, tails up, and in great spirits. It is 3:30 in the afternoon, and we've been on the trail just about 6 hours.

The checkpoint is in the school, and the dog lot is in the ballfield out back. They have a great vat of water heating for us, and the checkers are super helpful and friendly. One of the locals comes over to talk to me as I unload Spartan from the sled and prepare to camp. He tells me about running dogs when he was younger, and his dreams of building up a new team. I promise to leave him any extra dog food when I am done. Getting the dogs bedded down is a snap with hot water right at hand, and drop bags and straw close by.

I let the vets know that Spartan will be going home after he has eaten. He is feeling great, not limping at all, and is busy nibbling and kissing on the vet who is trying to examine him. Even though he looks like he could run all the way to Nome, there is some reason he doesn't feel like running anymore. Meanwhile, Chisel is limping around looking terrible, but keeps hammering his harness every time I ask him to go. Like I said, if Fly is your daddy you are born tough.

I go inside the school, and I'm immediately offered homemade local food – moose stew, salmon casserole, caribou hot dogs – the amount of food is staggering. Many of the residents are there for the potluck, and are really enjoying having Iditarod come through their village. I eat until I am waddling. Before I nap, I clean up a bit (hot running water in the bathroom!) As soon as I get up, I am again pressed to eat. There are new faces and new dishes, and everyone wants to make sure the mushers don't leave Nulato with an empty belly. I know I won't – I am stuffed!

Leg 13 –Nulato to Kaltag (34 miles)

After a five hour rest, I take the dogs in a wide loop around the ball field and back out to the trail. They are barking to go, and roar around the perimeter of the field without any guidance or help.

The sun is just going down, and they are revved up. The next run is short and easy, and I am hoping it will get them even more fired up. Lots of teams choose to push through Kaltag and camp at Tripod Flats, but I'm thinking a short fast run might be just what the team needs.

There is nothing exceptional about this run, we just head down the river. We are there almost before we know it, after only 4 ½ hours on the trail. The dogs are still full of energy and spunk when we pull in off the river. It's 1 a.m., a great time to stop and take a break.

Last year at this point I still had 15 dogs. This year, with 12, all my chores seem to go much more easily and I have plenty of time for a good solid nap. I plan for a 4 hour break. At some point I decide I need a few more minutes of sleep, and we actually rest closer to five hours.

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

When I get ready to pull out, all the checkers are busy with a team that has just returned from down the trail. A very helpful local asks if he can help guide my leaders out, and I think, why not? He obviously understands dog teams because he takes care to swing us really wide through the corners and around nearby teams. With his help, we get going without a hitch.

It's just before six in the morning, and we are on the road again. By this point in the race, the dogs are trail tough and into the rhythm of running and resting. They quickly settle into a steady pace. The trail up through the forests are incredible – flat, wide, and hard packed. Last year we just about bashed to pieces in the giant moguls here, but this year the ride is easy.

We've been dealing with temperatures at least 30 below since leaving Takotna. It's cold out now, but I am so used to it I hardly notice. What I do notice is, even though the sun is coming up, it is actually getting colder and colder the higher we go. After the first few hours where we really made good time, I notice that the dogs are moving slower and slower. But every so often we hit an icy patch of trail and surge forward into a lope. So it's not the dogs – it's the snow. At around 50 below snow is no longer slippery. It doesn't matter what kind of plastic you put on the bottom of your runners, you might as well be riding on two by fours. I am even having to help push the sled when we go down hills. What a slog.

Still, the dogs are game, and are willingly putting their shoulders into getting the sled down the trail. As usual, every time we stop for a break, Trouble barks his head off. Fly and Chase almost always join in. We get to Old Woman at 12:30 after only 6 ½ hours on the trail. That's just about how long it took us last year. The sun is just about up over the mountain behind us, and the dogs are going to get to rest in the sunshine. Perfect timing!

It doesn't take long to make the dogs happy. I even scoop up some of the straw left behind by other mushers to make them extra cozy beds. The place is deserted - we're the only ones here. But I know there are at least a couple of teams not too far behind. The cabin is still warm from the previous groups but the fire is out, so I quickly get it going. When I hear the next few teams coming in I step outside to help them park. It is a whole lot easier when someone guides your leaders; otherwise you end up stopping at the first straw piles you reach, which might already be occupied!

By now the cabin is warm and cozy, and after eating well I settle in for a short nap. I leave my extra trail snacks as an offering to the Old Woman, or any hungry traveler that might appreciate them.

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

We pull out of Old Woman at 5:30, just as the settling sun starts to let the cold descend once more. This is an ideal time to be running, and the dogs are really perked up. The trail is still granular and grabby as can be. You can't call what we are doing sliding. More like grinding. Thank goodness I have fresh runner plastic waiting for me up ahead, because it doesn't feel like there is going to be anything left of this set.

It seems like we aren't going any faster, but we must be because we drop down on to the Unalakleet River after only 4 hours. Once we hit the ice, the dogs start loping. There are only 8 more miles to the checkpoint. Once we round the hills and can see the lights of the village they really pour on the gas, and we just fly into Unk.

My mom, Aunt Carol, and Kathy Gonzalez (Ray Redington's mom, who lives in Unalakleet), are all there to greet me. The checkers even hand the clipboard off to mom and have her sign me in while they take pictures. I check in at 10:24 p.m. It's still cold - about 30 below.

Unalakleet is another one of those checkpoints that really takes care of us. Hot water just steps away, drop bags delivered to your sled, a nice big snow berm piled up as a windbreak, and the set up inside for the mushers is almost unbelievable. There is a whole kitchen to feed us, and plenty of food sitting out just waiting for a plate; there are laundry facilities in case something needs to be dried out; and separate cubicles set up with cots and mattresses so each musher can have a quiet, dark place to sleep.

Even though we only ran five hours to get here, I owe the dogs a little time from our last break, so I plan on resting five hours. I notice that Aberdeen's dog coat has shifted to one side and has become soaked in urine. The back half is frozen solid and stiff as a board. I run up to the checkpoint and toss it in the dryer. By the time the rest of my chores are done, his coat is dry and ready to go back on (and the dryer smells horrendous! I toss a wet cloth in, hoping it will help clean the drum of any residues). Taking care of the dogs goes quickly, and so does swapping out my runner plastic (but note to self - do NOT try to hold a cotter pin in your mouth at 30 below - serious burn to the tip of my tongue!)

I visit with mom and Aunt Carol up in the checkpoint while I try to get some food down. Nothing sounds good, and I just have to shudder and force myself to eat so I can get a nap. I manage to choke down some barbeque beef and piece of cake. It's close to midnight, and I only have a short time to get any sleep. I plan to get up at 2:00 to get ready for my 3:30 departure.

I get up around 1:00 to use the bathroom, and the checkers let me know that there is a huge wind storm blowing up at Shaktoolik, our next checkpoint. No one is leaving Shak to try to cross the open sea ice in the storm, and the tiny checkpoint is completely jam packed with teams and mushers. They are recommending that no one leave Unalakleet until the log jam breaks. That

kind of blows my plans out of the water. The dogs and I can get good rest here; Shaktoolik will be cold and cramped and windy (and I mean blow-you-off-your-feet windy).

Justin Savidis and I talk the situation over. The first thing we decide is that we should try to help each other keep tabs on the situation and figure out when to go. The second thing we decide to do is stake out one of the sleeping rooms; there are going to be a lot of teams catching up, and we are going to be stuck here for awhile. The third thing we decide is we aren't going anywhere soon, so we ought to feed the dogs and then get some sleep.

As soon as teams start moving out of Shaktoolik we figure that there is going to be a mad rush of teams out of Unalakeet too. We want to get a jump on these other teams and try to minimize the amount of time we lose to everyone who will catch up to us while we are waiting.

Justin and I trade off getting up to check the weather and reports of any mushers leaving Shaktoolik. There is plenty of time to catch up on sleep as the hours roll by. I even get a chance to eat a full breakfast cooked up by Middy Johnson, mayor of Unalakeet and fellow Iditarod musher. That guy knows how to cook!

Finally, at around 1:30 in the afternoon we see on the updates that some teams have started leaving Shaktoolik. I give Justin the heads-up and then scramble to get out the door and get my team going. Everything is loaded and packed, and I've already shuffled all the dogs. All I need to do is booty them and pull the hook.

Leg 16 –Unalakeet to Shaktoolik (35 miles)

We leave just after 2:00 in the afternoon. Just as predicted, a whole group of teams - five of us - leaves within the next half hour. But I am out front, and I don't see any of those teams again until we hit Shaktoolik.

My team has plenty of energy after resting for 15 1/2 hours (!!!aack!!), although they are a little slow on the take off. Everyone has to stop and poop as the entire village watches. Eventually they meander off the straw and down onto the ice, and we get underway.

The sun is up. The temperature is nice and comfy at around ten below, not miserably cold like it has been. This leg of trail climbs and climbs through the Blueberry Hills, with spectacular views down to the sea and the cliffs of Besboro Island. The hills don't seem nearly as daunting as the past couple of trips.

In no time we were pulling up the last little climb, a super steep jog up the side of a hill just before the trail descends in a long, swooping, three mile descent. I stop at the top to put on my wind gear. Once we leave the sheltering hills we have 12 miles of flat, open tundra, and we are going to get plastered by that wind storm.

We definitely find the wind, although it isn't as bad as I feared. Visibility is good, and there are plenty of trail markers. The wind is blasting us from the right. Bree, in lead, is bound and determined to turn to the side and get the wind out of her face. She certainly isn't listening to my corrections. Back to the rear of the team for her. Mars and Aberdeen are equally reluctant, and so

are Mercedes and Lyra. They've already proved they can lead in wind, but for some reason they are not enthusiastic today. Dogs have ups and downs too, and luckily I have enough leaders that I don't have to coax the less willing. I settle on Chase and Hatchet, who do a fine job quartering in to the wind.

The winds get stronger the closer we get to Shaktoolik. The ground storm starts picking up, making visibility worse, and we start seeing broken off trail markers skittering past on the ice. Finally the trail climbs up onto the spit and starts running down the road between derelict old buildings. Then for no reason I can see, the markers take us back down off the spit, and there the markers end in a series of enormous drifts that are taller than the top of my head. I'm not worried about getting lost; the spit leads right in to the village. But it is kind of hard to tell precisely how we are supposed to get there. The dogs never pause. They hook left up over some steep wind drifts and back to the top of the spit - right in the teeth of the wind.

The dogs can sense we are close, and they are firing ahead. The sled is plunging and lurching over 10 foot tall drifts, sometimes landing square, sometimes pitching over to crash. I am busy trying to peer out from under my hood and figure out where the heck we are going. I am not exactly sure if I would know if we had already passed the checkpoint while we were down off the spit, so I am squinting into the wind to try to figure out if I can spot the big trailer that houses the checkpoint.

Suddenly a checker with a clipboard appears right next to my leaders. There is a whole crowd cheering us in and waiting to help us into the checkpoint. We made it!

It is 7:40 at night, and the run has taken us just over 5 1/2 hours. Pretty good time for this stretch, but to be expected after our extended rest. The dogs are looking fresh and healthy, and I plan to give them no more than equal rest here, especially considering how poor that rest is going to be.

The dog lot in Shaktoolik is a windy, cold place for the dogs. I start to put straw down and it immediately blows away. So I spend a good twenty minutes gathering big blocks of snow and building a small snow wall for the dogs to huddle behind. Keeping the dogs comfortable is worth the extra effort, but I don't want to stay here any longer than necessary. Teams are streaming in to the checkpoint and some of them end up being parked down off the spit on the sea ice.

I go inside and heat up something to eat. While I sit up drinking some hot tea I get a weather report. I confer with Rhody, the race official here, and some of the other mushers. The weather is still not great. The next leg is entirely on wind-blown, featureless sea ice. Not a great place to be in a white-out. It can be very dangerous. We all agree that running across the ice in a group would be wise, but none of the other teams are prepared to get up and get going at midnight like I want to. Justin has come in an hour behind me. His team was balky up in the hills and he is lacking strong leaders, so he wants to give them more rest. Other mushers are running puppy teams or have some other reason why they are going to hold off on leaving. After our extended stay in Unk, my dogs don't need any extra rest and I just want to get on down the trail.

After coaxing and encouraging and trying to persuade all the other mushers to convoy with me, I can't raise any interest. Only one musher is willing. Curt Perrano has been at the checkpoint for a

long time (he left Unalakleet the day before when we were all waiting around). I hesitate to agree to go with him because I don't want to take on the added responsibility of guiding a rookie across. If things get really bad I want someone with experience out there with me. And I also know that his dogs have been much slower than my team on all of the previous legs when I have seen him. He must be running slow and resting short to be keeping up.

Rhody and I discuss the situation. I really trust her wisdom and trail experience. I am not interested in resting the dogs long - we've had way too much of that lately and I want to get to Nome! I also feel that running at night makes the most sense, when the reflectors on the trail markers are most visible and when the lights of Koyuk can help show us the way. Also, there is no guarantee that the break in the weather will hold. I want to get going.

Rhody says she thinks I will be fine out there by myself. She gives me a little bit of information about the trail; about five miles out from Koyuk lots of markers are down and the trail is pretty rough. If I can't find the trail, I should just aim for the lights of Koyuk and I will make it.

Leg 17 – Shaktoolik to Koyuk (45 miles)

We head out at 1:00 in the morning, a little later than I hope, but still ahead of the others (except Curt, who left on his own few hours before me). It is definitely still windy, but only about 5 below. It looks like we've left the really bitter cold behind.

The checkers help us across the road, and my dogs head right into the wind. I can only see two markers, so I try to head straight past them to find the trail. I can't find it. The dogs, excited to be running, are not willing to wait while I figure things out. They are swinging left and right and jerking my hooks out of the snow whenever I tried to stop to get oriented.

I am just on the verge of turning completely around and going all the way back to the checkpoint to start over, when someone must have seen my plight. A headlamp appears in the darkness, motioning me to the right. With a little bit of help, and a twenty minute delay, we are on the trail and headed out.

For the first hour or so we make good time, working marker to marker in the blowing snow. Every so often I have trouble spotting the next marker, but we can see the sled tracks and scratch marks on the ice carrying forwards. It is like following a trail of bread crumbs.

After about an hour I come to a place where I can't find any more markers. We head straight out beyond the last marker, but I can't see any signs of a trail and the snow is a deep, punchy, untracked mess. I stop the dogs and look left; nothing. I look right; nothing. We circle around for a short time looking for the trail and I can't seem to find it anywhere. The dogs are swinging all over and getting tangled. They don't want to stop, but they aren't sure where to go either. As we search around, I am always conscious of keeping the last marker within sight - I don't want to lose my lifeline out here. Finally I realize that the team is just getting confused and frustrated. I hook them down and hope they will stay put long enough for me to figure something out.

I stomp through the untracked snow to the last marker behind us and then put my nose close to the ground to follow the tracks. The trail takes a 90 degree left turn here! All of the markers

showing the turn have been broken off and are buried in the drifting snow. I set the markers up carefully - I don't want the teams behind me to get stuck at the same place.

I head back to my team and shine my light on the markers. The dogs see the reflectors and know exactly what to do. We're off!

It is a long, windy run across the ice. The temperatures is only 5 or 10 below, but I have to stop frequently to clean the crusted ice and snow from the dogs' faces. The wind is blowing from the east, pushing the dogs constantly to the left. When they veer around drifts I have to keep reminding them to straighten back out and return to the trail. My voice is getting hoarse from constantly calling Gee.

I start changing leaders regularly. At first they start out fresh and responsive. But after an hour or two of constantly having to turn back into the wind, their "gee button" seems to get broken. Incredibly, I still have eight strong leaders to choose from, so I can keep rotating them out of the hot seat and give them each a break.

Recent teams have been taking about 8 ¹/₂ or 9 hours to cross, and I feel like we are making pretty good time. The lights of Koyuk appear in front of us and gradually grow larger.

About the time I think we are probably ten miles out, I see a headlight in front of me. We have caught up to Curt. He is off to the left, near a couple of crossed markers. "X" means "don't go here", so obviously, the trail is not supposed to go that way. But I can't see markers anywhere else. I stop the team and look, but I don't see a single marker. The snow is blown clean, so I don't see any signs of the trail either.

After scanning back and forth for several minutes, I remember Rhody's advice; when you run out of trail markers, just head for the lights of Koyuk. The lights are right in front of me, so at least I know where we are heading. But also directly in front of me are towering blocks of jumble ice. Could the trail possibly go through there? Well, she did say the trail was going to be a little rough. The dogs are fired up and impatient, so without much thought, we plunge straight ahead.

Jumble ice happens when huge plates of frozen sea ice are pounded together by storms and waves. As the ice crashes together, large blocks and chunks and ridges form where one raft of ice piles up on top of the other. At first, navigating through the maze of 20 foot ridges and humongous building-sized icebergs is kind of fun. There is no visible trail, and the dogs are relying completely on voice commands as I scan out a way forward through the moonscape. My leaders are getting a kick out of outdoing each other to follow my directions, and we weave our way slowly forwards.

I keep expecting to pop out on the other side of the jumble ice, but instead it keeps getting more and more ridiculous. We're making more progress up and down than we are going forward. We're turning in circles to go around obstacles. Perched on top of a ridge and looking down a ten foot drop off, it hardly seems possible that someone could drive a team of dogs through this kind of terrain. Yet here we are doing it. I shake my head in amazement, and find a way off the ridge by turning back for 100 feet and then snaking around a huge circular depression.

The wind is still blowing like crazy. I have to swap out leaders more and more often as they are getting a bit frazzled by the absurd 'trail', the wild landscape, and the unrelenting wind.

I let the dogs veer gently to the left, hoping to intersect the trail. We don't find anything but more jumble ice, and now we are heading to far to the left. I start working the team back to the right, which is much harder because we must head more into the gale. It is kind of like tacking a sailboat into the wind; it's impossible to hold my course directly where I want to go. The dogs keep swerving off to the left, then we over-correct back to the right. We are all getting tired of hearing my hoarse voice calling for them to "Gee" over and over.

I can still see the lights of Koyuk, so I have confidence that we will make it eventually. I just need to keep the team's spirits up, and make sure they are convinced I know what I am doing. As the sun begins to rise, I make sure to mark some landmarks on the hills behind town. I know that once the sun is up I won't be able to see the lights of town anymore. I barely notice the sunrise in its colorful glory as I toil to keep us moving forward.

We've been in the jumble ice for 2 1/2 hours before we finally make it to the shore and climb up to the checkpoint. It's 10 a.m. and I was never so glad to see a checkpoint!

As we pull in, I laugh when I ask the checkers, "So, I must have missed something back there, huh?" They chuckle and say that they thought we did great - they've been watching on the GPS tracker as we made steady progress, and they knew we were going to be fine. They explained that the trail had taken a 90 degree turn to the right where I had gone straight into the jumble ice. They also explain that I was not the only one to take the "direct route".

Just about this time, I realize that one of the checkers helping me get parked and filling me in is none other than my friend Brad. He has moved down the trail from Cripple and is now manning the Koyuk checkpoint.

As I take care of the dogs, I mentally review the run. I am kicking myself for wasting so much time; I have lost probably an hour and a half meandering through the labyrinth. But when I realize it still only took us a total of nine hours, I feel a bit better. And regardless of lost time, I am bursting with pride for how my dogs handled the most insane trail I've ever seen.

It is great we have come through in good shape, but a run like that is mind-frazzling for the dogs. I owe them a good long rest. I am pretty exhausted too, after battling the wind for so many hours.

I spare a thought to Curt out there, and hope to heck he didn't follow my path. He didn't; he spent more time out there looking and eventually found the trail. He pulled in over an hour later, after almost 12 hours on the trail.

I feed the dogs well and bundle them under great big haystacks. I tell them that they are going to get a nice long eight hour break, and I promise the next section will be an easy, low key run. Then I go inside, eat two of my packaged meals, and fall asleep on Brad's cushy thermarest pad.

I wake up even more shaky and fuzzy headed. My dizziness, which has never faded completely, has returned with a vengeance. I eat, drink, and go check on the dogs. A little bit of time playing with and petting each dog brings my energy and spirits up - and hopefully theirs too.

I still have hours of down time before our planned rest is over. But it is the middle of the day - I am very tired, but I'm not sleepy at all. I sit in the community center and browse on some of the food and snacks that are laid out for us. Two girls, probably ten years old, are full of excitement and energy and questions for me. They are having a contest to see who can keep smiling the longest. It looks to me like their cheeks are starting to hurt. I may not be sleeping, but just sitting in the warmth and stillness of the checkpoint is restful.

About this time, I realize that Brad and the other checkpoint volunteers are really focused on watching the GPS tracker. Another musher has fallen afoul of the jumble ice and they are watching closely. I quietly come up to see what is going on and realize that they are monitoring Justin. Following his track, I can see exactly what is happening.

After entering the jumble ice he must have realized it was the wrong way. He back tracked, and then started forward again, searching for a trail. He is now far off track and wandering in circles. I can see his efforts to keep the team headed towards Koyuk, but the wind keeps pushing him to the west. With his ongoing leader problems I know there is a real risk the team will just shut down. He could be stuck out there on the barren frozen ice, at the mercy of the wind and the blowing snow; a potentially dangerous situation.

There is nothing I can do but hope he makes it in. I head back for another nap. When I get up, Justin has found the trail and is heading straight to the checkpoint under his own steam. I am so relieved for him!

Other teams are trickling in. They came past my wrong turn in the daylight and were able to see the sled tracks and scratches in the snow heading to the right. They've all made the run in seven or eight hours. No matter what I do to make a break from this pack, I just keep losing time to them. Sigh.

Leg 18 –Koyuk to Elim (44 miles)

We pull out of Koyuk just before 6 in the evening. I'm looking forward to this next section. It is relatively flat and easy except for the last ten miles of hill climbing. It crosses the sea ice and contours along the shore towards the hills near Elim. It is barely breezy and looks like excellent weather. I sing to the dogs about what a fun, fast little run we are going to have, and then another nice little rest.

The breeze picks up as the sun goes down, but I think nothing of it. We are rolling along at a really good clip and the trail is great. I am excited to be moving towards Nome. At this rate we are going to hit Elim in only 5 or 6 hours.

I start thinking about all the fun there is to be had in Nome. I do some calculations in my head, and realize that I should reach the finish line well before the finisher's banquet.

We bounce along down the trail for the first three hours. I'm still making up little 'la la la' songs to the dogs about how soon we'll be in Elim and what a nice big pile of straw they will have there.

And then things change. I know the trail heads across wide open tundra and weaves through patches of trees before it hits the long straight road up the beach. But as the sun goes down, I realize I can't see any of this. The wind has picked up and is blowing snow sideways. This section of the trail comes with warnings about how deadly it can be during a white-out.

The trail is starting to drift over. We start moving marker to marker. This works out fine for a bit. I put Aberdeen and Chase up front. They are my most trusted leaders, they know how to run in wind (well, they all do by now), and they are good at leading the team towards the reflectors.

The visibility gets worse and worse. There starts to be gaps between markers. Losing the trail out here could be really dangerous. Every time we hit a gap, I let Chase and Deen feel for the trail, always keeping our last marker still in sight. We venture forward slowly. Whenever I see a broken off marker, I carefully set it up again so that the next teams can see where to go.

The farther we go, the more markers are down, sometimes three or four in a row. More and more often I have to get off the sled, walk forward, and hunt for signs of the trail. With the forming drifts, it is hard to know when I've gotten off trail and when I am just wading through a big mound that has blown in across the hard pack.

The dogs are patient and willing, but this is not the low-stress run I had been hoping for them! Between hunting for trail, cleaning the ice off the dogs' eyes, and crawling forward through the deepening snow, we are moving really slowly. Yet every time I locate a marker and light it up with my headlamp, the dogs move right out, aiming for that reflector, which represents safety.

We come to a place where I simply can't find the trail. The wind is blowing so hard I can only see a few dogs in the team. The snow is so deep I can't find any sign of trail. The dogs are hunkered down miserably, backs to the wind, and completely frustrated as we cast about for direction. I post-hole through the snow, searching for some indication of where to go, and I don't find it. I make ever widening circles, always keeping an eye behind me to make sure I don't lose track of my team. Luckily, my sled is striped with reflective tape and it lights up like a Christmas tree every time my headlamp washes over it.

I can't find anything. I work my way back to the team. I consider putting on my snowshoes to range farther out, but discard that idea as foolish - we can't be more than 50 feet away from the trail, I just have to figure out where it is. The dogs have clustered together in a miserable ball. Blowing snow is finding its way under their coats and plastering into their fur. It was right around zero degrees when we left Koyuk, but the temperature has dropped. Add in the howling wind, and there is a serious chance of frostbite or hypothermia if we don't get moving or get to shelter.

I decide to go for one last look, making a wide circle out in front of my dogs. I don't see even a hint of a marker. But as I stumble around way off to the right, I do trip over a frozen dog turd.

I've found the trail! I head straight back to my team, and now I find a couple of markers, blown over and covered in snow. I set the markers up and shine my light on them.

The team is starting to look a little less enthusiastic. Even when they spot the markers, I have to coax them up out of the snow and into the teeth of the wind again. My trail notes say that if you are having trouble finding the trail during a wind storm in the dark, STOP and wait it out at the shelter cabin. But I have no idea where the cabin is.

We make another half mile before we are again lost with no markers. I am starting to think we'd better quit and hunker down. But not here, in the wind-swept plain. We need to find shelter. Even trees would be helpful.

About that time, I see headlights coming my way. Snow machines! By now I don't care about the race, I want to take care of my dogs. I flag the snow machiners down. I ask them how far to Elim. They tell me it is a good long way. I ask if the wind is this bad the whole way and they say yeah. They look impatient. I tell them I am worried about my team, and ask if I can pay them to guide me to Elim. They say they don't have enough gas (although they could get more gas in Elim).

I ask how far to the shelter cabin. They say I passed it a few miles back. I never even saw it in the blowing white-out. I ask if they will at least guide me to the cabin. They say yes, and I ask them to wait while I turn the team around. I say they will need to go slowly so we can keep up, and they agree. As I go up to grab my leaders and turn around, they roar off into the night. I am floored. I can't believe they just took off. It's a good thing I'm not in serious trouble.

I know we can't stop where we are, and I hope we can at least follow the snow machine tracks. I quickly realize that the wind has already erased any signs they left behind. But I also realize that I have let the conditions overwhelm me. We are doing fine, and I know the trail is here somewhere, I just have to search it out. With renewed determination, we continue down the trail.

Truth to tell, I got a little flustered out there. It's easy to do at this stage in the race when you are exhausted and sleep deprived. I should have kept my head together and not gotten so worried. I can't believe my lack of faith almost led me to give up the race. True, my only concern was to take care of the dogs, but I feel like I let myself down. I learned a lot about how to handle a wind storm and about finding trail. I also learned a lot about keeping confidence on that run. Next time I will do better and remember how self-reliant I really am. Next time.

The wind doesn't let up, but the trail gets easier to follow. I am getting off the sled less frequently. After awhile I realize we must be on the long straight road up to the hills. This road is lined with cabins, fishing shacks, and boats, but in the white-out I can't make out a single thing.

I know there is only ten more miles to go, and my mood soars. We are going to beat this stupid wind storm! Before long we are following a plowed road and the dogs start loping. They seem to feel just fine. We crest the final hill and begin the long glide down to town.

We hit Elim at 1:00 in the morning. Even with all the stops and slow trail, we have made good time - a seven hour run. I know the teams behind me will have a much easier time, since I had set up dozens of markers to help guide them. Looking at times later, I see that they each took about an hour less than me. I just can't shake these guys!

Elim is all but deserted, and we are quickly parked. It is still pretty darn windy, and I work with some spare bales of straw to make wind blocks for each pair of dogs. They eat well and seem pretty energetic. But after two horrendous, challenging runs in a row, they are going to get a good long rest. The next leg is where we made our end last year. I can't take a chance of a repeat performance, so I am going to make darn sure the dogs are fired up to go. I get set for a long nap; we're not leaving until morning.

Leg 19 –Elim to White Mountain (44 miles)

Anytime a team quits on you, there is a real worry that they will decide to stop again. I want to come in to our problem spot, just past Golovin, with a strong and well rested team. Up front I want every good leader who wasn't with me last time; dogs I would have confidence in going right on by. This will be Mars, Mercedes, Lyra, and Bree. I want to feel great mentally and physically, and never let on that I have the slightest doubt that they will cruise on in to White Mountain. I am pretty sure we will, but there is always that tiny doubt. I'm pretending that doubt doesn't even exist.

We head out of Elim after a nice seven hour break. It is 8 in the morning and the dogs are happy and energetic. You would never know we just went through a seriously difficult run. I should probably take a clue from my dogs and realize it just wasn't that big a deal to them.

This year the trail leaves the checkpoint and veers left down the hill. After a little jaunt across an open area, we drop down a bench and are back on sea ice. My jaw drops. I can't believe it. For some reason I always thought Elim was way up in the mountains. But here it is, overlooking the beach. I guess because of the trees and hills, because you climb and climb and climb to get to Elim, and then when you leave Elim you usually climb into more hills, I had never noticed that it is actually right on the ocean!

All too soon we head up off the flat sea ice and start grinding up through the hills. This is the section with Little McKinley after all. It has some of the toughest climbing of the entire race. We are well rested and the dogs are strong. The hills don't seem nearly as steep or as long this year. We crest each ridge easily, and before I know it we are on the long descent into Golovin Bay.

We hit the sea ice again. I can never understand why this section, entirely on ice, is always a gradual sloping climb. We are on sea ice, it ought to be flat. But it isn't - it's a long slow rise.

The wind is, of course, blowing. The trail is bleak and wide open. It is nothing compared to what we've been through, but my leaders are not looking as dynamic as I want them to be.

I've had Mercedes and Lyra in lead the whole run, but Mercedes is really unfocused. Lyra isn't impressing me much either, but I figure with the right partner she will get a little more motivated. I stop and put Bree in lead, but she is up to her old tricks - absolutely head strong and

not listening to me a bit. She keeps wanting to veer down wind, and I am back to hollering "Gee" over and over. At this point I don't care if I ever say that word again. I swap in Mars. No luck. They are going along fine, and I know they will do it. But just to hedge all my bets, I am looking for some energy and determination to carry us through Golovin and right on up the bay.

Chase is barking his head off. He is one I really counted on last year and he quit on me, so I don't want to have him up front with any sneaky little ideas in his head. Chase turns to look at me as if to say, "Trust me; I can do this; I want this." He leans around the dogs in front of him to get a better view of the trail. He obviously wishes to be out front. I stop about a mile from Golovin and give him what he wants. I have to regain my faith sometime, and he has been absolutely incredible this whole race.

We dash through Golovin and back onto the ice. I refuse to believe anything except that we are going on-by. And so we do, right on by our trouble spot, and forward towards White Mountain. I don't even breathe a sigh of relief. I knew all along that we weren't going to stop!

It feels like we are trudging, but we are going forward and that is all that matters. I also remember that looks can be deceiving on this long, straight stretch of trail. Without any real landmarks, sometimes it seems like you are moving on a treadmill and never getting anywhere.

Eight miles from White Mountain we leave the wide open bay and start working up the Fish River. We get to the checkpoint at 2:30 p.m., after less than 6 1/2 hours on the trail. It wasn't a particular fast run for us compared to other nearby teams, but it really doesn't matter at this point. We are here.

Time for a nice long break. We've had a lot of those lately, but it's not like we are really racing anyway. The next closest team is over two hours behind us, and we are well behind any teams in front of us. We aren't going to have any company on the next (last!) run.

Leg 20 –White Mountain to Nome (77 miles)

My team looks rock solid. I've had these 12 dogs since dropping Spartan back in Nulato, almost 300 miles ago. Dogs go through ups and downs, just like I do. Chisel's wrist has been a real problem almost the entire race, although he always warms up and looks fine, and always pulls hard. Here in White Mountain I realize that, with care and treatment, it is getting much better. Cutter and Mercedes have both had times when they just didn't look as excited to be leading as usual, and other times when they were the strongest and most motivated dogs in the team. Aberdeen and Mars have been totally reliable all along, but they both looked a little flat running in to White Mountain - pulling, but not with their usual enthusiasm and energy. I've learned to watch the dogs and see what they tell me. As long as they still want to go down the trail and aren't holding us back, an off run or two is nothing to worry about.

We leave right on time at 10:30 p.m. It is a long run in to Nome, and I prepare myself to run all night. The weather couldn't be better; calm and cool, temperatures just about zero. Perfect for running. The dogs are trail hardened and feel strong.

After 30 minutes, the trail turns west and crosses through the Topkok Mountains . These "rolling hills" unfold one after another after another. They aren't too tall, but the short, steep little climbs just keep coming at you. There are very few landmarks in these hills, but one of them, the old A-frame cabin, flashes by before I know it.

We descend out of the hills and reach the shelter cabin, 30 miles out, after less than 4 hours. I am impressed with our pace. This is where the trail starts to parallel the open beach. I get out my wind pants and put them on in case the notoriously ferocious winds start up.

We hit some wind polished ice, and I vaguely remember that the trail goes along a frozen lagoon just behind the line of beach and driftwood. Except I can't see a single marker, just frozen polished glare ice. The dogs are slipping and scrambling all over the place and my sled is veering and slewing. I see a couple of scratch marks in the ice, and we carry forward, but the dogs have no idea where to aim, and I can't see another sign of trail. I thought this area was supposed to be heavily marked because of the dangerous white-outs that happen here?

I see some faint yellow reflectors up on the beach side. There are ancient old tri-pods scattered in with the drift wood. The footing is terrible, and the dogs are absolutely not heeding my instructions, just charging forward over whatever obstacles are there and heading in whatever direction they want to. I put Chase and Aberdeen up front - they seem most willing to follow my commands, but we are still lurching and veering all over the place. I need to find the trail! I recall dire warnings about never crossing the driftwood line because then you could become disoriented out on the sea ice. I argue with the dogs and get them back down on the slippery ice, but I still don't see any signs of where we are supposed to be.

I head them over to the other side of the lagoon, where the tundra rises up on to the hillside. There is no trail here either, but at least we can get our footing. I sweep my headlamp back and forth, looking for some sign of a reflector. I can see a good long way on this clear night, but I don't see even a wink. I turn the dogs and head up the hill to try to get a better view.

After quite a bit of searching, I turn the team back towards the shelter cabin, the last place we saw trail markers. I've only been here once, four years before, and I don't exactly remember where the trail goes. I would hate to guess and end up lost out here, this close to the finish. We've wasted a lot of time fumbling around.

We find our way back to the last markers. They are lined up and pointing straight down that lagoon, so I decide that is where we will head, trail or no. The dogs don't like the slippery ice any better than they did before, and I let them hug the bank where they can at least keep their feet under them. After a bit I see a flattened trail marker out in the ice. Bulls eye! We may not be right on the trail, but we are headed in the right direction. After that more and more markers show up, most of them knocked flat, but a few brave sentinels still standing. Chase is really starting to get the hang of leading the team across tractionless ice, and is starting to try to follow the markers. He is even learning to look for the reflection from the ones laying flat on the ice. We pick up speed.

Finally we get off the lagoon and the dogs take off loping. We enter a long alley of giant log tripods, decked out in reflectors. Any time you see this many markers, it is an indication of how bad the weather might get. But it is almost still and calm, so I figure our trip across might be quick and easy.

The trail is wide and well used. It is also contouring along the hillside. Nothing is more annoying than trying to balance a sled that wants to slide sideways down a hill. For miles. I have all my weight off to the right, and I am pulling with everything I have to keep my sled almost on one runner. My arms start to feel like I am waterskiing.

At some point I realize the wind has picked up. A lot. It is blowing us sideways too, increasing the difficulty of keeping the sled where it belongs. It is blowing snow. Lots of snow. Good thing for all these enormous markers!

After a few hours we leave the wind and sidehill behind, cross the Solomon River, and begin climbing towards Safety Roadhouse. I don't remember the endless climb from last time I was here. It is not steep, but there is no let up for hours. The dogs are willing, but not exactly enthusiastic. Aberdeen doesn't look like he is excited about being in lead. I put him back with Mars, who also seems a little flat. Hatchet goes up front. I'm not worried about them quitting on me, but dang this is a long haul. And we still have a long way to go. I pump and peddle some, but after awhile my dizziness starts increasing again. I make myself eat and drink. More importantly, I make myself sit back and let the dogs do the work.

The dogs are moving right along, but this has already been a good long run. I don't want them to even think about stopping at Safety. I fish out my bib and struggle in to it as we go down the trail. This way all I need to do is sign in, sign out, and barely even stop moving. We hit Safety at 6 in the morning and blow right through. The trail is supposed to take the easy road around Cape Nome, but as I sign the checkpoint log the checker lets me know that the trail has been re-routed and we are going to have to do one last gut-wrenching climb. At least we only have 22 miles to go!

The trail keeps climbing gradually for another hour and a half. I think about which dogs should take the honor of leading the team across the finish line. They have all done an incredible job, each one taking their turn at different times. Chase is an obvious choice. Every time the going got tough he stepped up to the plate. I am also completely impressed with Hatchet's toughness and drive. His brother Cutter is a spectacular leader and always gets more attention, but Hatchet has a real grit and desire that I want to honor. I put Bree and Lyra up front just to give the boys a little break. I want to make sure they are really gunning when we come down to town.

The girls take the lead strongly, and we hit the final push. Cape Nome is an imposing 700 foot tall hill, and the trail heads straight up the back side of it for a couple of miles. The dogs slow to a trudge. We stop frequently for breathers. They are always ready and willing as soon as I say let's go. Trouble and Chase are, as usual, barking. Flip and Fly are hammering their harnesses back in wheel, and the whole team is working like a well-oiled machine.

When we crest the big hill and can see the lights of Nome, I ask the team to stop. I get off the sled and give each dog a hug and tell them we are as good as there. I put Chase and Hatchet back in lead, and with a lump in my throat we dash down the steep face of the hill all the way back to sea level.

We have 15 more miles to go, the sun is rising, and it is a beautiful morning. We can see the lights of town forever and they never seem to get any closer. The dogs maintain their steady pace, and we slowly eat away at those last few miles. Even as we enter town, they don't speed up, just keep their steady trot. The last few miles along the beach are more sidehill, and my arms are pulling out of the socket. I can barely wave at the passing cars and cheering people above us on the road.

We leap up the embankment and on to Front Street. It is 9:30 in the morning, and everyone is out to see yet another team finish. Hatchet takes one look at the cars and crowds and looks for an escape route. No way is he going to take us the last 1/2 mile through this circus. We are in the middle of the paved and plowed road, cars and people all around. A dump truck driver patiently waits for us to get out of the way. The rest of the dogs are jumping and barking, excited to finish up. Hatchet, who bravely led through wind storms, hill climbs, and jumble ice, flatly refuses to have anything to do with this mess.

There is nowhere to set a hook, so I tell the dogs to whoa and hope for the best. Cutter is yapping his head off, and I quickly clip him in to lead and put Hatchet near the back. The entire time I am asking the team to whoa, and they are jerking the sled forwards, but they don't completely take off. By the time I'm done the dogs are in one great big ball. But as I move back towards my sled, the tangle magically unravels, and I have to grab the sled as it goes by. That was a great trick!

Up ahead are crowds of cheering, waving people. There are TV cameras, microphones, mushers, friends, race officials, family, all there to greet us. It doesn't matter that we are way back in the pack - 36th place. If you finish Iditarod, you get a big welcome under the arch!

The dogs are rolling around, enjoying the attention. Half of them have been here before, and they know we are done. Fly, Trouble, and Chase are barking their heads off. They obviously still have plenty of energy, but it is time for a nice long rest.

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One more note about running Iditarod. Most of this description is about where we went, what it was like, and what happened next. After reading it over, I think it is missing a real sense of the connection and almost constant interaction with the dogs. As we go down the trail I am constantly talking to them, checking in with them. As we run, I am constantly scanning the team, watching each one closely, observing their movement, their energy, their attitude.. Every time I stop and walk down the line, for whatever reason, I am touching, caressing, playing, and interacting with the dogs, and they with me. Each time I replace a bootie or adjust a dog coat is a chance to pet my dogs, have a quick conversation. At every checkpoint, each dog gets individual attention. If I ever thought I had an intense bond with my pet dogs in the past, it is nothing compared to the connection that develops with teammates on a journey like Iditarod.

If anyone wants to know why I put myself through all this, the months of preparation, the financial hardships, the struggle of running a 1,000 mile race - it's right there, looking up into my eyes with love and trust.