

Iditarod 2013 Recap

My long time fans know that these little stories of mine contain all the nitty gritty details and tend to get sort of long. Let me know what you think and what information I could add (or delete) to make this more interesting. Enjoy! Keep in touch!

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In 2011 I had an incredible, blazing run in the front of the pack all the way to Golovin, where my rocket burnt out and never re-lit. In 2012 I ran a very safe and conservative race and made sure to finish. Finishing is always a good thing, but it is hard for someone as competitive as I am to feel great about finishing in the middle of the pack. This year I really wanted to push a little harder (but not so hard that we would flame out again!)

Early in the season it became apparent that I might not have the team to do any pushing with. Same dogs (essentially), same training methods, same equipment, same preparation. But in all of our mid-distance races we were slow, slow, slow. Also, we were plagued by injuries the entire season, starting in the fall, and continuing all the way up until just before Iditarod.

And so I decided to take it as it comes, watch my dogs, do what I could. I revised my goals.

1. **Finish.** There is almost no situation that I can't overcome with some thought and determination, so I won't even allow myself to consider scratching, no matter the circumstances. I created a focus phrase to use in times of trouble. It was: "You can handle this". I know I am tough, determined, and capable. I know I can handle whatever comes my way. Having this little mantra in my mind helped me to stop fretting and start working on solutions.
2. **Have fun!** Enjoy the trip, the time with the dogs, the entire race. I love so many things about Iditarod. The amazing terrain we travel and the beautiful wildness of it all. The incredible people we get to know on the trail and in the checkpoints. The power of overcoming such inconceivable challenges. And most of all, working as a team with my dogs - my wonderful, amazing, inspiring dogs.

Still, there is a lot of time out on that race to sit and think, to let your mind drift, to obsess over problems that you can't solve when you are in the middle of running Iditarod.

I have spent the last four years in a 'last chance' mode. Every year the financial struggle of feeding and racing these dogs seems impossible, every year the task of getting the team ready to run seems impossible, every year I live with the knowledge that this is likely my last year running dogs. Thinking about not running dogs makes it hard to breathe. Making mental plans for what to do with each of my beloved dogs is a form of pure self torture. This year (with some help) I realized that no, I am not getting out of dogs any time soon. I will find a way to do it (I can handle this!), and I need to quit agonizing about it. I still may not know how I am going to make it happen, but I **will** make it happen. What a relief to let go of that pain!

This year I made a conscious decision to stop any thoughts that weren't about right here, right now, and instead to focus on my surroundings, my dogs, and the wonder of being out in it all.

3. **Be fun.** Or, as Brandi Carlile's [song](#) says, "make myself a blessing to everyone I meet". We get so tired and exhausted out on the trail that it can be hard to stay cheerful. But I never want to be one of those mushers who is cranky or rude to the checkers, vets, officials, volunteers, villagers, other mushers, or anyone else out on the trail. Instead, I want people out there to remember me for good reasons; because I was appreciative, pleasant, kind, maybe even silly. Because I took time out to thank them, compliment them, or just say hi. I want to be memorable for good reasons.

Notes about Racing

If you aren't already familiar with checkpoint routines, the challenges of eating and drinking out on the trail, and how we take care of our dogs, check out these links to information on my website. It will help you follow along on the story.

- [Food and Drink on the Trail – for Dogs](#)
- [Food and Drink on the Trail – for the Musher](#)
- [Checkpoint Routine](#)

The Line Up

I started the year in September with 31 dogs in harness. OK, we can't really count Barley the pit bull, even though he does get harnessed up and run with the team. That is, he runs with the team up until we reach 20 mile runs. About that time we have to sit him down and explain to him that he really isn't a sled dog, that his poor feet are too small, that his massive body is too heavy, that his huge head is too big a weight to lug around, that he just can't keep up with these elite athletes anymore. His heart and soul are willing, but his body just isn't built for distance. He pouts and denies it. He becomes destructive and hysterical. To protect him (and our house) he gets locked in a crate whenever a team is being hooked up and he is not going along.

And we shouldn't really count the Broncos litter, Elway, Shanahan, and McCaffrey. They were only 10 months old when we started training, and are much too young to be considered part of the race team. Their goal for the year was to learn the ropes and gain some experience at some mid-distance races.

So anyway, I started the year in September with 27 contenders in harness. And then things started happening. Normal things like injuries from deep, punchy, rain-rotten snow or slipping on ice. Completely bizarre problems, like Doc managing to get hit by a car going full speed on the highway. (He sustained no injuries beyond severe bruising, but boy was he sore. And if you saw it happen, like I did, you would have been convinced that was the end of him.) Then there was the heart breaking, unexpected loss of Azure due to a sudden and massive infection. The injuries and issues just kept piling up, until at the end of the year every dog that wasn't out for the season had some issue to put their place on the roster in jeopardy.

By the time March rolled around, there wasn't much left to choose from. I had only five dogs that were strong, motivated, capable, and had been injury free all winter: Mercedes, Bree, Alis, Luna, Lyra. FIVE!! All leaders, to be sure, but some of my smaller, less powerful dogs as well.

Shanahan, McCaffrey, Razor, Voodoo, Mars, Shotgun, Fly, and Halo were all out due to various injuries at various stages of recuperation. My super happy, hard working, sturdy, bomb-proof Fly pulled a shoulder muscle just the week before Iditarod.

Cerveza, with her thin coat, had really struggled with frost bite last season, and I was reluctant to put her at risk in a long, tough race. Little did I know that cold would be the least of our problems this year!

I made the difficult decision to retire Deja after watching her struggle to keep up all season. She is a tiny fireball of drive and athleticism, but she is barely half the size of some of my bigger, faster dogs.

And Helix. Poor messed up, sweet Helix. He was born on my lap, raised gently and kindly, and even spent a summer at a tour camp, where he got lots of loving attention from many people. He adores me, he adores Varan. Yet for some reason he is terrified of strangers. Not just a little scared - peeing, writhing, panicking, hysterically scared. As he has gotten older, his terror has grown instead of diminishing, despite all our efforts. At only two years of age, his race career is over before it can even start. Besides being unfair to continually scare the bejeezus out of him by forcing him to deal with handlers, vets, checkers, and the myriad of other people involved in racing, it would also be race-ending for me if he spooked at a checkpoint and fled the scene. So he is out.

All the rest, all of my big, powerful males, all my determined, trail-wise, tough dogs, most of my top leaders were on the *maybe* list. Most of the *maybes* were due to minor injuries, hopefully healed up. In these cases, if you really want the dog on your team (and I really wanted these dogs on my team - they were my whole team), you hope for the best, take good care of them, and send them right home if they show any signs of problems.

Flip, Trouble, Hatchet, Doc, Cutter, and Harp were pretty strong *maybes*. They had all healed up from various minor injuries at some point during the season.

Chisel very creatively managed to bang his hind leg on his house, and came up swollen and limping dreadfully just a few weeks before Iditarod. Even with time off, rest inside in the warm house, and massage, it took over a week before he quit limping and got back to running. Taking a dog with a recently healed injury is always a gamble because they are pretty good at faking it when maybe they need a little more time off.

Chase and Aberdeen, two of my best and most experienced and trusted leaders, were both suffering from re-occurring shoulder injuries. They were still looking stiff right before Iditarod. Even though they looked good in our final run on Friday before the race, it seemed unlikely that they could go all the way this year. But I really needed Chase and Aberdeen - their wisdom and experience, and the trust and teamwork we've developed over so many miles together. I was

willing to take the chance and put in the extra time caring for them in the hopes that they would see me through.

Spartan was injury free, and he is a humongous, hard pulling workhorse. For 500 miles or so. But in both of the last two years I have had to haul his enormous carcass in the sled when he flat out refused to carry on down the trail, despite being healthy, well rested, and in great shape. I had decided I did not want to deal with his nonsense again, but given my dog shortage, I had to rethink that idea. I could count on Spartan working hard for at least half the race.

Elway wasn't even on the list - he was too young to consider. But he had been having an amazing season. At just 14 months old he had already completed 500 miles of racing, and loved every minute of it. His strength and amazing attitude really impressed me and I was seriously considering taking him. Then two weeks before Iditarod he hurt his foot badly. Somehow he cut a slice clean off his rear pad. I slathered it with ointment and kept it covered in a bootie, and didn't let him run until the day before Iditarod. I figured if the cut didn't keep him from running, the loss of conditioning would, but he still wasn't out of the running. While I wouldn't push a young dog hard and it was likely he would go home early, I liked the idea of him gaining some Iditarod experience.

Sable is an incredibly strong, hard pulling dog. She is an amazing member of the team on shorter races. But at five years of age, she still hasn't learned to properly take care of herself out on the trail. She doesn't eat, doesn't drink enough, and doesn't pace herself. After a few hundred miles she is worn out, tired, droopy, and miserable.

If you were following along, you will see that I had those five fit and healthy dogs, plus twelve *maybes*. That only makes 17. I had to figure out quickly which of the maybes was the maybiest of all, and hope like heck that the rest would be ok. I hate it when I have to make decisions like this. After spending every minute of my time and every penny I had (actually lots more pennies than I had; that is why they make credit cards), after working my butt off and struggling so hard for the entire season, I barely had a team. Instead of being in the position of choosing my top team members, I was having to select the one dog I thought would do the worst.

I was frustrated but I reminded myself I can handle this. I thought hard, weighed my options, and made my choice. It had to be Sable. There were lots of dogs that might not be able to go all the way, but she had the least to offer in terms of leadership, experience, or cheerleading energy. So she was off, and everyone else with four solid legs was in!

In spite of my concerns for our durability, this was a team full of experienced, capable veterans. Twelve of the sixteen had finished Iditarod; Luna, Harp, and Spartan had each been at least half way. The only true rookie was baby Elway. To top it off, a tremendous count of eleven dogs were a bona fide, proven race leaders. So I had my team, and we were set to go!

The 2013 Iditarod team



Aberdeen



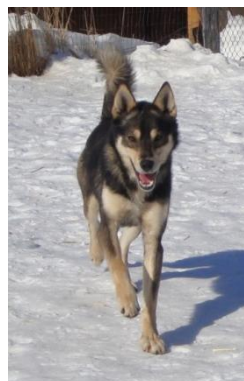
Alis



Bree



Chase



Chisel



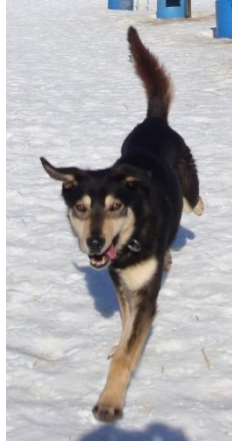
Cutter



Doc



Elway



Flip



Harp



Hatchet



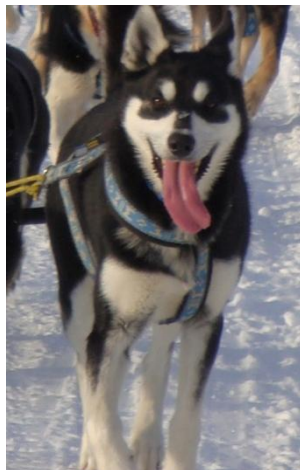
Luna



Lyra



Mercedes



Spartan



Trouble

Anchorage Ceremonial Start

Saturday's parade through Anchorage is always a weird combination of fun and annoying distraction. Miriam (our super helper this year), the dogs, and I drive to town the night before and stay with friends. We aren't very good guests - we come in late after attending some Iditarod events and leave early to get to the start.

Varan meets us on Fourth Avenue, where the teams all line up to begin the race. They make us get there ridiculously early. Our start time isn't until almost 11:00, but we have to be there before 8:00. That is three hours for the dogs to get more and more wound up, and for us to fidget and get antsy.

We drop the dogs (let them out of their boxes) as soon as we get there and feed them, then leave them down for a while to stretch, pee, and goof around. By the time the crowds thicken and it gets more chaotic, they are ready to chill out back in their cozy dog boxes. After putting the dogs up, we head off to get a reindeer hotdog for breakfast. It's a tradition, and a delicious one!

The place is a complete circus. There are fans wanting autographs and pictures, media wanting interviews, bizarrely dressed tourists wanting directions, noisy children wanting a little discipline. There are pet dogs (!), sled dogs, spectators, and mushers all chattering at once. The streets are cluttered with snow fence, porta potties, dog trucks, sleds, and eight inches of sugary snow that is like trying to walk in deep beach sand. There are airplanes, helicopters, loudspeakers, and politicians all adding to the noise. There are people selling souvenirs, popcorn, programs, hot dogs, and hot chocolate. It is loud and it is hectic. For the dogs, it is incredibly exciting.

There is an unending stream of officials coming by, chip checkers to verify which dogs we have; the pee team who collects samples from the dogs for drug tests; the person who tells us our start time; the person who hands out our official bibs; and the person who checks to see how many volunteer handlers we want. The answer to that question is always none. I feel bad, because the volunteer handlers are all very well meaning and truly excited to help. But I prefer not to have rookie helpers at this point – too many scenarios for disaster. We bring our own.

We still have plenty of time to kill. After wiping off the mustard, we unload all the gear. There is a surprising amount of stuff needed for this Anchorage performance. We unstrap two sleds from the roof of the trailer and lower them to the snow. We tie the main sled off on the trailer, and connect the second sled (we call it a whip-sled because it really cracks the whip around corners) behind the first. We lay out the gangline and snap leashes to each section. We put a cushion in the main sled for the rider, and a large bag of 'trash' booties (too worn out or full of holes to use) to throw at the crowds. We set out booties, harnesses, and the clipboard with the lineup for today's run.

All that, and still, we wait for our time. We wander around, visit with other mushers, and double check our gear. We fidget. We check our watches. Finally, about 40 minutes before our start, we drop the dogs again, this time to get them ready.

I find it very bizarre to be a 'celebrity', to have people ask for autographs and pictures. I just want to run my dogs. But the truth is, we need sponsors, so we need to be recognized and visible. Every year there are about a million pictures in the media and posted on-line of the well known and popular mushers - and very few, if any, of me and my team. I am determined to change that this year. It's a parade, I decide, so let's have a little fun. All of the handlers helping with our team wear bright blue leis. Miriam and I wave trail markers with clusters of blue and silver ribbons fluttering behind us. At the last minute, my friend Gina convinces me to wear her ridiculous blue and black dreadlock hat. We make quite a picture going down the trail. Not that it seems to get us any extra recognition, but we have a good time!

The run through Anchorage is surreal, as usual. We run dogs (most of us) because we like to be way out away from cities and people. We like the solitude, the quiet, the wilderness. And here we are, running down city streets and bike paths surrounded by thousands of cheering people.

Finally, the run comes to an end. We load the dogs, and get the heck out of the city. There is still plenty to do to prepare the race sled and load up all the equipment for the main event.

Leg 1- Willow to Skwentna (72 miles)

If Saturday is a bit of a headache, Sunday is almost relaxing. We live close to the start and we don't have to be there until noon. We sleep in. We have a leisurely breakfast. We tend to the dogs. Then finally we get into race mode and load up.

It is ridiculously warm; too warm for my parka. Usually when it is hot out, I wear just my old black Wiggys liner jacket. It has seen lots of abuse and has survived a couple of attacks from snow hooks. A few months before Iditarod, my friend Mariah found a brand new Wiggy's jacket at a thrift store, and gave it to me. It is a great replacement, except for the fact that is bright purple. It's puffy roundness makes me look just like a grape going down the trail.

The start is a zoo, just like every other year. My trusty handlers get us to the line in fine fashion, and then it is up to me and the dogs. Leaving the starting line, there is a long alley all the way across the lake. It is fenced off with red snow fence and there are spectators piled up ten deep on either side. Down the middle of the alley is a deep trench, grooved out from the brakes of all the other teams that left before us. On either side of the trench is a sort of 'sidewalk' of smooth unmarked snow.

My dogs know about sidewalks. Every time we cross our local roads, we run alongside the road on the stepped bank made by the plow trucks. They are never supposed to step foot off that sidewalk and into the road. So my leaders, Chase and Cutter, know just what to do now. They guide the team, at Mach speed, right up next to the fence. We roar along within inches of the reaching fans, and I giggle the whole way.

We quickly leave the upper benches of Willow and drop down onto the river system. For Alaskans, Iditarod is a celebration of winter, spring, and cabin fever all at once. The entire first leg of the race, from Willow to Yentna and beyond, is packed with people out enjoying the day and cheering on the mushers. It is almost as crazy as Anchorage. Sun or blizzard, 40 above or 40 below, the people come out to wish us well. This year almost half of the people along the route

know that my name is Karin, not Karen. I must be getting famous if they are getting my name right!

The dogs are really strong and happy, even though it is very warm. I make them stop to cool off regularly. The first run is always a dance of teams weaving in and out of the branches of trail, stopping, not stopping, running hard, trotting slowly, sorting out our various places in the tightly bunched pack. We blow into Yentna, sign the obligatory gazillion posters, and carry on down the trail. We start to pass teams bedded down next to the trail. I like to go all the way into Skwentna before we stop, but I'm thinking about the plusses and minuses of stopping before. I am always thinking about next year!

We reach Skwentna just before 10:30 at night, after less than a 7 1/2 hour run. The dogs settle down quickly and I get them taken care of before I head up for a meal. It is awfully crowded and hot in the checkpoint cabin, just about impossible to sleep. I doze for maybe half an hour before I give up and head back to my dogs.

On the way through the parked teams, I watch a musher trying to get her team going. They are not cooperating at all, and her leaders keep running back into the team. I grab the front of the line and hold them out for a few minutes while the musher untangles and gets set. Then I run the leaders out in the correct direction as they take off. As she flies by me, finally heading down the trail, I realize it is Kelly Griffin's very experienced but energetic team acting so wild. I hope my dogs are a little more cooperative when it is our turn to leave.

We stop for just 6 hours, leaving at 4:20 in the morning (I don't think the checkers recorded our out time, because the updates showed my out time 20 minutes later. I was pretty sure I didn't miss my planned rest by that much, so I double checked it against the tracker). Our run:rest ratio is 1.2; very conservative, which is fine this early and after such a hot run.

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

Due to the warm temperatures and rain, the usual trail from Skwentna up through Onestone Lake has been re-routed to the original Iditarod trail across Shell Lake. We saw this trail during the Northern Lights Race, and it is just as twisty and narrow as I remember. The dogs are moving beautifully in the cool morning air, but I know we are going to be stuck with temperatures above freezing for at least the first few days of this race.

We pull into Finger Lake a little after 9:30 in the morning. The sun is up, it's a beautiful clear day, and there is Karen Ramstead to greet us. She isn't racing this year, but she couldn't stay away. Her checkpoint is organized and efficient. We have a hilarious discussion as she explains the difference between Karen and Karin to the other volunteers. As I grab Heet and straw to take down the trail, she fills me in on what is going on in the race. Martin ran all the way to Rohn without a break! We both shake our heads at this wild strategy. After just a few minutes I wave goodbye and we are on our way again.

As we get farther down the trail, the checkpoints get a little less hectic. But the teams are still bunched up and all crammed in together this early in the race. Plus there are a lot more tourists and aircraft traffic this close in. Skwentna is usually not too bad because we are there at night,

but I try to avoid the circus that is Finger Lake and Rainy Pass. It's only about another 10 miles to the Happy River Steps, where I plan to let the dogs rest in the sunshine.

We make good time through the rolling hills, and then we head over the edge of the steps. On the first switch back I see that Elway has managed to wrap his tugline around his hind leg. I know that once we whip around this corner, we are going to pick up speed rapidly. There is a good chance his leg will be seriously wrenched if he has to make it all the way to the bottom like this. I shout at the dogs to whoa, somehow manage to get them stopped, and stomp my hooks down. There is no way they are going to hold; I throw my sled over on top of the hooks and hope that will help.

I am pretty sure the dogs are going to rip the hooks out and take off without me any second. I dread trying to negotiate the Steps with an overturned sled that is dragging hooks. It's a recipe for disaster. Just as I leap forwards to go help Elway, I see two teams rushing up behind me. I start hollering at them to whoa, with no idea if they will even be able to stop. It is the worst possible place for teams to collide; on a blind corner, on a steep hill, with a precipice off to one side. Apologizing as I scramble towards Elway, I see the teams behind me stop just in time. I bet they are not too happy with me.

I get El's leg freed, sprint back towards my sled, and rock it up with my feet already in place on the runners. We're off! I grab frantically for my two dangling hooks as we shoot down the drop to the next hairpin turn. Somehow I manage to get everything set and squared away just as we scrape over the final drop off, and I'm airborne. It is a looong flight to the bottom, and it is a hard landing. I am grateful I managed to rescue Elway, because that rough trail would have been the end of his run.

We hit the Happy River at about 11:15, and there is nowhere to park! There is deep snow, and no snow machine tracks off to the side at our usual place. It's possible to snowshoe a little trail, but not with a fresh team that won't cooperate. A hundred yards farther on, Wade Marrs and Kelly Griffin are pulled over on a side trail, but they've taken all the available spots. I pull up and ask Wade if there is anywhere to pull over just up ahead. He doesn't think so, but he very kindly grabs my leaders and helps me park the team off to the side in the deep, unsolidified snow.

It is nice to have Wade's company as we take care of our dogs and settle in to rest. We talk about the trail, our dogs, and how things are going. Wade has a little speaker set and has music playing. We chat with other mushers as they go by. We laugh in disbelief at the mosquitoes that buzz around - yes, it is that warm. I give Kelly a hand getting her team lined out to take off, and help Jessica Hendricks park just past my team. I share some of my batteries with her. It is a genial little encampment we have going here!

It seems to take forever to get my snow melted into hot water. In fact, it is taking forever. The cooker is not drawing air well. It worked fine all season, but things always seem to happen out on the trail. Once I finally get the dogs fed, I go to work on solving the problem; I am going to need this cooker again, and I might not have the luxury of bright sun and good weather to work on it. The cooker has a ring of aluminum flashing that holds the burner up closer to the bottom of the cook pot. I notice that the flashing is pressed up close to the air holes in the outer bucket. I

have a new burner, and it is just slightly larger than the old one, taking up more space and blocking the holes. I could discard the burner lift entirely, but it does actually help make the process more efficient. I take out my multi-tool and use the knife blade to cut the aluminum down several inches. That does the trick - the cooker works like a champ the rest of the race.

The entire time at the Happy River, I am hampered by a sore and stiffening knee. I don't remember hitting it, but obviously I smacked it pretty good in the scramble up on the Steps. The pain is breathtaking, and I can barely put weight on it. In the back of mind I am a little concerned about whether I can make it all the way to Nome with a knee like this, but I don't let the idea fully form. I've been here before, so I will wait and see how things develop. In the stress and exhaustion of the race, painful injuries can fade into the background. In this case, my knee remains ridiculously sore, but never slows me down too much.

We ran 7 hours from Skwentna to our camp spot, and I plan to rest for 4. This cuts the dogs short on rest a tiny bit, and I usually make it up by giving them a bit more rest at our next stop. Jessica and Wade and I all discuss how hot it is, and mull over our schedules. Eventually I decide to give them a total of 6 hours rest instead. This will keep us right on our 1.2 ratio, and put our departure later in the day when things are beginning to cool down. As we wait, team after team passes by, and I know we are well and truly at the back of the pack now. It doesn't feel great, but I hope we are setting ourselves up for a good run in cooler temperatures.

It is bright daylight. I make myself lay down, but I can't drop off to sleep. Teams keep pattering by on the trail next to my sled. We finally head out at 5:15 in the evening. It's still bright and sunny, but it will begin to cool down soon.

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

The trail is slow and sticky. We don't exactly charge up the hills towards Finnbear Lake, but there is a lot to be said for steady forward motion, and the dogs are working happily.

Approaching Rainy Pass the trail is in great shape. The brush has been beaten back, and the side-hill sections are almost flat. Even though the trail is kind, we really are trudging. It takes us 2 1/2 hours to get to Rainy Pass, and I know we've done it in the past in only two. Still, the trail is great, the scenery is spectacular, and I'm enjoying being on the trail with my amazing partners.

We check through Rainy without stopping except to sign in and exchange greetings with the checkers. The dogs do a good job running down the alley between row after row of nice, inviting straw. We start climbing over rolling, open terrain. In the beginning we make great time because the dogs are really starting to perk up as the sun goes down. The trail is nice and well packed.

After an hour or so, we start to run through soft spots, where previous teams have broken up the snow. At first there were just a few, but soon we are hitting more and more soft spots, until the trail just basically gives way to a sugary, bottomless mess. The dogs thrash through it up to their elbows. They fall in holes, they claw back up on top only to punch through in a staggering lurch. The sled isn't so much sliding behind them as dragging along, up to its belly in soft snow. The team is working hard and is cheerful, but I wince every time one of them flounders. I know they are wearing themselves out. The thrashing around goes on for hours.

We may be low on power, but the dogs are feeling good and not interested in taking any breaks. They really get animated when we see a loose dog running down the trail. At first all I can see are its glowing eyes as it lopez straight towards us. I figure another musher had a tangle or some other problem and their dog ran off. I hope I can catch it, or at least convince it to follow us and help it reunite with its team. Losing a dog is a disaster! It runs right toward the team and my dogs pick up speed, even as they stagger through another bottomless hole. At the last minute the strange dog flicks its tail and swoops away, just under my leader's noses. It was a fox, and a really brave one, playing games like that! My dogs thought it was wonderful, and try to pick up the pace, even though the footing is horrible.

Getting over this section of trail before too many others is one good reason not to stop and rest so long at Happy. Actually, I spend plenty of time re-thinking my first few runs. They are always right around 8 hours long. That's fairly long for early in the race, but they've always put me in good position in the past. It doesn't seem to have been a very good strategy this time. We are paying hard for being so far back.

The dark descends. It is really dark. There is a gloomy overcast, with no moon, no stars, no northern lights. Instead of reflecting back off the snow, my headlight seems swallowed by the dark. I strain my eyes to pick out the trail ahead.

It seems like it takes forever to get to the big drop that takes us into Dalzell Gorge. I keep trying to note landmarks for future runs, and I keep abandoning them in my mind as we wend farther and farther along. Finally we hit the chute and dump out in the steep walled canyon. The Gorge seems shorter than ever before. Despite some ominous pre-race trail reports of ten foot shelf ice and drop-offs, this part of the trail is in excellent shape. All the ice bridges are holding up well, and we glide down through the twists and turns easily. I enjoy the challenge, even as I hold myself ready for disaster. There are already stories filtering back of teams sliding into the water and bridges collapsing, so you never know when 'tricky' will turn into 'treacherous'.

The trail suddenly pops out of the Gorge and onto the wide, flat Tatina River. I always remember these last five miles as taking forever, but the dogs gallop into Rohn before I am even ready.

Our total run was not quite eight hours, and I decided to rest for seven. I know the more competitive mushers would cut it much shorter, but these dogs are not burning up the trail. If I keep them chugging along I am hoping they will pick up steam farther along.

Doc had a tiny little head bob coming in to the checkpoint. When we take a closer look, his wrist is swelled up and very sore. I get him unharnessed, cuddle him into a dog coat, slather on liniment, massage it well, and wrap his wrist up tight. I'll let him have a good meal and rest with his buddies before I drop him off with the vets to fly home.

Aberdeen looked a little off to me, too, but I can't narrow down any specific problem. I massage his shoulder and tuck him into a dog coat. I also take time to put a shoulder warming coat on Chase, complete with chemical handwarmers over the shoulder muscles. I started doing this at the first checkpoint, and I will continue throughout most of the race, just as a precaution. Chase

is just too important to our success not to take a few minutes. The first few times I put the coat on him, he is pretty uncooperative. He doesn't want to stick his legs through the armholes of the wrap, and flops bonelessly on the straw to make it as difficult as possible. By about Takotna, though, I notice he has started helping me get that coat on, so maybe he decided that extra coziness was not so bad after all.

My cooker is roaring like a furnace, and it takes no time at all to melt snow this time. I plan ahead and make a second meal for later. It is so warm out that I don't have to worry about it freezing. It takes me an hour and a half to take care of the dogs, including special attention for Aberdeen, Chase, and Doc, making a second meal, and repacking for our next run. I will need an hour and a half to get myself up and ready and hit the trail. Seven hours is a long time to rest, and I have an astounding four hours to sleep. I head inside the cabin and crawl up on an upper bunk. I toss and turn and fade in and out, but I never seem to drop off long enough to lose the thread of conversation around me. I know I am going to regret not sleeping, but there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it. Finally it is time to get up and get moving, and I am just as glad; loitering around watching other teams leave is getting frustrating.

Leg 4- Rohn to the middle of the Farewell Burn (32 miles)

We leave at 8:00 a.m. The dogs scream along down a rutted, dirty trail. I can't use my brake effectively because of the lack of snow, and the dogs are taking full advantage of it. Even as we careen along and I dance and dive to keep the runner side down, I can enjoy the breathtaking beauty. The mountains are simply stunning, and the muted sunrise, muffled by clouds, gives the entire scene a pearly, soft glow. This is why we race!

I breathe a sigh of contentment, and splat! I'm hit full in the mouth with sloppy, fresh poop. In all my years of mushing, this has never happened to me. Gravity tends to work just fine out on the trail, and the dog's deposits tend to land on the ground. Not on the sled and NOT on me. But the semi-hysterical dogs are digging hard. Chisel, running in wheel, closest to the sled, has managed to fling a great wad off the trail and right up into my face.

There is a moment of stunned disbelief, and then I begin laughing. I can't help it, it is too ridiculous to be surrounded by breathtaking beauty and then be hit with a face full of reality. I try to wipe the mess off my lips and out of my nostrils. It takes several minutes of work, and a little cat-bath with my lemonade before I feel relatively poop-free. Then of course my gloves are completely filthy and stinking to high heaven, so I must dig out my spares and get them on. All this while we rollick down a twisty, rocky, potholed trail that rightfully should have my full attention.

The trail pops out of the trees and banks, and wends its way along the Post River. All the warm weather has slicked over the ice with a slippery glaze of smooth re-frozen melt water. I spend most of my time trying to control my sideways slip without jarring the dogs off their tenuous grip on the ice. Luckily, the skating rink portion of this run is fairly short.

We skirt the side of the glacier this year, and no one would ever know what a perilous place this is most years. The worst part is jolting across the barren cobbles and boulders at the top. The next area is windswept and barren, full of charred trees and deadfalls. We skip across frozen dirt

and short patches of sketchy snow. The trail crew has done a lot of work to clear fallen trees. Some of the logs are still sticking into the trail, but they are easy to avoid. Or so I think.

I drive a tail dragger sled - one where I stand in between a small front sled bag and a rear caboose storage area. This puts my weight right in the middle of the sled. Having the weight in the middle is one of the reasons my sled is so easy to handle and so responsive. But it does mean that it pivots under my weight. So if I jerk the front of the sled hard to the right, the back of the sled will swing to the left. I sort of understood this concept without really thinking about it, but it has never been much of an issue until now.

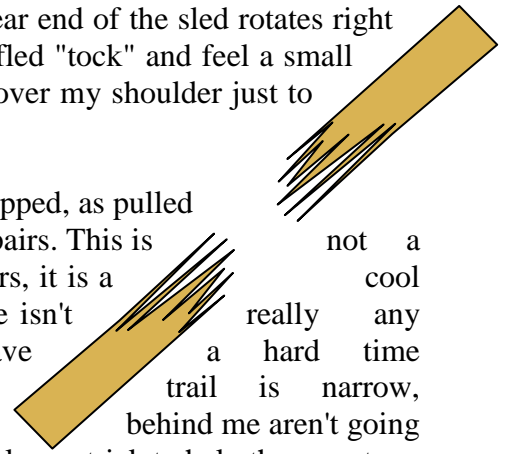
As we rush along over the dusty trail I spotted a large overhanging cut off log, just about hip height, and on the inside of a corner. As the dogs round the corner, the sled pulls toward the inside farther than I expect, right towards the overhanging log. I yank my sled hard over, and the log misses the handle bar and me with room to spare. But the rear end of the sled rotates right under it, and I feel the handle bar kiss off the log. I hear a muffled "tock" and feel a small jolt, but it is so minute that I figure I got away clean. I glance over my shoulder just to make sure, and the air rushes out of my lungs.

The main stanchion on the rear part of my sled isn't so much snapped, as pulled apart. I know immediately that I am going to have to stop for repairs. This is not a good place to stop. First, we've only been going about two hours, it is a cool morning, and the dogs are still crazy and full of energy. There isn't really any snow to hook down to, either. I am pretty sure I am going to have a hard time getting them to stop long enough for me to do much. Also, the trail is narrow, twisty, and full of blind corners. Any other teams coming up behind me aren't going to appreciate me blocking the trail, and it is going to be a real trick to help them past me without my team taking off too.

But it has to be done - we aren't going to get far without further damage if I don't shore things up. And I need to look over the sled more carefully for other damage. I talk the dogs down to a halt, because using my brake on this rugged trail would be a great way to rip a brake clean off. I gingerly set a hook in a snarl of roots, and sneak forward with a bag of snacks to encourage the dogs to chill out.

I start moving fast. I grab my repair kit, fish out some hose clamps and a small, flat aluminum bar, and set to work. First I have to unthread the hose clamps to fit them around the broken stanchion. I don't often need a screw driver on the trail, so I just use the one on my multi tool. I clip the tool into my pocket on the end of a long string so that I won't lose it. As I twist the screw driver around and around, the string winds around the tool until I have to stop and untangle it. It is very inefficient.

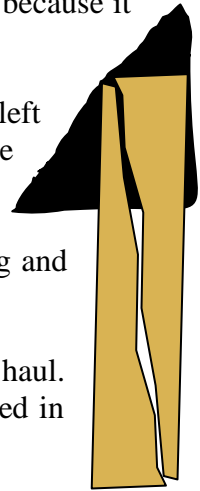
So I turn and I turn and I turn and I turn and get the darn things opened up. What a hassle! Next year those hose clamps are going in the tool kit pre-opened! Then I wrap the clamps around the stanchion, sandwiching in the aluminum bar as a splint. I turn and I turn and I turn and I turn to tighten the hose clamps down around the whole mess.



It is not going nearly fast enough for my dogs, who are jumping and fidgeting and messing around. And I can see there is going to be a problem - the jagged ends of the stanchion were several inches apart, and it took a lot of pressure to pull them closer together. I need something to keep the ends from spreading back apart and slipping out of the hose clamps. I dig out a section of parachute cord, rig up a truckers hitch, and lever the butt ends together, then make a few more good turns on the hose clamps to tighten down my emergency patch.

Throughout this process I am keeping an eye on the dogs and trying to keep them settled down. By this time most of them have sprawled out in the little patches of snow, and they are wound around trees and bushes and scattered on both sides of the trail. Complete road block for anyone coming up behind us! So I am also watching and listening hard for another team, because it will take me a few minutes to clear the trail if I need to.

And I am not done working on the sled yet. The other vertical stanchion on the left side is also damaged. It is cracked lengthwise from top to bottom. While I can hose clamp near the bottom to keep the two halves together, there is a flat plastic gusset at the top where all the pieces tie in together. I pull out my hockey tape and started wrapping, hoping it will be enough to prevent the piece from splitting and falling right off.



My temporary patch will work for now, but it sure isn't good enough for the long haul. By now the dogs are getting really squirrely, and we have spent 20 minutes parked in the middle of the way. Time to hit the trail.

As we shudder and bang down the rocky dirt path, my mind is racing. The whole back half of my sled has just about torn loose, and the repairs I've done are not going to get us much farther. I carry my cooker, snowshoes, sleeping bag, and food bucket loaded with snacks in the rear section. Those bulky items will not all fit in the small front compartment, so I have to hang on to this rear section. It is looking grim.

For a few moments I absolutely hate Iditarod, hate how easy it is to for everything to end in an instant, for an entire year's work and effort to go up in smoke. I swear I am never going to put myself through this stress again. I am angry and so frustrated at the unfairness of it all. Did I mention I haven't really slept in two days?

I mentally give myself a little shake and tell myself to quit whining. I remind myself that I can handle this, and focus my thoughts on how to solve the problem. Obviously, I need to get Varan to send me out a replacement sled. If I run straight through to Nikolai I can reach him by phone more quickly, and get the sled on its way to McGrath. I would need a long break in Nik after such a long run, and then I would have to take my 24 in McGrath. By that time, hopefully, the sled would make it to McGrath on a charter flight. I might have to spend extra time in McGrath waiting for the sled, especially if the weather doesn't cooperate. Then I'd need to run to Ophir and take a break there, and then would I need to break up the run to Iditarod or run straight through? I am re-organizing my entire plan, and not very happy about it.

Hold up, I think. I don't need a whole new sled. I really just need the rear section. In fact, I really just need new stanchions. That would be much easier to get shipped out, and Varan could take them right off our back-up sled and send them to me. They might be able to come by mail. Does the postal service offer overnight mail to McGrath? Probably not. Could I get it sent to Takotna and stick to my schedule better? Probably not. My mind churns. This, at least, is a much cheaper and likely faster option. I'd still need to hustle in to Nikolai to make arrangements. That will mean running the dogs very long, and right through the heat of the day. I don't like this plan much better.

I twist around to look at the damage some more. The whole thing looks pretty rickety. But maybe I could just spend some extra time working on repairs, and ask Varan to send stanchions farther down the trail. I can probably hold it together long enough to make that work. So back to plan A, and no change to my schedule. I just need to call Varan and have him pack up the missing parts and be ready to send them if I decide I need them. They'd probably have to be sent to Unalakleet, which is a whole lot further down the trail, and over some pretty rough terrain. But I decide that is a good gamble.

All of these mental gyrations take place in the space of maybe five minutes. Once I resolve my plans, I instantly feel better. I settle back and start paying attention to the tricky trail - a spill with my fragile sled would be a disaster at this point.

I had planned to run about 6 hours before taking a break, but after another couple of hours on the trail, I decide to stop early. The dogs are slowing down to a slog in the heat; we'll be better off if we rest now and run longer later. And I really want to unload the back of my sled and take a good close look to make sure there aren't any problems that I can't repair.

We pull over after less than five hours on the trail. As slow as the dogs have been moving, they still want to argue with me about stopping. They keep jumping back onto the trail, and the thin snow isn't holding my hooks well. Even when I get out the cooker, they still keep lurching forward, and I have a few moments of worry that we will leave my cooker and food behind. Finally I talk them into settling down. They eat and doze in the sun.

I have still more work to do. I take the bags off the rear part of my sled so I can really look. Oh geez - what I hadn't seen out on the run, was that the cross piece is also broken. It's snapped right in half. It's a wonder the caboose held together this far. It is not going to hold together much longer. I have only one more hose clamp, but I also have determination. I find a nice straight branch, trim it to size, fasten it to the broken cross piece with the last hose clamp and then lash it on with rope. It isn't the best branch - it is green cottonwood, and about as rigid as a long piece of licorice. But after I top it all off with hockey tape, it looks like it could do the job. As long as we don't hit rough trail; as long as we don't crash; as long as I don't add weight by sitting on my bucket.

The whole back half of the sled is a little catty-wampus, but after tightening all my other repairs up, it feels remarkably stable. It just might get me there, especially if I get some more hose clamps and something better than that pitiful wimpy little branch to splint with. The main

concern I still have is the pressure pulling the primary stanchion pieces apart. For now, the rope will hold things together. I have some ideas about how to fix it when I get to Takotna.

I am back in business! Of course, I haven't slept yet. I haven't even lain down, although I did make myself eat some soup and a burrito. Now it is time to repack my sled and move along. The dogs are happy to hit the road again after a quick 3 1/2 hour rest. It is only 4:30, so it is still hot. But I want to get going and burn off some of the tension from all my anxiety!

Leg 5- Farewell Burn to Nikolai (40 miles)

By now we have passed by all the windswept, burnout, rugged trail. We are just on the long, mindless straight shot across the taiga. Aberdeen has warmed up fine, but now Chase looks a little off to me. I think I must be imagining things, but I probably am not. It seems that there has to be a dog for me to fret over on every run.

By the time our first burst of energy wears off it is cooling down, so we maintain a pretty good pace. We pass some teams, and we all call out greetings. I am relieved to be back on the trail with a (semi-) functioning sled and moving forward.

Just past the turn off for Bear Creek Cabin I stop to snack. Martin Buser comes flying up from behind. He is shouting something about don't camp here (who's camping?), go down to the creek to camp. He always does have a crazy sort of energy out on the trail.

Martin ran all the way to Rohn, then took his 24 hour break. This means that even though he is right there with me, he is actually a full day ahead of me. And his dogs are sprinting! We could never hope to match that kind of speed!

Just an hour later we come swinging around a corner going full steam ahead, and I see my dogs half way across the bridge over Sullivan Creek. Right as I recognize where we are, I also recognize the back of Martin's sled. He is parked in the trail, hooked off on the other side of the bridge. His dogs are going bananas, and he is down below the bridge, collecting a bucket of water. I jump with both feet on the brake and barely get my dogs stopped before we run right into his sled. I realize Martin must not be going quite as fast when he is out of our sight, or we would have never caught up!

Sullivan Creek is just about 20 miles from Nikolai, and I happen to know that Martin usually rests at the Salmon River fish camp, just another 9 or 10 miles down the trail. He must be getting prepared to take a break, while I will carry on towards Nikolai. For me, melting snow is probably easier than tying off a team, digging out a bucket, and getting down the banks to get water. Martin's dogs are screaming and jumping around. It takes a few minutes for Martin to finish up, and in the mean time my dogs are getting more and more squirrely and hard to hold. Finally he takes off and roars out of sight at a blinding pace. At that rate, I figure it is the last I'll ever see of him.

But as the sun goes down I notice that I keep catching glimpses of his headlamp, and he isn't pulling away very fast. And by the time I pull up to the Fish Camp, I can see he is just getting the dogs settled and can't have been there too long.

We roll into Nikolai at 9:00 pm after 5 ½ hours on the road. I start kicking into high gear. I don't plan to stop long. The dogs are looking great, and we have just one long, 65 mile run before our 24 hour break. Plus, if we stop too long we'll leave early in the morning and end up running in the heat of the day.

I am happy to see Rhody at the checkpoint. She is an amazing person who keeps a checkpoint going perfectly and really understands the challenges we face. As I pull in she gives me all the basic information - straw, Heet, and drop bags are waiting for me at my parking spot, hot water is available just by the checker's tent, and hot food for me is waiting up in the school. And did I need anything else? "Yes, please," I pipe up. "I need hose clamps - at least four more to keep my sled functional, or I'm probably done." Rhody promises me she will get right on it. Nikolai is a small village, less than 100 people. I am not too sure what might be available here, but I know Rhody will make it happen if anyone can.

I haven't even gotten the dogs strawed and booties off before one of the locals shows up. He waits by my sled and asks to see the damage so he can get a better idea of what I need. "Well, see, I broke this stanchion", I explain, pointing to the angled stanchion. "I have two hose clamps holding the splint, and this rope holding the pieces together, but I really need two more hose clamps to make the patch rigid."

"And that's not all", I continue. "See, under all this tape, I split this other stanchion too. So I could use another hose clamp to keep it from separating. And", I point out, "this crosspiece is snapped as well. I have this stick taped on here holding it together, but I think a few more hose clamps would really be nice on this piece too". He laughs as I keep revealing more and more damage. Several other bystanders, including a reporter, listen in to my story of destruction and cobbling it all back together. My new friend says he'll be right back. I hope like crazy he can track down what I need at this time of night.

The reporter is intrigued by what is in my repair kit, that I can jury-rig my sled back together after so much damage. He wants to know how I knew what to do? I'm just really good with a tool, I tell him, and he smirks. The truth is, you better be pretty handy with tools and pretty creative, too, if you want to be a musher. The trail is not kind to sleds.

Once the dogs are comfortable, I've wrestled Chase into his shoulder warmer, and I have sorted through all my gear and gotten organized, I flip my sled on its side. All that dirt and rough trail left the runner plastic in sorry shape. I strip it right out and feed shiny new plastic onto the runners. Now if I just had sturdy stanchions holding those runners on...

Before I am done, my friend has shown back up with a boxful of hose clamps in all flavors and sizes. Not only that, but he produces a broken ski pole that he noticed one of the mushers throw in the trash pile. He thinks it might do a better job than my wimpy little stick. Happy musher! I thank him like crazy and tell him he just saved my race. I plan to dig out my trail money and pay for the clamps, which don't come for free way out here. My money is somewhere in my parka, which has been stuffed deep inside my sled since the start. Before I finish all my repairs and

maintenance, he is gone and I never get the chance to offer him cash for the hardware he provided. I definitely owe someone in Nikolai a huge debt.

Finally I am done taking care of my sled, the dogs are all snoozing, and it is time to take care of me. The walk up to the school isn't far, but I am moving through molasses. I strip off my sweat soaked gear as I trudge. Once I get to the school, I have an armload of smelly, damp outerwear that needs to be hung up to dry.

By the time I have a big bowl of moose stew and drink about a liter of Tang (which I detest, but I really need to get as much liquid as possible in me), I am fading fast. I look at my watch. I have exactly half an hour before I need to be up to get the dogs going.

I haven't really slept at all so far during the race, other than a little bit of dozing at Rohn. I'm not going to get any sleep here either. I will have to make up for it in Takotna on my 24. I set my alarm and lay down to rest my body, still too wound up to even think of sleeping. I am out like a light. Almost immediately my alarm sounds - the one and only time during this race where my alarm catches me when I am sleeping.

Waking up is agony. My body pleads for just a little more rest. My fuzzy brain can't come up with a good argument, but some ridiculous sense of duty drives me up onto my knees. It would be just too easy to sleep another few hours here. And then next time I am tired, I could just take an extra long rest again. After all, what is a few hours here and there? Pretty soon the entire effort to keep going through the exhaustion and sleep deprivation would start to seem completely pointless, and I would just drift to the back of the pack.

Not happening. Up! I force myself awake and stagger out to eat more and drink more, hoping the calories will be a fair trade off for the lack of sleep (they aren't). I climb back into my clammy gear and stumble to the dog lot.

Even half functional, I can get boots on the dogs, switch the team around, and get going in a short amount of time. The dogs have rested 4 hours, and I've at least refueled myself. It's 1:15 in the morning, a time when sane people are snoozing in their beds. Instead, here I am, fighting nausea and guiding a pack of crazy screaming dogs down the trail. This is one of those times when I question what the heck I am doing.

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

The dogs are zooming along. It is still well above ideal temperatures, but in cooler darkness everyone is fired up! I'm feeling really good about my sled, and the fresh air is helping to clear the cobwebs out of my brain. Chase looks a little stiff, but he soon warms up and looks fine. He'll have a whole day to rest and heal once we reach Takotna.

I see a headlight behind me on the trail. Actually, it looks like a Mack truck. It must be one of those awesome high-powered LEDs with the amazing multi-hour battery packs. Those things don't come cheap. I do just fine with my little headlamp, although I can't light up the night like my trail companion. And I do spend several hundred dollars each year on lithium batteries. The more I think about it, the more I realize I ought to invest in a new headlamp.

The Mack truck is visible off and on for a long time before it finally catches us. That's when he flips on the bright beam, and it's like being under stadium lights. We pull over, and Martin roars by us going at a flat out lope. But this time I don't let his overwhelming speed discourage me. I think about how long it took that light to catch us, and even now I can still see glimpses of his light not far ahead. He isn't going as fast as he wants us to believe.

The trail to McGrath is a long and relatively unremarkable. It seems like we spend the entire time pulling a slight uphill grade. I happen to know we are traveling downstream on the Kuskokwim river, but it sure does seem like we are pulling up a slope. I spend several hours pondering this conundrum, but can't come up with any reason why my senses so often tell me something other than reality.

The wee hours of the early morning are deadly. I am struggling to stay awake. I don't dare to sit and rest my weary body because I know I will drop right off to sleep. I've run many miles in a comfortable semi-doze sitting on my bucket. But with my damaged sled, I can't take the chance of hitting an obstacle unawares with my body weight on that back section. Or, shudder to think, crashing. My poor patched together sled is sturdy enough to travel, but it can't take much abuse. I am going to spend most of this race on my feet.

I force my eyes to stay open, and stiffen my neck, which doesn't seem to be holding my flopping head upright anymore. I sip at my drink and try to find something I can nibble on without retching. I do knee bends and dance moves and 'hopping jacks' on the runners. I try to tell the dogs a story. My voice keeps mumbling off to silence even as I am speaking. I drink a 5-Hour Energy and wait for it to kick in. It doesn't. I debate with myself about following the 5-Hour with No-Doze. I decide that I have to do something to stay on the sled and keep this train rolling. I swallow the dose and wait and wait and wait for my mind to get more alert. It never comes. I am simply crumpling on my feet. It is wretched. I am wretched.

I focus my thoughts on the rising sun. It never fails; my energy always comes up with the sun. I sing. "The sun will come up. In one hour. Bet your bottom dollar that. In an hour. There'll be sun." If I can just keep it together a little longer, the last few hours will be a piece of cake.

The sky lightens and I keep waiting for the struggle to stay conscious to ease up a bit. It doesn't. The sun is full in the sky and I'm still bleary. I see McGrath approaching in the distance and even then I can't seem to muster enough energy to keep from dozing off.

We pull up the bank and start racing along the road through town. I check my watch and see we've made really good time – just over 6 hours. The dogs have been having a great run and are full of excitement to reach a checkpoint. We almost dive back down the bank to the river before I realize we have reached the checker's station. I didn't recognize it because it is abandoned - nobody there.

I jump on the brake and stop the dogs. They are barking to go, and the leaders are already pointing down the exit chute. I look around, but no one is in sight. It is 7:15 in the morning. The

sun is up. I'm still up. Martin must have come through not too long ago. Surely they must follow our Tracker progress on-line. Where the heck is everyone?

My dogs start making a ruckus and twisting themselves into knots. The community center is right in front of me, but there is no way I can leave my jerking, bouncing team unattended to run inside to find someone.

"Checker", I holler, "Checker!" My team has spied some straw just behind my sled. They excitedly dash for it. Since we aren't going, we must be staying, I can see them thinking. The team wheels around and just about corkscrews us into the ground. I need to either get moving, or get someone to help hold these hooligans. I keep hollering.

Finally a head pokes out the door, then disappears. I wait hopefully. A man and woman come running out, shrugging into jackets. They aren't official checkers, but they have the clipboard. They think someone will come soon. Also, they think someone went to wake up the vets to sign my vet book. I've already been here 10 minutes. My dogs are losing focus, and I definitely don't want them deciding it is time to camp.

I hold out my vet book. "Just sign it", I say. "I can't stay here any longer." They tell me they can't do that, and I explain to them that a race official may sign the vet book if a vet is not present for a team that is checking through. "But we're not actually race officials", they protest. "Sign it", I say. "I'll take the heat for it not being official." And if anyone wants to give me a hard time, we are going to have a long discussion about how I held my team and waited, and no one showed up. Finally they agree to sign my vet book, and I am in motion almost before they hand it back to me.

We shoot off down the bank, back to the river, back to the trail. There is a wet snow falling, and we are just 18 miles from a long break. It takes some time for the dogs to find their rhythm again, but on the plus side, I am now wide awake!

Our speed picks up as we wend up through the forests and glades. There is a lot of frozen side-hill overflow, and the trail has been re-routed in a couple of places. At one point I miss the markers guiding us onto a better trail, and bounce down an icy shelf, slamming into a field of frozen ottomans. My sled tips onto its fragile side, the first time I've actually crashed this whole race. I can't believe I've been so careless – I need to do everything I can to prevent any impacts to that left side. I leap up, worried that I have done damage. The dogs are already dragging the tipped over sled through the frozen humps, and everything seems to be holding just fine. We never even stop as I tip the sled back upright and hop on. I take a quick look and decide we didn't sustain any more obvious damage.

Soon we are climbing up through the trees. My earlier alertness has faded. I find myself dozing off again, even though we are well into morning by now. The dogs are charging hard, the trail is wide and flat as it reaches for the hill tops, and nobody needs me to keep things rolling. Keeping those eyes pried open is a losing battle.

In my semi-doze, I hear the dogs start barking and feel them surge forward. I look around, and realize they are focused on the sign that says “5 miles to Takotna”. Something new and exciting to look at! There are signs counting down each of the last few miles, and the dogs bark and speed up at each one. It keeps waking me up. It makes me giggle to think that my dogs have learned to read!

We make it into Takotna in fabulous time, only 2 ½ hours after leaving McGrath. It is 10:00 in the morning. I still have 15 strong, hard pulling dogs. Because my string is so long, we get placed in the ‘overflow’ lot over by the Sayer House. This is great for me – we are far from the bustle of the main lots, but we have our own private water barrel less than 10 feet away. The House is warm, comfy, and quiet. And there are actual beds! No sleeping on hard church pews for me this year.

I take great care of the dogs – boots and harnesses off, Chase into his shoulder coat, deep beds of straw, extra tug lines so they can move around to stretch, and a quick meaty soup accompanied by piles of meat, fat, and kibble that they can pick at. Even though it is very warm, a sloppy snow (almost rain) is coming down, so I bundle the dogs into their coats to keep them dry and comfy.

And then it is my turn to eat; a breakfast burrito, an extra side of bacon, a load of Tang, and some cake. I am stuffed. Despite not having slept really at all since the race started, despite struggling to keep awake for the entire run here, despite the exhaustion of running this trail, I am not the least bit sleepy. Exhausted, frazzled, fuzzy, tired, tongue thick with fatigue. But not sleepy. I usually am great at maximizing my rest time by getting real sleep for short bursts, but this year I am just not able to do it.

Since I can’t sleep anyway, I ask Dick Newton if I can borrow a drill motor and ¼ inch drill bit. I plant to bolt that aluminum splint in place and do away with the rope that is holding the pieces together. It doesn’t take long before that chore is done. On my way to return the drill, I snarf up a plate of potato salad and a piece of coconut pie. Then I decide I just have to take a rest, even if I stay wide awake. I force myself to lie down while the room spins around me in my exhaustion. I stare at the ceiling for awhile, and finally manage to drift off for a few hours.

Then I’m up again. Time for a cheeseburger, some coleslaw, and then some pecan pie, washed down with glass after glass of Tang. Then I give the dogs more water. First a bowl of plain water in case they are just thirsty. A few dogs drink quite a bit (they get more), most dogs aren’t interested. Then I dish out a bucket of water baited with meat and salmon. Several more dogs are happy to drink the baited water, but there are quite a few who aren’t too interested. Then I add commercial kibble to the dishes of water – it will soak up the liquid and turn into a wet mush. Almost everyone loves this soaked stew. Some like to wait until the mess freezes into a meaty popsicle to chew on. However it goes down, it guarantees that every dog will get food and water into them somehow. It goes on like this the entire break, this three part watering/feeding process designed to keep everyone happy.

In the late afternoon I get each dog off the line and walk them around and play with them. They all seem bouncy and happy. I don’t spot a single stiff move or sign of soreness. I’ve been here

before – starting with a gimpy team of dogs that should fall apart within a few checkpoints, only to harden up and become a solid team out on the trail.

This year my 24-hour break is even more enjoyable because I get to spend much of it with Linwood Fiedler. Linwood has multiple top ten finishes, including second place one year. He's been racing dogs for a long time, and his knowledge is well respected. His team is parked right next to mine in a very narrow area. Luckily we both have nice, well behaved dogs. We have plenty of time to chat as we take care of our dogs, relax in the community center, and nap in the Sayer House. He shows me some sled modifications, and we talk about his water resistant sled bags. We talk about the trail and the dogs, the challenges so far, and the challenges to come. We note how similar our times are, and talk about seeing each other down the trail. His kind, quiet cheerfulness is a bright spot for me!

Finally, after a few more meals and a few more naps, it is time to get things going. The sun has come out and helped to dry the dog coats, which is a good thing because I hate to pack things away wet – the next time I need them it might be actually cold!

I had heard trail rumors about overflow on the way to the Iditarod checkpoint. Trail rumors will drive you crazy if you worry about them all, but there is nothing saying you can't at least be prepared. I wrap up my dog coats, extra clothing, parka (sure don't need that!), and everything else inside of heavy duty compactor bags. My sleeping bag is already in one; that is how it always travels, just in case.

Linwood departs from Takotna just a few minutes in front of me. As his team surges forward, they cut to the right towards the main trail. Linwood's heavily laden sled is headed straight for my leaders who are dozing in the straw, oblivious to the danger. Linwood makes a heroic lunge, flinging his sled over hard and missing my dogs by inches. Not the way anyone wants to start a long run, but I sure am thankful for his effort!

When it is our turn to go, I can see the take off will be a challenge for me, too. There are only three guys to help guide us, and they aren't going to be able to hold my ecstatic dogs back much. My team is going to hit the main trail and turn hard right while my sled is still up on the hillside where we've been parked. I am going to slide sideways off a sharp two foot drop, and my team is already building up a head of steam and digging in. This is going to be rough!

A few feet before the ledge I get off the brake and let our momentum build. Just as we sail sideways off the lip, I crank hard towards the hill and raise my downhill runner high so it won't dig in and flip me. We launch over the edge, touch down, and skid sideways before the sled straightens out on our new trail.

As soon as we are pointed straight, I jump on the brake and stop the dogs; we still have to sign out and grab the sack lunch they always send us with. The volunteers cheer and tell me they've never seen a move like that before. They were sure they were going to have to catch my team as they came barreling over the edge.

Leg 7 – Takotna, through Ophir, to Camp Spot (35 miles)

We head out just about 11:15 in the morning. It is already getting warm, and I know this run is going to be a challenge. It's just sticky and slow. The dogs are happy to be on the trail again, but we aren't setting any speed records.

We make decent time to Ophir, only three hours. There is a welcoming party for me there - two or three vets to get my team checked out, a handful of checkers, and other volunteers who come scooting up with my drop bags, Heet, and half a bale of straw on a plastic sled. They know I am just off my 24 and will be breezing through, and they are ready to help me get it done quickly. There is lots of chatter and joking around and photos with me, the dogs, and the sled. It's a fun group - I bet it is a nice place to take a 24.

As long as I am here and have company, I decide to pull off booties. It's always a dilemma. They can only do so many miles without booties before their feet become sore. Once they are sore, they stay that way until they get some extended time off. But overheating is potentially disastrous, and they can stay much cooler without their boots on. I try not to spend too much time agonizing over decisions, but the question of whether to bootie or not to bootie is an endless dilemma for me on this race.

We are loaded up, ready to go, and back on the trail in less than ten minutes. I see Linwood parked just ahead of me, taking care of his team and giving them a cool down break. Back in Takotna he had talked about taking mini-rests every $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 hour to let the dogs bite snow and roll around to cool off. It goes against the grain to stop so often, but I can see that it's a good idea and I will need to do the same on this run.

My team dashes right past Linwood and towards the open trail, only to be diverted by a giant stack of straw piled right by the exit. They don't really want to rest, but that much straw right there is too big a temptation to resist! One of the checkers trots over, grabs my leaders and sets us straight. He has obviously seen this before, and was ready for it.

We chug along with good purpose. After about an hour, Linwood passes us at a fast clip. We keep him in sight for time, but his team is much faster. The trail is nice, the day is beautiful, and we are tooling along out in the middle of nowhere. There is not much to do but enjoy a pleasant and relaxing run.

I had been planning to go half way before I stopped, just to keep the runs even. But I start second guessing my plan. It is hot. I am drenched with sweat and the dogs are panting hard. We are stopping a lot to cool down. It will be much better to do a short run now, and run longer at night. The sled is weighed down with straw, extra fuel, and food for the dogs and me. There's an advantage to offloading this weight sooner. Finally, around 4:00, in the hottest heat of the day, I start looking for a spot to stop the team.

It takes almost half an hour to find a place to get off the trail. I see a likely looking spot at the bottom of a draw, but realize that Wade Marrs is camped there, so I go on past. He shouts for me

to stop and camp with him. It would be great to have company while we rest, but we're already by, so we keep on going. Just up the hill, I find a scrawny little trench crouching just to the left of the trail. It is not much but it is going to have to do.

The dogs are not cooperative. They see a trail, they feel like going. They don't feel like going fast, but they are not willing to pull over. I leave my sled in the trail, hoping no other teams come up right away. I take the straw up and spread it in the shallow trench. The dogs never pass up straw - they just proved that to me back in Ophir. But this time, when it counts, they are trying to jerk the hooks loose and keep going. I grab my leaders and drag them off the trail. No one else will scoot over. I drag each dog onto the straw. They won't stay there - they keep jumping back onto the trail and barking. I am starting to get frustrated. They know what is going on here, and they are just being difficult! Seriously, do they really want to keep plodding through this heat?

I go back to my sled and wrestle it off the trail. Now I am in soft snow, which won't hold a hook, so I tie the sled to a tree. Then I start yanking dogs back into the straw and tying them off on trees. I am floundering around in the deep snow and grinding the meager straw into it, but I kind of don't care at this point. It's not like the dogs could possibly get cold at these temperatures. Finally, the dogs settle down and they are mostly not right in the way of other teams.

Taking care of the dogs is a challenge in the soft snow. I can walk along on the hard packed trail to the side, but to reach each dog I have to plunge into the deep stuff. Taking off booties, putting on Chase's shoulder coat, setting out bowls, serving them their dinner – every move is a struggle. Finally it is done, and I lay, drenched, on my sled.

We're going to get going again after a four hour break, and I don't plan to bootie them, so it will take literally only minutes to pull them back on the trail and get going. I have plenty of time for a nap. But of course, I don't sleep. I just lay there and can't get comfortable. I watch team after team pass us by. No matter how much fun I'm having, getting passed is just hard to swallow.

Leg 8 –Camp Spot to Iditarod (65 miles)

We hit the trail again at quarter to nine. It is still too warm for dog sled racing, but there is a nice fresh breeze and the dogs are feeling great. We continue on through rolling forested hills, and our pace gradually picks up.

After an hour or two I can smell smoke. I know we are near Don's cabin. We round a corner to face what seems like chaos. There are dog teams, cookers, and campfires scattered all over the place. The dogs are excited by all the activity, so of course they speed up. But in the darkness I can't see where the trail goes. I call out to ask if the trail is open or not, and someone tells me I'm on it, to just go straight ahead. There are teams parked all over the place. There are teams actually camped on the trail, just scootched over to one side. Between dogs on the left, dogs on the right, and dogs right in the dang way, it's a tricky little challenge for the team to navigate. My leaders Lyra and Mercedes do a super job of threading through the chaos and we are off again, now with more energy.

The trail opens out into a wind-swept expanse of rolling tundra. There are scratch marks from sleds on the sporadic patches of icy snow, but mostly we are on frozen gravel – not good on my

poor dog's un-booted feet. We chatter over frozen tussocks and gravel patches, and I dance between the runners, the brake, and the drag pad to keep the runner-side down.

Without much snow it is very dark. There are knocked down markers that are occasionally visible, and there are permanent markers scattered about to either side on scrubby trees and falling down tri-pods. The reflective markers look like a random galaxy with beacons in all directions. I know the trail generally heads on down the valley, but it is a very wide open valley and I'd like to stay within shooting distance of an actual trail.

The dogs have other ideas. As usual, when the trail gets tricky, the dogs help out by getting excited and speeding up. We are bucketing over the frozen clumps of vegetation. My leaders are following my voice commands a little, but they are confused by all the markers too. There is no chance of slowing the team down. The brakes just rattle and skip over the humps and lumps, and it wouldn't take much to hook a tooth into one and rip the brake right off the sled. The drag pad isn't providing much friction either, so I am just in "white-water mode" - no brakes, not much steering, just try to keep it pointed forwards so you don't hit something sideways. It's pretty exciting and I am definitely wide awake and driving!

Eventually we come back to snow and rolling, forested hills. We are making time and enjoying the night run. We come busting around a corner at a good clip, and suddenly my leaders hit the brakes. Pile-up – the whole team screeches to a halt. In the headlight beam I can see that there is a good size creek running right across the trail. And I do mean running - it is flowing with that root-beer colored water that flows out of the muskegs.

I learned a few years ago that it doesn't matter how many times you go through overflow during training, it's not going to carry over during a race. They might charge across knee deep water every time at home, but they are likely to refuse to tiptoe across the slightest puddle during a race. So I know the easiest way across is for me to be the lead dog.

I have also learned that the standard advice of pulling a trash bag over each boot before wading into overflow can be really counterproductive. First, the bags keep sliding down no matter how you tie them up. So then you end up trying to work with the team with one hand and hold the bags up with the other. Second, if the water is more than shin deep there is a good chance it will go right over the top of the bags, which makes the bags less than useless. But most importantly, those dang bags are really slippery on top of wet ice!

No bags for me; I know that I am going to get my feet wet. But I am not too worried – it is really warm out, so no worries about frost bite. And I'm already drenched with sweat anyway. Plus, I have an ace up my sleeve. Weeks ago, when I was packing my drop bags I took a wild guess and decided it might be wet out on this stretch of trail. I threw a spare set of boot liners into my bags for Iditarod checkpoint. I know it is only a few more hours until I will have dry boots. Since I have all my gear wrapped up in plastic bags inside the sled, I am ready to get this crossing done!

The dogs are in a tangled ball near the creek bank, and the only way to get across is to make an even worse tangle. I push the sled right up to the water's edge. Since no one is willing to jump in the water, now all 15 dogs and the sled are perched on the bank. I grab for my leaders and trudge

across the shin deep water, towing a mob of tangled, splashing dogs behind me. I continue right on up the far bank until all the dogs and my sled are out of the water. I trot back to my sled, set the hooks, and get busy unsnarling the spaghetti-mess the dogs have made of the gangline.

The dogs are supercharged! They might have been too hot a few minutes ago, but they have just had an icy, refreshing bath. They are wriggling, rolling, jumping, and barking. I have to really scramble to get them lined out before chaos breaks out. As soon as we are all pointing down the trail, the dogs rip the hooks loose and I have to jump on the sled as it shoots past me.

The crossing probably only took us an extra 15 minutes. At the rate we're moving, we can make up that time quickly. I am glad to see that the dreaded rumors about deep overflow, steep shelf ice, and terrible conditions are just the usual exaggerations. We hit our rhythm again and start rolling down the miles.

We sweep around another corner and screech to another halt. I can't see my leaders, but I can see the gangline snaking into the scrubby trees off to the left of the trail. And here is another creek. No one mentioned TWO sets of overflow!

The creek looks pretty deep, and the dogs have decided to find a 'better' way. There are now at least ten dogs wrapped around the spindly spruces and completely locked in place. I try to explain to them that their way is not going to work, but they don't believe me. It takes me a good ten minutes to pull everyone out of the trees (several times – the little buggers just won't hold still where I put them!), get everything wadded up on the bank, and get ready to wade again.

We all splash across, struggling to keep our balance on the ice underlying the knee-deep water. When we get close to the other side, Flip makes a lunge for the bank. Since I am directly in front of him, he makes a snap decision and goes left around me. Wrong way. His tug line catches me behind the knees and shoves me face first into the water. I jump up quickly and scold him. "Dang it Flip! I was fully prepared to get my feet wet, but going all the way in was NOT in the plan!"

We all clamber out the other side, and I hustle to reel the sled in as quickly as possible. Everything may be wrapped up in plastic, but it isn't going to withstand being submerged for long. Plus, the sled bag is going to weigh about four tons now that it is saturated. The dogs take great delight in rolling, shaking, and winding themselves around every available tree. It takes me another 10 minutes to get lined out and pull everyone out of the bushes (multiple times).

This crossing probably took us an extra 20 minutes or more. I'm not too worried about making up time at this point. I know we are closing in on the checkpoint, and the dogs are freshly invigorated by their plunge. Off we charge!

Not ten minutes later, we come across yet another flowing creek. I shove the sled towards the bank and look over the edge. It's a good 18 inch drop to the top of the water, and I can't see how deep it is from there. I lower myself over the edge and finally find the icy bottom with my boots. It is not a pleasant feeling to have ice water creeping up my crotch, and it's swimming-deep for the dogs.

There isn't a dog in the bunch who is willing to leap over the bank to join me. I reach for my leaders in the tangled mess of dogs. They know what is coming and they head the other way. I can just reach my swing dogs, so I grab the line fast and reel them in. The second they hit the water, they are clawing their way right back out. Every time I get a dog over the edge, they fight hard and scramble back up the bank. This is not working. I hang on to the gangline and just start backing up. The water is flowing over the top of frozen ice, so the footing is treacherous. And the dogs are pulling strongly in every other direction except into the water.

When I finally manage to pull some dogs over the edge, I have two huge concerns. First, the dogs are all snarled up so I have to keep an eagle eye on everyone to make sure their heads are above water and they are not in trouble. Second, when the sled finally goes over the edge, I really need it to stay upright so it will stay dry(ish) and also because I won't be able to pull it across unless it is on its runners. If I have to go back after it, the dogs are going to follow me and end up back on the bank we came from.

I keep pulling the dogs that are in the water across the creek, and pulling more and more dogs that are on the far bank over the edge into the water. In his efforts to keep from taking the plunge, Trouble jumps into the footwell area of my sled between the front and back sections. This happens right as the sled starts to nose over into the water, and I have an instant of alarm that he will be tangled up and dragged under. At the last second, he jumps back clear and leaps off the bank into the water

Bree, who hates, HATES, HATES water, has slipped out of her harness and is running up and down the bank barking. I will have to deal with her later. Once everything is safe and secure on the other side and the sled is hooked down, I will have to wade back across and grab her. I will need to carry her over to keep her from instantly scrambling back out on the wrong side. I know she will hate that, and she will claw and struggle and throw my balance off as I try to keep my footing on top of the ice. Something to look forward to! But for now, I have other priorities.

I finally pull the whole mess – sled, dogs, gangline – all the way into the water. I make sure the sled is upright and the dogs all have their heads above water, and start hauling on the line to get us across the creek bed.

Once we get to the other side, the dogs paddle and claw at the bank, but it is too steep and icy for them to get any purchase. I start hoisting them up, one by one. Pretty soon all the dogs are out of the water, snarled in a big messy ball, shaking water out of their coats, and vibrating with energy. I try to follow them out of the water, but there is no one to boost me over the edge. I crawl up the steep bank on my hands and knees, water streaming off me.

I check to make sure everyone is OK and not completely snarled up in the gangline. The dogs are screaming to go again, and their excited squirming makes it extra challenging to get everyone untangled and lined out. Just as I finally get us all organized, and headed up the hill out of the creek, Bree comes bounding up to me. She is sopping wet and extremely proud of herself. I am proud of her, too! It took some guts and determination for her to make that crossing all by herself – everyone else had to be dragged across. I am also really happy I don't have to go back to fetch

her and wrestle her across the creek. I quickly put her back into her harness and get ready for the next step.

My sled is still sitting below the bank, mostly submerged and bobbing gently. The lip of the bank is overhung, and the waterlogged sled is really heavy! I call on the dogs and ask them to pull, but the nose of the sled just butts into the undercut bank and goes nowhere. I stand above the sled and lift up, but I can't get any traction on the slick, steep bank. It's like trying to do a dead lift wearing roller skates. I'm not getting anywhere.

Back into the water. I heave and pull and grunt; the dogs lend their strength; the sled just keeps ramming the bank. I can't get it high enough to clear the edge. I need to get better leverage. I park myself right in front of the sled, heave up on the front, and call up the dogs. They lurch forward, and I do gymnastics, lifting and bending backwards as the sled rides up on top of me and flattens me backwards onto the bank.

Now the sled is on a 45 degree angle, the front propped up on the bank, and the back still down in the creek and under water, and we are stuck. I am on my back, still half in the water, laying under the sled, holding it to keep it from sliding back down. The sled is just below the tipping point, and the dogs can't quite heave it up over the edge. I have no leverage to help them.

Still hanging on to keep the sled from falling back into the water, I shimmy out from under it, roll over onto my stomach, and crawl forward. I manage to snag the line from the snow hook, and I crawl up the slippery hill on my hands and knees until I can set the hook facing backwards to keep the sled under tension and prevent it from going back down the bank.

Then I slide back down the icy hill on my butt, and go right into the water. This time I lean my shoulder into the back of the sled to push while the dogs pull. Finally, the sled rises up out of the creek and it is back on dry land! Water pours out of it, running down the bank and adding to the icy coating.

I crawl back up the slippery creek bank and towards the team. I pull that snow hook tight again, holding the sled from sliding backwards. Then I set the other hook facing forwards to keep the dogs from charging off without me. I walk up the line, squishing with every step, and check each dog while I tell them all how good they are. That was a tough crossing!

We are off again, still bubbling with energy. Whee – that sure gave us wings! We only have a few more miles to go, and we should be there in no time. This has turned out to be a long run! I'm ready to dry off, eat, and try to take a nap. I bet the dogs are too.

But as we count the last few miles down, we run across yet another creek with deep overflow on top of the ice. Wow - this is getting ridiculous!

By now we have a routine down. I hop off the sled, grab my leaders, trudge across the knee deep water, and right up the other side. It only takes a few minutes before we are ready to go again. Lyra, up in lead is lunging and screaming. But I can see that her partner Mercedes is looking a

little frazzled. I can't really blame her after all we've been through. I move her back and put Chase up – he is shrieking like an idiot.

We pull into the checkpoint just after 6 a.m. It's been 9 hours since our last break, so I plan to give the dogs a nice long 8 hour break (1.2 ratio). My friends Brad and Kelly are volunteering at the checkpoint and they help me park the team on the river ice.

I bundle Chase into his shoulder warmer, and everyone into their coats. Even though it is warm out, there is a stiff wind blowing down the ice and I want them to rest well. I take extra time unloading my sled and making sure everything is dry. By now all the water has frozen, so I have to smack chunks of ice off the runners, sled bag, and stanchions.

After getting all my clothing hung up to dry and eating a quick meal I lay down on a bunk in the toasty little cabin. After a run like that I figure I will sleep well, and I have several hours for my nap. Instead, I toss and turn and fidget. I can tell sleep is just not going to come, but I do force myself to lay still and rest.

Linwood is here. He rested only two hours on the way over, so he will be heading out earlier than we are. Justin is here too. Justin and I have spent lots of time in checkpoints together, and have done lots of strategizing. As usual, neither of us is really happy with our position in the field. Instead of focusing on that, I try to redirect my thoughts. I explain that one of my goals is to have fun, no matter what else is happening. And I realize that I really am having a great time and having more fun on this race than any I've ever done. I hope my sense of energy and enjoyment buoys the spirits of those around me.

I head out looking for drinking water. I thought I sent some bottled water here for me, but I didn't find it in my drop bags. Better planning next year! The checkers share a little bit with me, but they are running short and I can't fill my jug. I know I will need plenty of drinking water in the hills to come. One of the Donlin volunteers slips me a couple of bottles of water as I head back to the cabin. Now I have more than I can use, so I drop by Wade's sled and share a bottle with him; he is short on drinking water too. It can be serious problem when you're working as hard as we are and sweating so much, so I am happy to share.

Leg 9 - Iditarod to Shageluk (56 miles)

2:30 in the afternoon is just about the worst time to run dogs, especially if it is hot. Even worse, as soon as we leave the checkpoint we will start climbing through the Shageluk hills. We crawl up one hill and down the next. Our speed isn't too bad, considering the heat and the terrain, but we are also stopping every 30 minutes or so for a breather. I'm keeping a really sharp eye on the dogs to make sure no one is overheating. We are all working hard! All my clothes were nice and dry after our break in Iditarod, and I put in nice dry, warm boot liners, too. Everything is now damp and clammy again, soaked through with sweat.

After four hours, we pull off the trail and take an hour break. I have soaked commercial in my bucket to try to help the dogs get some liquids. I am sucking down lemonade too, taking sips every few minutes. I debate with myself for awhile and decide to strip the booties off the dogs and leave them off.

After our stop, the dogs are lethargic and plodding for a bit, which is only to be expected. It is hard to get going again! It is sort of snowing. At least, sloppy wet slushy junk is coming out of the sky. I can feel it soaking through on top of my shoulders. I am wearing a hat just to try to keep the snow out of my face, but it is too hot. I wish I had a baseball cap somewhere in my gear to shade my eyes without making me pass out from heat.

We finally start wending down out of the hills on a wide open trail. Sleet (ok, it's really rain) is pelting us in the face. For some reason the trail is crowned, with the center much higher than the edges. For miles and miles I wrestle with the sled. On rare occasions I can keep it balanced right on the top. But most of the time I am leaning and pulling, trying to keep the heavy, waterlogged beast from veering off to the side and lurching to a halt in the deep snow. My arms and back and legs are straining with the effort, and it just keeps going on and on and on.

This is one time when having short tugs is a disadvantage; the tug lines from the wheel dogs connect to the gangline several feet away from the sled. This means they aren't able to help much whenever the deep sticky snow starts to suck the sled in. With longer tug lines, they attach farther back and can provide more steerage for the sled. I debate rigging up some longer lines from the sled to the wheel dogs, but there is a team chasing down behind us and I decide I won't bother. I keep expecting the crowned trail to end soon, and it doesn't. I really should have stopped and fixed this problem, but by the time I decide I better just do it, I can see the lights of Shageluk coming up.

Soon we are zooming through the steep sided sloughs, like a bobsled track that shoots us right into town. A herd of children come screaming out of the dark and chase the team all the way to the check in line. Karen Ramstead is there to greet me, laughing at my now hat-less, soaking wet head. Her energy is infectious, and her organization faultless.

It's eleven o'clock at night and pouring down rain, but the entire village is wide awake! Besides the kids in the welcoming committee, there are lots of snow machines racing about, and the community center is packed full of a party which keeps pouring out into the street and the holding area where all the dogs teams are parked. I've never done my dog chores accompanied by a live band but I decide I like it. The band only seems to know about five songs, but they are pretty good at playing them.

Karen is doing a masterful job of keeping the checkpoint safe and functional with all the chaos going on around us. I see her face down unruly, drunken, angry snow machiners several times. They can't understand why she won't let them drive right through the dog lot, but she is not going to be ignored. Eventually they back down and find another way.

We're parked right near Linwood again. I am happy to see him. His team seems to be running faster than mine, but he is resting a bit longer, so he isn't pulling ahead too quickly. He plans to leave just a bit before I do, and I promise to see him down the trail.

I bundle the dogs into their coats and cover them with heaps of straw in an effort to keep them dry(ish). I tuck plastic bags over the top of my sled too. I am envious of Linwood's water

resistant sled bags again. By now I am soaked, and I'm hoping I will be able to hang up my gear somewhere warm to dry (no such luck).

I'm also limping and lurching around because somehow, my left foot feels like something is broken up near the inside of the arch. I don't remember hitting anything, but there were plenty of stobs - cut off stumps of small trees - sticking up and grabbing at our feet. However it happened, my foot is so painful I can barely put weight on it. It reminds me that my knee is still pretty darn sore too. This game is hard on the body!

On top of the aches and pains, I am reeling with dizziness. Lack of sleep, physical exhaustion, and dehydration all work together to keep my head spinning just about the entire race. It can be almost impossible to keep from toppling over as I bend over to tend the dogs. Sometimes it is worse than others, and right now it is really bad. I remind myself to drink as much as I can.

I debate taking my 8 hour mandatory rest here. This is the first checkpoint where we can take our official break, and lots of times it is a good place to stop and get re-energized. But it is loud and chaotic (not to mention pouring rain). I don't think we will get good rest here. Plus, we are just coming off a nice long break back in Iditarod. I decide we will only stop for 6 hours.

I manage a short nap on the hard floor, and then head back out in my damp gear to get the (damp) dogs ready.

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

We leave Shageluk at 5:00 in the morning. It has stopped raining, and now there is a good wind blowing. Time to get some miles done while the dogs are fresh and happy.

All race long I've been struggling to get Prilosec into the team. The antacid medication is really good at helping to control stomach ulcers, but it has to be given on an empty stomach. Between frequent meals at checkpoints and snacking every two hours, it is hard to find a good time to dose the dogs. I decide I better do it about an hour into the run – that is about as far as I can space it after their meal last night and before their first snack. After an hour I pull the dogs up, and head to the line with the little pills. By the time I've given everyone a pill, half of them have their booties off. By the time I get everyone bootied again, a couple of dogs are tangled, and a few more have curled up for a nap. By the time we hit the trail again, we've wasted 20 minutes. We're not doing it that way again!

It takes us 3 hours and 45 minutes to complete the 25 miles to Anvik. Goofing around with that prilosec really wasted some time. We blow through Anvik quickly, and wind our way through the sloughs back to the river in no time. The dogs are really firing now. Our timing is back on schedule, and we hit Grayling just before 11:30 in the morning – a perfect time to shut down for a bit.

I look at the dogs. They are feeling great. Our speed on the last run was excellent. It only took us 2 1/2 hours to run that last 20 miles. It's not time for that 8 hour break yet.

While I'm taking care of the dogs, a camera crew for Al Jazeera interviews me. I know there is international interest, but it is so weird to run into them in Grayling, of all places!

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2013/03/20133111165464589.html>

After offering the dogs plain water, bated water, meat, fat, and commercial, they all doze off. I can't resist a short cuddle with Chisel. Straw, sunshine, and a good snuggle are hard to beat! Then it's back to the trail after only five hours of rest.

Leg 11 –Grayling to Eagle Island (55 miles)

We leave Grayling at 4:30 in the afternoon. It is still a little hot for running, but it should start cooling off soon. The dogs are making fabulous time. I keep double checking the GPS, and it keeps showing that we are traveling at a great clip.

Harp and Hatchet are up in lead. Harp is only two years old. She has been showing great talent in lead all season and led some early sections of the race. But the real proof of a leader is what they can do farther down the trail. I am excited to see how tough and determined and happy she is out front. We have another 'race leader'!

It is still spitting rain and snow. The water logged trail is punchy and full of soft spots. For the most part, the dogs are running on top but every so often one will break through the top crust. Every time I see them stagger and lurch I hold my breath, hoping no one will wrench a shoulder or do some other kind of damage.

We make this run in a fast and fresh 7 hours, pulling in just before midnight. The dogs are happy and bouncing around. A couple of other nearby mushers tell me I have the best looking team they've seen coming in. I am feeling really great about my dogs – this team is coming together!

It was a great run in, but now there are chores to do. I am not so excited by the pelting slush blanketing us in melting snow. I tell myself I ought to cut out a trash bag to cover myself and stay dry while I work, but in my fatigue I never get around to it. I cover the dogs with coats and straw; I get all my gear covered up inside the sled; I cover the sled with plastic bags. I even cover the rest of the straw from the bale I split to take down the trail with me – I know Paige, who will take the other half, will appreciate dry straw. But I don't cover myself.

As I work around the dogs, I get chillier and chillier. By the time I head up to the big wall tents to grab some sleep I am shivering in the damp. I try hanging some of my gear to dry, but the tent is only lukewarm, and it is very humid with all the mushers drying off and breathing in there. Someone has stuffed straw under the tent to help insulate the floor. It is a huge improvement over canvas directly on snow, but I quickly realize it isn't enough. I can't get warm, and I'm too tired to go fetch my sleeping bag. Instead I just try to hunker down. When Linwood comes into the tent, I whimper to him about being soaked and cold, but don't get up to do anything about it. This is the whiny low-point of my race. It's not as if it is cold enough to be really dangerous, just uncomfortable, and I am really feeling sorry for myself. Finally, it is time to get up and get going again. I am glad to move around and build up some heat.

I have the sled packed and ready to go, and all that is left is to boot the dogs. As I slide my hand down her leg to put boots on Harp, I feel a thick, hot swelling on her hock (rear leg joint). I didn't see a problem last night, and the vets didn't notice anything either. But after a six hour break she is stiff and painful. She must have injured herself on the rotten trail.

I work on down the line, putting boots on each foot on each dog. There's another one! Lyra's wrist is puffy and painful. Dang it! That miserable punchy trail got another one! If we had caught these injuries the night before, I could have treated them and they might have recovered enough to stay with the team. As it is now, they are both going to have to go home. By the time I fetch a vet, fill out the paperwork, get the girls out of their harness and ready to go, and set some food aside for them, we've burned another 15 minutes. Behind time and suddenly down to 13 dogs. Phooey.

Leg 12 – Eagle Island to Kaltag (60 miles)

We leave Eagle Island at 6:30 in the morning. We will get a few cool morning hours, but this is a long run and it's going to be a hot one.

After the first burst of energy wears off the sun comes out, frying us in its glare. We are only moving at about 6 miles per hour, which isn't great, but not too surprising. We are loaded down with straw, soaked kibble, and lots of sets of meat snacks for the run. Plus the snow is sticky and the dogs are having to work very hard to keep us moving forward.

It takes us five hours to hit the half-way point, and it is time for a break. I am confident that after a couple of hours cooling down, a nice snack to wet their whistles, and a lighter load, the dogs will be happy to trudge the rest of the way in to Kaltag.

Aaron Peck pulls in next to me and it is nice to have some company. I haven't really spent any time on the trail with Aaron before and it turns out he is a pretty nice guy. We spend some time checking over Bree, who has looked a little off to me. He is much better at flex-testing than I am - he looks like a real professional as he manipulates her joints. Neither of us can find anything wrong with her, so I don't worry about wrapping, and just give her an overall rub down. Like all the other limpers so far, in the next runs she smoothes back out and looks fine.

At 1:30 in the afternoon, after a nice two hour break, I get the dogs back up to finish the run. They look sleepy. I drag them off the straw and prop them up in the trail. They sit on their butts or lay down right in the snow. This is not good! They are plenty well rested, but the sun, the other team camped nearby, and the long, boring trail are all working together and draining the dogs of any desire to run.

While everyone else sulks and droops, Chase barks and bounces. He is always ready to go. I put him up in lead with Cutter, who looks willing, if not excited. I walk forward with my leaders, and try to get them moving. We plod down the trail, the dogs following me. Every time I head back to my sled, our forward motion peters out. We are jerking and lurching down the trail in little spurts, with me alternately walking in front of the team, scolding, and encouraging. I am just about sure I can nag them into plodding along, when Wade Marrs catches us from behind. I

push my team over to the side, let him pass, and then draft behind him. He calls encouragingly to my dogs to get them going. We are moving - slowly.

Wade's pace is not fast, but his dogs are in a good, steady rhythm. Mine don't feel like keeping up. I call them up every time they slow down, and smack the sled bag with a stick. We slowly trail along. My dogs keep looking back at me - that is a bad sign. I can see a mutiny looming. Wade, looking on, agrees they don't look like they would be moving on their own. After an hour of getting after them, slapping my sled bag, and worrying, I decide to stop while it is still my idea.

I pull the dogs to the side of the trail, pull off their booties, and ignore them for the next two hours. The entire time while I wait, my stomach churns and my tension and stress skyrocket. This should not be happening! These dogs looked incredible coming in to Eagle Island! I just gave them a nice break! What the heck is wrong with them? What have I done wrong in training?

I practice deep breathing to relax. I remind myself that I can handle this. I listen to the silence of the wide frozen river and the rustling of the dogs, and connect to my environment. I think about each of my special, wonderful dogs, and how amazing they are, what hard, honest workers each one is. By the time I decide to get going again, I am so full of confidence and energy that the dogs can't help but line out and trot on down the trail.

I spend the rest of the run with my wheels spinning. Did I just do a smart thing by averting a melt-down? Did I teach the dogs that I will give them a break if only they just decide to look unwilling? Did I misjudge how much rest they really needed? Was it a good idea to leave booties off for the rest of this run? Finally I tell my inner voices to shut the heck up. I made the best choices I could. We are moving. That has to be enough for now.

After just a few minutes we pass Wade where he stopped to give his dogs a break. He is getting them up and ready to go. He'll be just behind me. Back in the distance behind him I can see Aaron is back on the trail too.

Funny thing is, after only two extra hours of rest, we are now making great time. We are pulling away from the other teams. Sometimes I just don't know what to think!

We run about five more hours, and arrive at Kaltag just before nine in the evening. A family waves to me from their porch, and welcomes me to their village. Several other people greet me as we run up the bank and through the town to the check-in. This is a nice change of pace; Kaltag is not known for being too friendly for Iditarod. I've never had any problems, but I've also never been welcomed so warmly. I give everyone a big smile and wave - it is really nice to come into a town that is happy to see you!

I move on down the line, taking care of dogs. The routine is second nature - park the team, get their booties off, get water going, put the shoulder warmer on Chase, get dog coats on everyone, get straw down, check for injuries and problems, re-organize the sled, get the dogs fed. The list is endless, but I can do it half asleep.

Poor Hatchet got sucked into that treacherous trail before Eagle Island, too. His injury wasn't too bad, and I've been wrapping his hind leg and massaging him, but now he looks really sore. He has been working great and is not limping, but the swelling is worse than before. I take extra time and effort with him now. I am really hoping he will bounce back, because he is one of my strongest and most determined leaders. He is happy, eating well, and full of drive. He has been waking up feeling good and isn't stiff, so I decide to keep him in the team for now.

While I am getting myself something to eat in the community center, I mull over what to do with Spartan. Even though he usually doesn't do too well in the heat, Spartan has been a good, hard worker the entire race. I've been watching him like a hawk; both previous times he has been on the team, he worked hard and then suddenly quit right around the 500 mile mark. He is a huge asset when he is working, and a very large load to have to haul in the sled when he is not. The first year I figured it was just a fluke because he was inexperienced and the trail was really tough. But last year he quit flat again, on an easy run after a nice long rest. I decided then that it would be smarter to drop him at the first sign of slowing or uncertainty. So far this year he has looked fantastic the entire time. He has already come farther than I ever thought he would make it, and he isn't showing any signs of fading.

On one hand, my team is feeling small to me and I don't really want to drop a perfectly capable dog. But on the other hand, the risks of taking him are great. The next run is hilly, long, and will be partly in the heat. Hauling 70 extra pounds of dog could be the last straw for my team if they are having a tough run. Linwood points out to me that I don't need anything else to stress over, Spartan's track record indicates there is a good chance of him stalling out, and I will still have 12 dogs, which is plenty of power. I am so tempted to keep Spartan in and see if he can prove me wrong. But eventually I agree with Linwood; it is not worth the risk and extra worry. I decide I will leave him with the vets after he has eaten and gotten a good rest.

This is the last place on the trail to take our mandatory eight hour break on the Yukon River, so I settle in for a nice long rest. The dogs already got four hours of rest in a ten hour run, and it would be better to just rest four or five hours here and then get moving before it gets hot. But we owe an eight, so we are going to stay until 5:00 in the morning.

It seems like everyone I was running in front of earlier is all pulling out of Kaltag as I take care of my dogs. We are falling farther and farther back. This was a disheartening run, even if we did bounce back for round two.

I get in some real hard naps – which is good because I haven't done more than doze since Takotna, over 300 miles and three days ago.

Leg 13 –Kaltag to Old Woman Camp (51 miles)

The dogs look great as we head out in the morning darkness. We have a great rhythm and the trail winding up through the forested hills is fun. As usual, we reach Tripod Flats Cabin earlier than I expect, and then it takes just about forever to do the last remaining ten miles or so to our destination, Old Woman Cabin.

There is no one around when we pull into the cabin at 11:00 in the morning. I park the dogs on some straw and get busy taking care of them. The sun won't peek out from behind the mountains for another hour or two, and there is a chilly breeze blowing. While the snow in my cooker melts, I run into the cabin and get the fire going so that I can rest in warmth.

I plan to try to sleep every chance I get, since I am having such a hard time with sleeping this year. Justin arrives at the cabin shortly after I do, so of course we end up talking instead of sleeping. It is the middle of the day, after all. No matter how tired I am, this year I just don't seem to be able to sleep during the day.

It took us six hours to get here, and I plan to give them five hours rest. After their reluctance last time running in the heat, I am really leery of pushing too hard. We pull out of Old Woman at 4:00 in the afternoon. We are headed out to run in the heat. This is getting to be like Groundhog's Day! At least it is breezy. And temperatures ought to drop around 6:00 or 7:00.

Leg 14 –Old Woman Camp to Unalakleet (36 miles)

The trail continues down the wide, open tundra of Tripod Flats, a huge valley with mountain ridges paralleling the trail on both sides. After a few hours we drop off the hills and onto the river ice. There are a few cabins and we start to see some snow machine traffic. Even though we are still a ways out, the dogs always perk up here.

The trail takes a couple of unexpected route changes, and of course most of the markers are knocked down. I can see brake scratches going in either direction, and in some places there are reflective markers that look almost like Iditarod markers, but aren't. It's tough to know which way to go, and the dogs are not patient. They are also not easy to turn around if I make the wrong decision. Each time I stop, look carefully, and make a guess. Each time I am rewarded by finding Iditarod markers on the path I chose. Where I can, I put markers back up to help those behind me.

We pass a man and a boy working on a snow machine. Not longer after, they putter by us. We see them again after a short distance, stopped, hood up. They get things going again and roar on by. I wave. We catch up again! I laugh and tell them I may beat them to town. They laugh back and agree I might be right. This run is going well and the dogs are happy, which means I am feeling great!

We pull in to Unalakleet at 9:00 p.m. As always, Mom and Aunt Carol are there to greet us. They tell me that Middy Johnson (ex-mayor and Iditarod finisher) is taking breakfast orders. I am ready to eat! I am wide awake and moving a million miles an hour - super efficient as I do my chores. The dogs have had plenty of rest lately, so we are only going to stop for four hours. It is just enough time to take care of the dogs, switch my runner plastic, grab a bite to eat, and try for a quick nap.

Some of the dogs are suffering from a horrible case of chafing on their hind end. This is something I've never encountered before, but all the heat and moisture is irritating their skin, especially between the hind legs on the boys. The poor dogs have lost hair and are red and raw. At least none of my dogs are getting the kinds of harness rubs I've been seeing on other dogs.

I've been spreading bright pink foot ointment all over their bums. It's made with zinc oxide and antibiotics, so it makes a great 'diaper cream', but it looks kind of funny going down the trail in front of me. Most of the dogs are doing just fine; at least they are not getting any worse.

Poor Hatchet is suffering from the worst case of chaffing in the bunch and I know he must be uncomfortable. Even worse, his hind leg is still sore and swollen. All my work with massage and wrapping has helped keep it from getting worse, but it isn't getting better either. He has been working his tail off, and he is not limping or acting like he doesn't want to go, but I am not going to push it any farther. I am very sorry to see Hatch go. I know I will see him again at home, but I hate to say goodbye to my team mates out on the trail.

Of the five dogs I have dropped, all but Spartan are excellent leaders. I was counting on Hatchet, Lyra, Harp, and Doc to help get us to the finish line. A couple other leaders are still working well, but not likely to help out front; Mercedes never really bounced back as a leader after her run through the creeks, and Alis has been looking pretty subdued lately. My huge pool of leaders is dwindling. It makes me nervous, except I have to remind myself that I still have five strong leaders; Chase, Aberdeen, Cutter, Luna, and Bree. That is a better selection than some mushers start the race with.

Leg 15 –Unalakleet to Shaktoolik (35 miles)

We leave just after 1:00 in the morning. We meander out of the checkpoint, stopping to poop and veering around looking for a trail to follow across the polished ice. Once we hook to the left and start out of town, there is plenty of wind-swept gravel. I jump off and run as much as possible to try to save my shiny new plastic.

This is a short leg of trail, but it is infested with long, steep hills. I am very glad not to be running it in the heat. It is dark and cool and now that we are warmed up, the dogs look motivated! We are charging up the hills, pulling strongly. I am pedaling and pushing to help the dogs, but keeping very good tabs on my own energy level, hydration, and calorie intake. It seems like every time I've ever gotten shaky out here on the trail, it's been after I worked a little too hard helping the dogs with hills. Under these conditions exhaustion can hit suddenly with no warning and it can be hard to bounce back once you push too hard.

For most of this race I've really been watching Elway. He has already far exceeded my expectations for a 14 month old dog. He has been happy, working hard, eating well, and resting like a pro the entire trip. However, this is his first time on anything as tough as this journey, and I don't want him to become intimidated or overwhelmed. Big El is hitting these hills like he is going to personally pull the sled up each one. But he doesn't have the experience to know just how long these tough hills are going to go on. He doesn't yet know how to pace himself; he's just been relying on his amazing athleticism to carry him through. So I am watching closely.

As we head up the final, looooong hill, I can see him start to droop a little bit. You can just about read his mind as he faces another steep, hard climb with no end in sight. I call out to encourage him, and tell him to trust me – we're nearly done. Just before we hit the top, he starts looking back at me. He is not sure he can keep this up. We are so close to the top, and I tell him he can

do it, he can do it! Perfect timing for him to learn that I won't ask more than he can do, and to learn that he can do more than he really believes.

In just a few minutes, we top out and head down the other side. It is a two mile long glide all the way down the far side, and all the dogs catch their breath. Elway visibly perks up. I can almost feel his relief to be rolling down hill, leaning into his harness and letting the sled brakes hold him back.

There is just one more steep, nasty climb up, but it is short. By the time we hit it, Elway is feeling so good that he charges to the top. He never has another moment of doubt the entire race. He makes me smile!

Bree has been doing quite a bit of leading for me lately. She is energetic, motivated, and hard working. I know she simply won't cross water (even inch deep water), and I know from last year that she is nearly useless in the wind. She is also terrible with directional commands; she understands them, she just chooses to ignore them. But on a straight up trail, she is showing herself to be a brilliant lead dog. She is up in front with Aberdeen, who is looking less than motivated. Bree takes charge and brings us right in to Shaktoolik.

We sure weren't fast (6 hours), but I'm still feeling really good about my dogs. We had a strong run over one of my favorite sections of trail, and we are (maybe) catching back up to some of those guys who left us behind on the river.

It's not quite 7:30 in the morning; we've run all night. We've had several strong runs, and I've been very conservative with rest. It is time to push a little bit. I decide to leave after four hours. Our timing is pretty bad. We're going to rest through the nice cool morning, and run across the bleak and barren Norton Sound under the glaring sun. But no matter how I work it, I can't avoid the hot daylight so we might as well get it over with.

Alis is looking pretty subdued. She has been slightly dehydrated for a few runs, and here in Shaktoolik she doesn't bother to eat or drink. I give her a few hours in case she feels like picking at her meal later, but she is just not interested. It is time to let her rest more; I need to drop her.

I am very nervous to be down to only 10 dogs. This is the fewest dogs I've ever had in Iditarod, and there are still plenty of miles left. And it is not as if I have any worry-free dogs in the team. Every one of them has shown some sort of issue at some point in the race. The fact that they all look pretty good right now isn't making me feel any better. Then I stop, remind myself I can handle it, and shut down that inner scary voice. No point wasting thought on something I can't change. I have ten dogs, and I will finish. End of story.

I lay down on Rhody's cot for a 30 minute nap. I drift in and out, listening to conversations around me. It doesn't seem like I will be able to sleep, but I drop into a strange dream. My friends and I desperately need pirate hats for our costumes. We aren't having any luck, but I can see some costume items in the window of a porn store, so we head inside. There is a gay-pride festival in town and there is a long line of people in front of us. This is unfortunate because we are already late. We impatiently wait our turn. There is an incredibly good looking, very dark

skinned man in line behind us. Slightly embarrassed by our eagerness, I explain to the beautiful stranger that we aren't in line for porn. The man starts to explain to me that his isn't in line for porn either. He doesn't talk at all - he sings to me in a rich, deep voice. He tells me all about how he is actually a chicken farmer and just inherited the store from an uncle. I start laughing and it wakes me up. But I can still hear the deep voice singing. I am sure I am hallucinating - or maybe still asleep? I roll off the cot and sit up, but the chicken song continues - it's Jim Lanier trying out one of his new songs on the checkpoint, and sneaking into my dream!

Leg 16 – Shaktoolik to Koyuk (45 miles)

We get moving at 11:30 in the morning. The checkers help me across the road, and we head out into the desolate flats. The dogs are moving at a decent speed but I am not having to hold them back like I usually do in the first few hours past a checkpoint.

We make steady progress towards the shelter cabin on Island Point. From here on out, there is nothing. No landmark, no features, no variation. Just endlessly white. For hours.

I watch our speed on the GPS. Each time it falls below 7 miles per hour, I call the dogs up. It is a losing battle. I revise. Each time our speed falls below 6.5 miles per hour, I call the dogs up. Blah. Boring. Nagging at the dogs is no fun.

I stop to snack the dogs, and see a team catching up to me. Shoot! I hate getting passed! It is Paige Drobny. She stops to snack too, and every time I stop all the way across, she catches me. We trade leads a few times; our teams are just about identical, speed-wise.

It is hot and sunny. The heat isn't as bad as some runs because a breeze is keeping things cooler, but the glare of all that sunlight on the ice is blinding. The trail is just a line of markers across a blank page. There is nothing to break up the monotony.

We stop for a break. The dogs need a boost. They eat their snacks right up and look perky. I think they are feeling pretty good, but mentally this is a tough run. I let Cutter and Chase and Luna loose and we play a little game of tag. I ruffle up each of the dogs and tell them how great they are. I jump around and act silly. The dogs are smiling and rolling around. They look pretty lively.

We head off down the trail again with a little burst of energy. It soon fades and we plod slower. They need perking up. I sing them a song to remind them that I will take care of them.

“Lean on me
When you're not strong
I'll be the one
To help you carry on.”

They speed up. I fall silent; our speed peters out. I tell them a joke. Only Cutter gets it, but they all wag their tails at my voice.

Singing keeps us going. Every time I quit singing, our speed drops off. I sing. For hours. At this point in the race my memory is pretty bad and I can only remember a few lines from a few songs. I sing them. Over and over and over. With enthusiasm!

Our speed stays good as long as I sing energetically. In fact, we make darn good time – six hours to cross this stretch; as good as anybody nearby, and better than most. We finally pull in to Koyuk and I can let my voice rest.

It is not quite 5:30 in the afternoon, and we ran through the worst part of the day. Now that it is cooling off, we are all set to take a nap. This is backward, but short of taking an extra six hour break, there is no way to adjust.

The dogs all need some liquids, but several of them are just not interested. They are huddled in their straw, looking frazzled. I let them rest while I finish up chores, and then I pick them up off the straw and walk them around. The village kids are happy to help me cheer the dogs up. After a walk around and a stretch, most of them pile right into their meals. Chase and Elway ignore their meal. Something else to worry about.

I head into the community center to eat and rest. I am wide awake, but sort of scrappy after singing and pushing the dogs all day. There are plenty of mushers inside, and we are all joking and laughing and telling stories while we eat. Karen Ramstead is running this checkpoint too. She reminds me that sleeping would be a good thing.

I can't – I'm too wound up. Everything is ridiculously funny, and I am funny too. It is so nice to get across the sound and know I don't have to do that again. It is so great to talk to everyone else. It is so amazing to eat food. Wheee! I know I am a little on the manic side, but I am enjoying the ride. I might as well have fun.

I try to decide how long to rest. It is hard to think at this point. I cut it pretty short in Shaktoolik to try to get some of the run done before things got warm. So I owe the dogs a little rest. On the other hand, we had a good run over. On the other hand, I have a few picky, flat looking dogs. Plus, I don't want to foul this up by pushing too hard. On the other hand I am still within shooting distance of a couple of teams that I want to beat - this is a race, after all. I'm juggling a whole lot of ideas! Linwood weighs in with his experienced point of view that an eight hour rest is always restorative. I can't wait that long. I think I have something to prove; being in the back of the pack is the worst! I decide equal rest is the ticket, and plan for six hours off.

Leg 17 –Koyuk to Elim (44 miles)

We pull out of Koyuk just before 11:30 in the evening. Alan Moore and Paige are right on our tails. We are moving out well, but the teams behind us are moving better. They quickly catch and pass us. Then we hit a beastly little hill. Last year we skirted around this on the sea ice. This year, with the warm temperatures, we are staying off the ice and climbing over. It is a steep, ugly thing. The dogs waver and grind to a halt. The sled is as light as it is going to get - only a few snacks for the trail adding to the weight of the standard gear. I push the sled with all my strength and scold the dogs, but it takes my 'serious' voice to nag them back into motion. We jerk our way to the top with frequent stops. I watch Alan smoothly speed up and out of sight without a pause or bobble. Ughh – frustrating! We just came off a nice break, it is dark and cool, we should be cruising.

The rest of the run is unremarkable. We aren't fast. We aren't too slow. We plug along. Aberdeen looks flat. Nothing in particular wrong, and he is putting his shoulder into the harness, but he has lost any spark for leading. Luna appears to be limping a tiny bit. I will need to massage her and wrap her wrist. I really can't spare any more leaders, so I have to hope for luck that she will bounce back.

We pull in after seven hours, a fairly normal run time compared to others near me, but an hour slower than Paige. Alan was even faster. If I didn't compare our run to everyone around me, I would probably be a lot happier with it. If I didn't compare our run to everyone around me we wouldn't be in a race. It would be nice to move up the rankings, not just keep sliding farther down. For the most part I am having a wonderful trip. It's only when I worry about how far back we are that I get demoralized.

The checkers lead my team back through the parked teams; past Paige's team, and Allen Moore's, past Wade Marr's team. We end up in a back lot, surrounded on three sides by high banks of snow, and blessedly quiet and out of the way.

I settle the dogs in and make them comfy. By the time everyone is fed and cozy in their dog coats, the sun is coming up. We had a decent run, but nothing spectacular – we'll take a normal 1.2 ratio here and stay six hours.

Of course I don't sleep, but I do rest and eat. By the time I get up, it is warm and Elim is crawling with Idita-tourists. They watch me load the sled and get the dogs up and ready. They are curious and full of questions. I don't mind – it doesn't slow me down any, and I know this is a huge thrill for them. I also know that people who fly out to Elim to see the teams are a) really into Iditarod and b) have disposable income. It's always a good idea to be nice to people, but especially potential sponsors!

Leg 18 –Elim to White Mountain (44 miles)

We head out of Elim and drop down onto the sea ice. It is just after noon – could we pick a more horrible time to start a tough, hilly run? We are poking along, and nobody in the team looks enthusiastic. I am feeling just great, though. I sing and chatter and try to perk the dogs up.

After maybe eight miles on the sea ice we turn at right angles onto the first long, grinding climb. It heads straight up for something like two miles. The dogs are crawling, looking back at me, and acting like sulky teenagers. I keep after them and keep them moving, but oh man they look so reluctant.

I know I can shivy them along and get them up over the hills, even Little McKinley. But if they are this draggy now, barely starting the run, what's going to keep them moving past the dreaded doldrums after Golovin? I am worried about the dogs quitting again. Every time I quit hectoring them, we peter to a stop.

I make a decision to take a break now, before the dogs quit, wait out the heat, and play it safe. I hate it. I hate my fears and lack of confidence. I hate that we are stopping to take a break when

we just hit the trail. I hate that we are this far back, and are going to fall even farther. I am stressed out and shaky. I pull the dogs over, pull off their booties, and toss them a snack.

Then I sit on my sled and fret, stomach churning, breath coming in hitches. I am such an idiot! I don't know what the heck I am doing, and I'm ruining my team! We have a mandatory eight hour break coming up at White Mountain, and we're just coming off a nice solid six, so the dogs certainly don't need extra rest. This is clearly a mental issue, and one I am not going to solve right now.

I watch Richie Diehl's team work their way up the hill. He is pedaling hard, calling on the dogs, and really pressuring them. They look like they would stop too, if he would let them. The same is true of the next couple of teams coming by. Everyone checks to make sure that we are ok, but no one wants to stop on this hill and give their dogs bad ideas. Everyone is after their team in a serious way.

Huh. I guess I've never seen what other teams look like as they work through a trouble spot late in the race. They all look kind of like mine, except I chickened out and stopped. More second guessing, more stress, more fretting. But I know I have to give them an honest to goodness break now, or they will just be stiff and reluctant, and maybe we'd be in an even worse position. I fire up the cooker and give the team some baited water. They all ignore it and spill it into the snow.

So we sit. And wait. And wait. And wait. My stomach churns, but I pretend to be having a great time, relaxing and enjoying the sunshine. Of course I don't sleep.

I want to wait until dark, but finally after six hours I just can't take it anymore. I pull the team out of the side track and onto the trail. They bark and roll and act thoroughly pleased with themselves and with life. We are up and off, flying up the trail with energy to spare.

The dogs tackle the hills like they mean business, like they never dragged and pouted and gave me questioning looks. They pull so strongly and happily up over the hills that I can't keep up running, and I have ride the sled even over the steepest sections.

We fly down the long descent into Golovin Bay and charge up the sea ice towards the town. We gallop through the streets and back to the sea ice, continuing north towards White Mountain. I'm driving a freight train. Damn dogs anyway.

Of course now that I am up and running dogs, I can't stay awake. I can't sit to rest – my sled is so fragile that I don't want my weight full on the rear compartment if we hit a bump. So I stand and struggle to keep awake. My eyes close, then open, close, then open as I stand on my runners.

My eyes blink open once again, and there is a hazy, bright glare filling my view, filling the horizon. I blink and roll my eyes, trying to get them to focus so I can figure out what is on fire. It takes a good thirty seconds for my eyes to get clear. The light is a town, and we are less than 50 yards away. I have been on my feet, completely asleep for at least 15 minutes as we drew nearer and nearer to White Mountain.

We get to the checkpoint just before midnight, after only five hours actual running time since leaving Elim. Throw in that six hour break, though, and the run was a disaster. I am trying to put a positive spin on it in my mind – my dogs are going to be really fresh and full of energy after an eight hour mandatory break on top of extra trail-side rest! But at this stage in the race I just want to be moving on. A little tired would have been just fine, since we have one more run and then a really long rest. Nothing to do but just take care of things and be ready to go when it's our turn.

As soon as I get the dogs settled, I head up to the community center and get permission to call home. I know Varan was watching us sit there in the mountains, and he was probably worried sick. We talk briefly. I tell him I am really disappointed in my dogs and really disappointed in my choices, but that we will be in Nome shortly. There is no question that we are going to finish this turkey. Then I go take a nap, and actually sleep a bit this time.

Leg 19 –White Mountain to Nome (77 miles)

We head up the river, out of White Mountain at 7:20 in the morning. It is nice and chilly at the moment, about 10 below, but the sun promises to rise up and bake us to death on this next very long run.

The dogs take a few minutes to get warmed up, each one taking a separate potty break. We meander out of camp, enjoying the fresh air and sunrise. Pretty soon we are churning along at a purposeful, powerful trot.

As the sun comes up, so does a stiff breeze. It is heavenly. I pull out my parka for one of the first times of the race. The Topkok hills melt away under the padding rhythm of my strong, determined team.

We pass the shelter cabin and head out across the lagoon, this year with more snow and actual markers. The wind becomes even stronger, and I have to take Bree out of lead – she is terrible in wind, and is no longer listening to my directions. I don't really mind. She has done a great job for me all race, and I already know her strengths and weaknesses.

The Solomon Blowhole is 'quite breezy'. I debate putting dog coats on, as snow is plastering into us from the side. But I don't want to waste a bunch of time putting coats on, then taking them off again if the breeze drops. Anyway, the wind is cold but I don't think anyone is in danger of frost bite, so we just carry on. The dogs are clearly enjoying the freshness.

Just near the Solomon bridge near the abandoned locomotives, we catch up to a team – Aaron Peck. It feels wonderful to finally pass a team instead of constantly being passed, as we have done so much lately. I left 30 minutes behind him and didn't expect to make up much time, but my dogs are just feeling so good, and so am I.

Just before Safety, Matt Giblin catches us and roars by at a lope. Travis Beals is right behind us in the distance. They left 40 minutes after us, and it is really demoralizing that they made up so much time on us, especially when our speed has been so solid. On the other hand, if your dogs are moving that fast this close to the end, you probably should be running farther up in the pack.

In Safety I see a large group taking pictures. My friends from Elim have found me again farther down the trail. We check through quickly – the dogs are barking and leaping and acting like maniacs, just full of the wind and the trail and aching to go. We've run six hours and twenty minutes to get here, but we are all so fit and full of energy that there is no way we're ready to stop now.

Just past Safety we turn right towards Cape Nome, straight into the teeth of a pretty stiff wind. Chase and Luna are in lead, and they just put their heads down and charge. The trail is drifting over and the visibility is almost nil, but it doesn't slow us down much.

We work our way over to the base of Cape Nome, and then turn back left to start the long grinding climb to the top. The blowing snow has covered the trail with a soft layer, and the dogs are weaving around, looking for the 'good' trail. I keep correcting them, and they keep wandering. Finally, as they veer 20 feet to the left of the trail, I abandon the team and the sled and run up the trail on my own. The dogs are almost comical as they do a double take at me jogging past them. I call them over towards me. Ears go up, tails go up, and they come bouncing my way, clearly amused by the whole thing. I keep running in front of them until they overtake me, and jump on the sled as it glides by. I pedal to the top. We pause.

Pause to catch our breath. Pause to take in the view – where we've been, and what little is left to get to where we are going. Pause to realize that this is it, it's almost over. Pause to collect myself because I am really not ready for it to end. Pause to stop in with each dog and tell them how amazing they are, how much I love them, how glad I am to have shared this adventure with them. Most of them are not interested in cuddling and conversation. They are fidgety and eager to move on. So much for dramatic connections.

Down the hill and how did these last few miles get so long? There is a snow machine pacing us, carrying a camera person. They keep leap-frogging us, getting set up ahead for shots, and then jumping back on the machine to do it again. They are also filming as they growl by. Pedal, pedal, run, hang on catch my breath, run some more. Yep, I want to run hard for the finish, I want to help my dogs. I don't really want to work this hard, but vanity says I gotta make it look good!

Finally we cross the road and start running along the beach below town. I stop the team. I still have Chase and Luna in lead. I know Luna does not want anything to do with leading the team into crowded, noisy places. I have not asked Elway to do any leading this race. But the fact that he is here, happily pulling his way into Nome, is pretty incredible. I want to put him up in lead, just for fun. I figure he will be completely distracted, so his lead partner is going to need to be someone very determined and very strong – Cutter!

Off we go, for the last few miles. We hit the ramp that leads up to Front Street. Someone has a dog on a leash. It is hysterically excited about the approaching team. Passing dogs (other than dog teams) is Elway's nemesis – he can't resist wanting to rush over to investigate. Cutter digs in and yanks him straight, aided by the rest of the team, which is running over the top of my distracted goofball.

Elway is certainly doing a terrible job of leading, but he can't overcome the power of his partner. Cutter is going to tow him to the finish line come hell or high water. We make our way (wavering slightly as Elway tries to investigate all the cheering people), and finally we are up under the arch.

I jump off the sled to hug my dogs and throw them a snack. I am roasting to death in all my gear. I've been pedaling or running for the last few hours. Now that we are out of the wind, the sweat is rolling off me. I start pulling off layers. Officials are trying to interview me, and I have to keep apologizing as I strip off more and more layers until I am down to a tee-shirt. There are a few cheers from the crowd, and calls to keep on going. I'm too hot to feel embarrassed.

Varan has been so busy greeting the dogs and taking off booties, that he doesn't even notice who is in lead. "Did you see Elway?" I ask. "Yeah, I can't believe he made it the whole way!" he says. "No," I say, "Did you see him come down the street?" "No, where is he?" says Varan, looking through the team, and laughing out loud as he says, "He led?" Well, sort of. Kudos to my Cutter dog for dragging him along.

We've made the run from White Mountain in 9 hours and 20 minutes; super fast. We finished in just over 11 days, my best total time so far. Of course, compared to everyone else, this is my worst finish ever. It is frustrating. I want to pretend I am competitive, but it is hard to argue that when I can't even make top-30.

But there is always next year. It probably won't be so darned hot (every horrible run we had was in the heat). I know we can do better. That is what keeps us coming back - wanting another shot at doing it right. That, and the wildness, the beauty, the people, the trail, the challenge, the dogs, the dogs, the dogs...