

November 24, 2014 I was on a run, training my team for our 7<sup>th</sup> consecutive Iditarod. A car left the highway and crashed head-on with my four-wheeler, launching me and the team into the air. I broke my back in three places.

Recovery was, and is, painful. I live with pain every day, and most activities aggravate it. I have some loss of function in my right leg, especially when I'm tired. After being immobilized for almost 5 months and having severely reduced activity since then, my fitness and strength are the worst they've ever been.

My physical therapist said I could definitely get back to running dogs, but was skeptical that I would be able to begin training for Iditarod less than a year after getting wrecked. I am kind of stubborn.

In March 2016 I was back at the starting line of Iditarod, pretending to be back to normal. Inside, I was wondering how the heck I was going to do this. I was worried that I wouldn't be strong enough to handle the team or the rough terrain. I was scared of the pain that I knew was coming my way, and nervous that I might not be tough enough to push through and keep going. I was worried that my body might let me down when things got rough, which could put me and the dogs in serious danger. I was more uncertain than I'd ever been since my rookie year, when everything about the race is an unknown.

Despite all my fears, I was determined. I shoved all my doubts under a layer of experience and confidence, and got ready to go. The soundtrack running through my head was the hard pounding [Lydia](#). There is a line in that song that says, "I am here to win this fight", and I fed this to my resolve to help it grow.

### **Sunday; Willow, Yentna**

The dogs leapt off the starting line at a dead run. With both feet on the brake, the GPS still showed our speed at over 17 mph. WAY too fast. There was not much I could do but ride the brake, talk to the dogs, and hope they would calm down. Almost all of this run is on the river systems, flat, hard, and fast. The brake was chattering and skipping on the hard packed ice and I was wondering if sled parts would start shattering. Those dogs were amped up!

After a few hours of serious vibrating, I was soaked with sweat, my feet were burning, my legs were cramping, and I just wanted the run to be over with. But it wasn't. It was a long, long time before the dogs would calm down enough to make stopping realistic.

I had been planning to stop and camp just after Yentna to break up the run to Finger Lake into two equal lengths. But there was no point trying to stop this team; they weren't going to cooperate. So we carried on, over seven hours of grinding, shuddering, pounding down the trail to Skwentna. At least the dogs settled very cooperatively, ate well, and laid down as soon as I gave them straw. They know a checkpoint when they see one.

We arrived just after midnight, and rested until almost 6 a.m., a nice long break for the dogs, and I even got a few hours sleep. Since we were travelling so fast (too fast) I wanted to give the dogs lots of rest to try to keep them from burning out too quickly.

## **Monday; Skwentna, Finger Lake, Rainy Pass**

We left in the cool morning darkness, and once again I was fighting this ridiculously strong, frenzied team, trying to keep our speed down. Everyone was hammering the line, trying to force the sled to move faster.

All except Painter. She drooped in her harness, and then lay down to quit. After less than 80 miles, shorter than many training runs, she flat refused to run. I had only gotten this dog in January, and I didn't know her well. She was fantastic in training, so I wasn't sure what to think. I didn't know if she was having some issue (although I can't think of anything short of a broken leg that would stop most of my dogs – some of them not even that would make them slow down), or if quitting is just in her nature. It was a bit discouraging to be a dog down so early in the race.

Luckily she is small, and carrying her in the sled bag barely slowed the monster team down. We took less than five hours to get to Finger Lake even though the trail was heavy and sticky. We rested there in the sun for just four hours, and took off again in the heat of the afternoon. The timing was bad, but sometimes there isn't a lot of choice. Staying longer was just going to make the crazy team crazier.

We barreled down the trail in the hot afternoon sun, flew down a very easy Happy River Steps, and kicked our way up the steep climb out of the river. It took us only four hours to get to Rainy Pass, arriving just as the sun started to lower, just before 7 p.m. With such a short run, I couldn't give the wild dogs too much time to rest.

I think I liked it better when I ran to Rohn in three long pushes (stop in Swentna, stop at the bottom of the Happy River Steps, stop at Rohn), than running these short, fast legs where I get almost no time to rest. Three hours and twenty minutes of rest in Rainy Pass, just enough time to feed and take care of the dogs, thaw some food and water for me, and get ready to go again.

The trail up out of the pass was great. It was just after dark (about 10 p.m.) and things were finally cooling down. The dogs were charging hard. The last time we went through this area it was a technical, exhausting, absolutely terrifying trail. I knew it wouldn't be as bad this time, but you really never know how tough the trail down through Pass Creek will be. All the mushers I spoke to who ran in 2014 agreed that they were gun-shy and leery of what was to come next in this stretch.

This part of the trail is never easy. I've dragged across ice and rocks, wallowed through bottomless sugar snow, taken wrong turns, smashed my way through the narrow creek bed jumping holes in the ice, and generally been beaten up almost every time I've been down through Pass Creek on the other side of Rainy Pass. The narrow canyon walls and steep slopes just above the Dalzell Gorge never get much attention, but it is always a challenging trail. I think we just forget about it in the excitement of the Gorge.

This time was one of the easiest. The snow was excellent the entire way, and the trail crew did an amazing job. In one place the bottom of the narrow canyon was nothing but rock and open water.

The trail crew somehow carved a trail from the steep canyon wall, making us a narrow shelf along the sidewall.

The only tough spot was the open creek crossing. Paige was stuck in front of us, sled on its side in the water, dogs in a ball. We stopped and waited. I took the time to pull on waders. But the waiting let all the air out of the balloon. The hyped up dogs shrieked and circled and made a general mess of things, but after chilling for too long I could not convince them to jump off the bank into knee deep running water. Meanwhile, five more teams had backed up behind us, and the pressure to get out of the way was intense.

I pulled, I pleaded, I argued, I tossed dogs off the edge. They pulled back, fought for the bank, and absolutely refused to cross the water. I pushed my sled into the water and dragged the team in with it. Finally Cutter and Harp decided to help out and started across the creek for the snowy island in the middle. Most of the dogs crawled up on the little iceberg, but as I was pulling the mess of tangled, wet, unwilling dogs into the second channel and towards the far bank, my sled tipped over into the icy water. Most of my gear is in dry bags, but my parka was just stuffed on top, and the sled bag filled with water which froze into heavy ice that I carried for a long way down the trail.

We finally crawled out the far side and I moved quickly to unsnarl the wet, freezing, tangled lines. Two harnesses hung empty. Sumlin and Oreo had managed to scramble loose, and they were nowhere in sight. The rest of the team was hammering the line, jerking the sled forward and threatening to take off down the gully without me. I couldn't leave the crazy team to go after my loose dogs. I couldn't take off down the trail without them. I was stuck.

I looked around frantically. If the two loose dogs decided to head back to Rainy Pass, my race would be over. If the loose dogs had run farther down the trail, or had disappeared into the brush and I couldn't find them, my race would be over. I couldn't see them anywhere. I called their names and got no response. Finally I saw two sets of glowing green eyes come bouncing out of the mess of teams still on the other side of the creek. They came to the edge of the water and stopped, looking at me. They were obviously not going to cross on their own. I had to go back to get them. But I couldn't leave the rest of the team, and there was nothing to tie the sled off to.

Jim Lanier had crossed just behind me. I begged him to stand on my hooks while I went after the escapees. Sumlin came right to the edge of the creek when I called but wouldn't come any farther. I tromped across the water, but she wasn't going to come back over willingly. She struggled wildly when I tried to pull her into the water. That was never going to work. I hoisted her up and carried her across the rushing stream, fighting for my balance in the knee deep water.

I clipped her into the line and then dashed back for Oreo. Jim was getting impatient but there wasn't much I could do. Oreo was in no mood to be caught and dragged into an icy bath. I called and he danced around just out of reach. I sat down and spoke quietly and he sidled over to me reluctantly. One more piggy through the water and I was back in business. At least, once I got the frantic dogs lined out and untangled again. I worked fast and stripped out of my waders in record speed. We bolted down the trail, trying to clear some distance between us and the following teams.

The cold water had the dogs hyped up even more and we were really flying. We careened down the steep trail with me riding the brake to keep things under control. At the bottom of a steep little hill the dogs screeched to another halt – there was a tiny little shallow creek in front of them. After the last creek they were really unwilling to cross any kind of running water. I really didn't want to roadblock the other teams. In fact, I didn't even want to see them again, so I was in a hurry. I started moving quickly to get us across. I drew on my waders, grabbed my leaders, and got the whole team moving across the water before too many had a chance to decide they weren't going to do it. Once the first few dogs were in the water, the rest of the dogs followed along, and I jumped on my sled as it came down the bank. The whole crossing took less than five minutes and we were on our way again.

Before I knew it we were rolling through the big trees that precede the drop into Dalzell. It was so very different than the last time we were here. There was plenty of nice packed snow, easy to drive on, easy to steer, easy to keep our speed down. The brake-eating rocks and roots were covered. The dash down scary steep MF hill was almost relaxing and the team never got faster than a brisk gallop.

Dalzell Gorge was icy and rough, as usual, but nothing compared to the death ride of 2014. We took a couple of wrong turns on blind corners, which made me stop and reroute the team and get reorganized. I knew there was a whole bunch of teams just behind us and I was trying hard not to get in their way. We also took a few wrong turns where the dogs charged forward on the wrong path without paying the slightest attention to my directions. In a place like the Dalzell Gorge, this can be disastrous. The trail crosses back and forth over the open creek on skimpy ice bridges. The shelf ice was pretty high this year, and sliding off the trail into the holes would include a long drop down into running water. The hyped up dogs didn't care about that, and we took a couple of sketchy, twisty, narrow ice bridges that we were not intended to use.

Somehow I managed to keep the sled from crashing into the creek far below, and had only one good crash. We came flying around a sharp, icy corner and slid sideways off a two foot lip of ice at the apex of the turn. I saw the crash coming but there wasn't a damn thing I could do. The sled and I slammed over hard. My head bounced off the ice but I kept a grip on the sled and hollered at the dogs to stop. With my head still ringing, we dashed down the canyon until the trail dumped out on the broad Tatina River. It took us less than five hours to get to Rohn, 30 minutes of that spent messing around in the water features.

## **Tuesday; Rohn, Nikolai**

I was really relieved to have made it this far with relatively few physical problems. My back pain was constant and challenging, but manageable. Most importantly, I had the strength and ability to drive the sled through the more technical parts of the trail, and wasn't held back too much by the physical limitations that I still have after my accident. All this time I had been diligently taking my pain medication every eight hours. The options for pain management are severely limited on the trail. Nothing that makes you dopey, dizzy, or fatigued will work – you get enough of that from exhaustion and exertion. The medication I was taking was just enough to take the edge (a very small edge) off the pain. By the time I reached Rohn it was also starting to cause stomach pain and nausea. I made myself continue to follow the dosage, but I spent the rest of the

race struggling to eat and drink as much as I needed to. Taking care to stay on top of energy and hydration needs is essential when you are putting yourself through the rigors of a race like Iditarod.

We rested in Rohn four hours. I am very efficient in camp and can usually get a couple hours sleep even on a four hour break. By this point in the race lack of sleep is starting to catch up to you and it becomes harder to function, so I was glad to lay down and rest. Sometimes it can be really difficult to go from the physical activity of wrestling a sled, to moving quickly and efficiently to get chores done, to laying down to sleep. This year I made it a point to cover my face each time with a neck fleece as I tried to drop off, and after just a few stops it became a routine that allowed me to sleep quickly anytime I had the chance.

We pulled out of Rohn around 7:30 in the morning. I was hoping to run a few hours before the sun heated up and rest during the hottest part of the afternoon. As usual, skimpy snow leaving Rohn had us skipping over had packed dirt and weaving through the tight trees with very little control. As usual, dust and dirt predominated the trail for 35 miles or so. Different this year though – flat dirt. The roots, rocks, stumps, and tussocks that made 2014 so hazardous had all been cleared. Such a difference!

We dashed along in the increasingly hot sun. As they had been the entire race so far, the dogs were wild, strong, and completely focused on getting down the trail. Sometimes we were moving so fast I didn't have time to realize we were taking a wrong turn. Cutter and Whack A Mole, in lead, were having a ball running together, but weren't too concerned about the opinions of the silly human trailing along behind.

At one point the dogs decided to jerk left into some sort of rough gully, instead of following the broad, flat dirt trail in front of them. The sled bucked and jumped over rocks. Just as we rejoined the trail one runner jammed into a narrow crevasse and our momentum slung me and the sled up and over to land face first, dragging in the dirt. The team found this very exciting and dragged me and the sled a good 15 feet before they decided to wait and let me pick myself up and dust off the grit and twigs.

Around noon we pulled up to the buffalo camp. It's a good spot to aim for, as it is just about half way. The dogs weren't exactly cooperative about stopping. We'd only been running four and a half hours. But the sun was up and getting hot. It was time to rest.

It was almost four in the afternoon. The sun was beating down. The dogs were snoozing on their straw beds, and I was snoozing on top of my sled. Well, I was trying to snooze. I'd been fighting off bronchitis for a few weeks, and lack of sleep and hard work had brought it right back. I was hacking and coughing constantly which made it almost impossible to sleep. I had a spare Z-pack in my med kit, but I was holding off, thinking I might need it even more, farther down the trail.

The dogs had gotten plenty of rest though, and it was time to go. I put Ember up in lead with Cutter, wondering how he would do. He showed some talent in lead during training, but was also a typical two year old boy; unfocused and unpredictable. On this long, mostly flat run through the scrubby forest to Nikolai, Ember charged forward like a pro.

About half way to Nikolai I noticed that Ziggy wasn't pulling. He is a monster sized dog, too big and heavy to want to haul in the sled. I knew from experience that once he got tired, he wouldn't bounce back with rest. I knew I was going to have to drop him in Nikolai. I had been hoping he would have learned to pace himself after our earlier races and training runs, but I don't think any of the dogs were pacing themselves so far on Iditarod – they were all too wild and excited by the new trail. Ziggy had been pulling hard and enthusiastically for 200 miles and he had hit his limit again. Although he stopped pulling, Ziggy was tough enough to keep trotting along all the way to the Kuskokwim River and up into Nikolai.

We pulled into Nikolai at 8 p.m., still light out, and just starting to cool down. I had a lot of chores to do. I needed to change runner plastic after the beating it took across the Burn. I needed to drop Ziggy and shorten up the line from a 16 to a 14 dog line. I needed to crack all the heavy ice off my sled bag and try to lighten up the sled a bit. Since we had only run four hours, we were only due a three hour break. That didn't leave me a lot of time.

Once I got all my chores done and had a bite to eat, I had only 20 minutes to lay down to sleep before I would need to be up to boot the dogs. So far during the race I had slept a couple of hours in Skwentna, and about an hour in Rohn, and had really only cat napped in Finger Lake, Rainy Pass, Rohn, and the Buffalo Camp. Tuesday was now coming to a close, so in the last three days I had only gotten about three hours of sleep.

The next run to Takotna was going to be brutal. It's an easy run along the rivers and flat swamps, but I would be running all night through the dead hours when the body just insists it must sleep. I caved in and gave myself an extra half hour to sleep. The dogs didn't need the extra rest, but I sure did. The warm, dark room and soft mats on the floor in Nikolai meant that I conked out almost immediately. Even though I was deeply asleep, as usual I woke up five minutes before my alarm, and wearily got up and moving again.

### **Wednesday; McGrath, Takotna**

We pulled out of Nikolai at 11:30 p.m. I had Ember and Whack A Mole up front. They are both young, but very talented. Ember had settled down and proven himself on the last run, and Whack A Mole has been a go-to leader for quite some time, despite his young age. Once again, I was standing on the brake trying to keep our speed down. I was amazed and proud of my strong, motivated, united team, made up mostly of youngsters. At the same time I knew we were travelling too fast and really needed to slow down and calm down if we were going to make it 1,000 miles.

I told myself that I would keep them under 9 mph, a bit fast for a long distance race, but maintainable. I couldn't do it. They were too strong. I argued with myself. On the one hand, too much speed can take a team down so far they never bounce back. On the other hand, we were coming up to our 24-hour break, which is a lot of time for a team to recuperate. Also, the dogs were working awfully hard against the brake, and it was wearing all of us out. Still, we had a long run ahead of us; longer than we had run so far this race, longer than most of our training runs. In my fatigue, the thought process was working really slowly. Finally I decided I was going to have to ease up a little bit, and let them go as long as they stayed under 9.5 mph. That is

ridiculously fast for this point in the race, but the entire team was running so hard and with so much enthusiasm that I didn't think I could hold them back anyway.

The run to McGrath was uneventful and very swift – less than six hours, the fastest I've ever run this section. I wasn't sure how all my young dogs would feel about carrying on through a checkpoint, as we had been stopping after only very short runs. I shouldn't have worried. They were amped up and once we dove down the bank back to the river, we were off and running again.

I had been doing really well staying awake on our all-night run. In the time between 2 a.m. and sunup it can be viciously difficult to stay awake, but I had been kept alert by my hard charging team. About three miles outside of Takotna, as we worked our way up a long climb, I dozed a bit. I was standing up to make sure I didn't go too far under, but I was definitely snoozing as the dogs ate away the miles. Suddenly I felt the team move differently, which instantly jerked me alert. There in the trail lay a body, face down, arms spread wide.

That woke me up in a hurry. The dogs were still charging forward, but they were staring bug-eyed at the still form and going wide to stay as far from the body as possible. I heaved the sled to one side to avoid running the body over, and slammed on the brakes to stop the team. My heart was pounding and my brain started jumping through the steps I needed to take – secure the team, check for breathing, check for pulse, check for injuries. If I had to take this person into Takotna, what was the best way to get them into the sled? I went from basically asleep into overdrive in less than a second.

As I went over my options, I jerked the sled to a stop. And realized that it was just a torso. To be more precise, it was just a parka, with no body inside it. But to the dogs and to me, in the light of my headlamp, it sure looked like a corpse.

Once I had a moment to regroup, I recognized the green and orange colors as Kelly Maxiner's. There was a broken bungee laying the snow right next to it, and I knew what had happened. All of us were prepared for the cruelly cold weather we usually encounter on the trail, but so far the temperatures had remained uncomfortably warm. My parka had spent the entire race thus far jammed inside my sled bag. Kelly had obviously strapped his on behind, and hadn't noticed when it fell off. I swiftly grabbed the bulky parka. Kelly was going to miss that parka farther down the trail. At least I hoped so, because we were all wishing for colder temperatures.

Now fully awake, we cruised the last few miles over the hills and down into Takotna. We arrived at 7:30 in the morning just as the sun started lighting the sky. We'd been running all night. The dogs were, as usual, super excited to have reached a checkpoint. Parking the long string of 14 eager dogs took plenty of helpers.

There is a lot to do for a long break - harnesses off and hung to dry; booties off and bagged up to send home; spare set of dog coats put on; straw shaken out for each dog; dog dishes distributed; meat, kibble, and water handed out; extra long tuglines clipped in to give the dogs more room; rub downs and massages as needed; medication (anti-ulcer and antioxidant) given. The dogs

settled down quickly, and I got everything taken care of in record time. Time for a hot meal for me, and then a nap on the church floor.

The 24 hour break went quickly, and I got plenty of sleep, even through all the coughing. My dogs are very durable and only Ember needed any massage or care – he had a sore back/hind leg that I had been working on a little at each stop. I also took each dog for a walk to stretch and play.

I gave myself two hours to get the team ready to go again, because I had to do everything in reverse; long tuglines collected; dog dishes, bucket, and ladle picked up and packed away; dog coats off and ready to be sent home; harnesses on; booties on; dogs rearranged; sled loaded and ready to go.

### **Thursday: Ophir, Innoko Valley**

We pulled out of Takotna right on time, and the dogs were full of it! It was just before 8 a.m., and already the day was heating up. Once again I was riding the brake and trying to keep our speed under control. Once again I marveled at the strength and beauty of these wonderful dogs. We blew down the road to Ophir in only 2 ½ hours and then turned off on the narrow trail to Cripple.

I still had Ember up in lead, and this time I had him paired with Elway. Elway has been a superstar since he was just a youngster. At four, he has multiple Iditarod finishes to his credit and is a tough and motivated dog. But until this year he wasn't much of a leader. I wanted to see what he could do up front, but was fully prepared to pull him out of lead if we had any problems at all. Putting two goof balls in lead is always risky, but sometimes they surprise you.

We passed through Ophir with just a quick sign in and vet check. Almost before we were really focused again we came around a corner to see water. Lots of it. The overflow filling the low spot in the trail was about 50 feet across and looked deep. I started to stop the team so I could get my waders out and lead the dogs across. Then I noticed that Ember and Elway weren't hesitating. They charged right into the slushy water and led that team across without a pause. I sat on my bucket and put my feet up on the sled and made it across with dry boots. I was so proud of those dogs!

We continued on down the trail as it rolled over gentle hills, through scrubby forest and swamps. There were several more small patches of overflow, but my two big boys up front took us right through with no problems. I could see the team visibly gaining power and unity the farther we ran down the trail. There was energy, excitement, focus, and power radiating from the dogs. They were loving this adventure!

I was aiming for a shelter cabin in the Innoko Valley that is about half way to Cripple. Why? I don't know. Temperatures were in the twenties above, the afternoon sun was warm, and we would have been just fine pulling off to the side of the trail and snoozing for a few hours. I certainly didn't need to find a warm cabin. But it's a good target, and the cabins usually have a nice platform where I could lay flat.



The little patch of forest with the cabin showed up just after 2:00 p.m. For once our timing was just about right. We'd been running strong for just less than six hours. Still trying to keep these wild dogs from tiring themselves too much, I set my schedule to rest for five hours. This easy schedule would never get us near the front runners, but my goal this year was just to get to Nome.

There was plenty of straw in the wooded area around the cabin and I had hauled half a bale, so the dogs got a really cushy bed to relax on. They ate really well and settled in for a nap. When I went into the cabin, it was warm and there were still embers in the woodstove. I threw on a couple of logs and tried to nap. I didn't have much luck; just coming off a long 24-hour break, I wasn't sleepy in the middle of the day. Instead I cleaned up the cabin. Previous users had left useable food items, empty packages, dirty socks, and all sorts of stuff strewn all over the main floor.

Finally it was time to get going again. It was just about 7:00 p.m. and still hot, but it would hopefully cool off as the angle of the sun diminished. I left Ember and Elway in lead; they were doing a fantastic job and setting a great pace.

The trail continued to roll over gentle, tundra covered hills, crossing occasional patches of spruce forest and creek bottoms filled with birch and willow scrub. The farther we went, the less snow there was and the rougher the trail got. There were lots of little gullies and creeks with steep drops into them, and vertical climbs out of them. Some had dirt, some had ice, some had slush, and some had water in the bottoms. All of them gave me and the sled a pounding. The dogs nearly leapt across one narrow gulch; my sled smashed forward into it, hit the far side, stopped dead, and recoiled backwards as the loaded runners flexed. I bounced off the handlebar with a jolt and stopped the team to take a look at my sled. I was sure there had to be damage after such a vicious slam, but everything looked fine and the dogs were screaming to keep going.

The dogs enjoyed the varied terrain and cooling temperatures, and got stronger and stronger. Each time I stopped the team for snacks or to reorganize after a rough patch, Sumlin and Glow screamed at the top of their lungs until we were in motion again. The amount of power the team was producing was almost frightening.

### **Friday: Cripple, Ruby**

After six hours the lights of Cripple checkpoint glowed ahead, while the northern lights swirled above. Tyrell Seavey, checking me in around 1:00 a.m., noted that my team looked 'sort of frisky' and grabbed on to help me keep them under control as we moved to our parking spot.

There is no water near Cripple; you have to melt snow for the dogs. I got the cooker going before I did anything else. While the cooker was burning I got the dogs all set and nestled down for a rest. I was done with my chores and had my sled all packed and ready for the next run in only an hour and fifteen minutes. I noticed other mushers that had arrived before me were still working on their teams. I mentally reviewed all the tasks that need to be done, but I hadn't left anything out. I was just very efficient.

By this time I had been going all day and most of the night, and was ready to get some sleep. I found nice bunk in a warm musher cabin. Unfortunately my coughing and hacking kept me (and everyone else in the cabin) from getting much sleep. After laying down for a couple of hours and dozing I got up, filled my water jug in the cook tent, and got going again.

It was 5:30 in the morning as we climbed the hills out of Cripple. The dogs were wild to go from the beginning, but about ½ hour out of Cripple they suddenly surged forward with insane power, barking and straining in their harnesses. I immediately thought of moose, hit the brakes, and switched on my bright beam. I didn't see anything, but the dogs kept racing forward. Whatever it was, it was staying with us. Finally I realized that the excitement was all about a team just in front of us.

My sled bag has so much reflective tape on it that it lights up like a Christmas tree whenever it is near any sort of light. This makes it really easy to find in a busy checkpoint where there may be a whole field of teams and sleds. More importantly, any snow machiner out there will definitely see me in plenty of time to stop. The sled in front of me had no reflective tape, and it took me awhile to figure out what it was. It happened to be Justin Savidis, who had left ten minutes before us.

The dogs were really strong, and we had caught up to Justin pretty quickly, so I decided to pass. But once we got in front of Justin, it was just one problem after another. He was following right on our tail and I didn't want to hold him up, so I was trying not to stop too often. My dogs were definitely faster, but I kept having to deal with mini-tangles and tip-overs as the trail started bucking through washouts and creek beds, and twisting through tight trees.

After an hour or so of trying to build a lead over Justin so I didn't have to worry about holding him up, we ran into a group of potholes filled with icy overflow. The dogs went through easily, but one hole had a deep pit on one side. It threw the sled off balance and we started to flip into the water. I put my foot down to keep the sled upright, and it went in over my knee. We hauled out on the far side and I was busy trying to assess the damage to my now soaking boot and bibs. Suddenly we were faced with crossed markers right across the trail.

I stopped quickly. The trail definitely did not go forward down the trail we were on, that much was clear from the markers. But I sure couldn't see where we were supposed to go. To the left was a wall of brush and trees. To the right there was a narrow gap, which opened up on a five foot vertical drop off into a slushy half frozen creek, followed by a five foot vertical climb out on the far side of the creek. I couldn't believe this could be the correct path, but I didn't see any other possibilities. And after looking closely, I spotted a trail marker on the far bank. So that was it. Over the cliff.

The dogs were not happy about going over the edge. I tried to push my leaders down the drop, and Elway very clearly said no. None of the other dogs were interested either, and they fought to stay on the bank. They were a lot stronger than me. Pushing wasn't working. I clambered down the drop off and used gravity to help pull the front dogs after me. Once I had a few dogs headed in the right direction, they all surged forward, so I had to scramble to get back up to my sled

before it went over the drop without a pilot. It was a rough drop, but we were on our way again. For a short while, anyway.

On the far side the dogs scrambled up and over the steep bank, but there was no way they could pull the heavy sled up and over the lip. Even with me pushing, they were pulling at right angles to the vertical sled, and all their force was doing very little. I climb up the bank and heaved straight up on the gangline. I am definitely not as strong as I was before I got hurt, and doing a dead lift is pretty hard on the back. But finally we were able to get over the edge.

Once I was atop the far bank I could see the actual trail where it gently made its way across the creek about 20 yards back from our cliff dive location. In the mess of trees, overflow, brush, and multiple trails, we had zoomed right by the turn off. I bet a lot of teams made the same mistake.

It was time to stop and snack the dogs. And it was time to give Elway and Ember a break from leading – they were starting to look a little frazzled. I found a wide spot in the trail and fed out some chicken skins. Justin's team wasn't too far back after all our bushwhacking. They went by us, only to stop and snack maybe five minutes later. At this point the trail had narrowed, and there wasn't room to go by. We were stuck behind Justin's team.

We reached the Sulatna River crossing, 25 miles out. After dropping down into the river there was a long stretch of overflow that got pretty deep before we climbed a long, steep bank up on the far side. Harp and Whack-A-Mole were now up front, and they charged through that overflow like pros. I was feeling really good about how my dogs were tackling water.

On the other hand, our speed was slowing down and the team was starting to look less coordinated. I reminded myself that this run never seems to go smoothly for me, and tried not to worry too much. But I couldn't help but think our crazy speed in the first half of the race was about to backfire on us. Whack-A-Mole couldn't seem to leave Harp alone, and after half an hour I switched up Cutter who is always great in lead.

Once again we were underway. Except now I was thinking it was time to stop and rest. I wanted to break this run into equal parts, and we'd already come over half way. It was 11:00 a.m. Even though we'd only been going five and a half hours I hoped that a nice refreshing break would help the dogs reconnect and refocus. Also, I knew the next 20 miles was a series of long uphill grades that can really discourage a team. I wanted to tackle those hills with a rested and ready team.

The only problem was, there was nowhere to get off the trail. The trail now followed a nice wide road, but there was now also deep snow on either side. I had decided not to haul straw because it is heavy and I figured I would find a spot where a previous team had put down straw. We had already passed several camp spots where there was plenty of straw to re-use. But now, when I wanted to stop, there wasn't a wide spot or any straw in sight.

I was watching my team visibly droop in the heat. Cutter was looking very flat. He was still leading competently, but his line wasn't tight. I wanted to stop the team before they wilted any more. Finally we came around a corner to find a nice wide spot that was still in the sun. Ed

Stielstra was already parking his team, but he generously allowed me to sneak in front of him. Even without straw, the nice sunny day made it a good spot to rest.

The entire race we had been hearing (and seeing evidence) of a horrible diarrhea virus working its way through the teams. Up to this point my dogs had looked great, but during this stop Hatchet, Ember, Elway, and Cutter all showed signs of problems. Cutter, my go to guy, the most experienced, toughest leader in the team, was the worst. I could see that he felt awful, but there wasn't much I could do except give him some medication and hope for the best.

The best did not happen. When it came time to get going around 3:00, Cutter looked miserable. I moved him back in the team so he wouldn't have to work as hard. He still wasn't keeping up and I knew it was time to give him a break. I loaded him into the sled. He has never in his life had to get a lift, and he was not at all happy. I strapped the sled bag over him, and kept smacking his nose whenever he poked it out. Finally he agreed to stay put and I let him ride with his head in the fresh air. He spent the rest of the run gazing up at me while I pet him and told him he would feel better after resting. Every time I looked into his soft eyes I thought of all the beautiful runs we had together, and how much I wanted to finish one last Iditarod with my special guy.

Once I took Cutter out of lead I ran through just about every other dog in the team to take his place up with Harp. I still had twelve (!) decent leaders in the team. Up until now, every dog I put up front did their level best to run the fastest Iditarod ever. But now no one seemed to have the focus to lead the team. The boys couldn't concentrate around Harp – she was clearly coming into heat. Sumlin, Glow, and Shanahan piddled around and made a mess of things. I didn't even try Nome, who had been reserved and quiet for most of the race, although still pulling well. Finally I put up Tilt-A-Whirl. She had been running in swing since Takotna. I felt she was too immature and was looking a bit overheated. I didn't expect her to do much in lead, but she surprised me. When I put her up with Harp she seemed game.

Finally we were making progress on the long, hot trudge to Ruby. It was only 35 miles from where we had camped, but the long slog up endless hill after endless hill after endless hill made it seem so much longer. This team was an entirely different creature than the one I had been barely hanging on to for the first 500 miles.

I had a few options for where to take my mandatory eight hour break. When I was driving a wild, strong, motivated team I had been leaning towards taking the long break in Galena or Nulato, farther down the river, and after a longer run. Now that the team had deflated, I realized we needed that long break now. The run into Ruby took us only five hours, but I needed to pump the dogs back up or we weren't going to go far.

It was 8 p.m. when we reached the little village of Ruby. I got the dogs all cozied into their dog coats with a big meal in their bellies. Even though most of the boys in the team had the runs, they were mostly eating pretty well. I got more medication from the team of veterinarians. Metronidazole usually kicks in really quickly, and I hoped our diarrhea problems would be under control soon.

I also decided to drop Harp. At this point none of my other girls were interested in leading and she was making all the boys forget what to do. It was a tough decision because she is a strong leader with experience, and I was running low on experienced dogs. But I was so frustrated by how all my boys were acting that I just didn't want to deal with any more hormones.

### **Saturday; Ruby, Galena, Nulato**

I got a nice long four hour nap in Ruby. It was the first real good rest I got since Takotna, way back on Wednesday, and I was out hard until just before my alarm went off (as usual, some inner sense woke me before the buzzer sounded). I got the dogs up and ready to go right on time and we pulled out at 4:15 in the morning. The dogs were all barking to go and looked ready and refreshed.

The run to Galena is right down the Yukon River, which is flat and easy pulling as long as the wind isn't knocking you off your feet. This night it was calm and still. Also, it was finally just a little bit chilly, right around zero; perfect conditions for a great run. I completely expected the dogs to charge down the trail.

And we did. For about 20 minutes. Then we sort of wavered to a stop and the dogs sort of milled around. It took me a few minutes to get everyone lined back out and going. As long as we were in motion we were moving at a fantastic pace. But we just kept stopping. Whack A Mole had been really terrible about coming back to visit Harp. Now with Harp gone, Whack A Mole was still struggling to lead. The team was finding every excuse to slow down and stop, and he was more than happy to hit the brakes and then come back and cause a tangle. Tilt A Whirl, up front with him, was just following his lead. She was contributing nothing to our forward motion.

I needed strong leaders up front. Cutter and Hatchet, the only experienced veteran leaders left in the team, weren't feeling too well and I knew they weren't going to take over. I started shuffling leaders again and again. I just couldn't find a combination that would keep us moving. We would start out all right, and then someone in the team would stop to pee and the whole team would grind to a halt. Then the front end would mix up with the middle, and I would have to go untangle the team. By the time I would get back to my sled to get going again, the team would be back in a heap. Barking to go, but not lined out so we could actually proceed. I knew the dogs weren't physically tired after getting so much rest, but mentally they were toast.

Ember looked strong and happy even though he definitely had the virus that was going around. He had been leading like a champion for most of the last 300 miles, and had only faltered up next to Harp. I put him back up, hoping he was ready to go back to work. He held the line tight. Now I just had to find someone to pair with him. Finally I decided to give Tilt-A-Whirl another chance. She wasn't going to lead the team on her own but she was happy enough to trot along as a co-leader, relying on Ember's confidence. Once I got those two up front, my frustrations were over. We charged down the river.

After an hour I realized Cutter was lagging again. I was really praying that a little more rest and time off would help him bounce back, so I got him to ride in the sled again. On the flat, fast river the rest of the dogs didn't even notice the extra weight, and we flew along in the cool darkness.

For the first time during the race, I got out my parka. The temperatures were still very mild, just below zero. But compared to the temperatures we had been running in, it felt pretty cold. For the first time I was a little chilled. I wasn't exactly shivering, but my muscles were tense from the cold, and this became a problem. All the damaged muscles in my back began to scream and lock up. There wasn't much I could do; this was the sort of pain I had anticipated. I was just glad the race had been so warm up to this point. A really cold race would have been agonizing. I knew that I would have a chance in Galena to lay flat and warm, and I could only hope that my muscles would cooperate.

We arrived in Galena after just over 6 hours, arriving at 10:30 in the morning. Between the pain from my back and the stress of finding a combination that would lead the team, I was really glad when we finally charged up the steep river bank and onto the streets of the village. Considering how much time we spent motionless looking for direction at the beginning, I was really happy with our time. The dogs were all eating well even though just about everybody in the team was showing signs of diarrhea by then. The medication didn't seem to be helping at all, but as long as they kept eating and drinking, didn't get dehydrated, and still wanted to go it would be alright.

As soon as I entered the big community center, I saw my friend Allen Moore. We have run a lot of miles together and he is always an inspiration and great source of information and encouragement. I could see right away that he was troubled. I asked him how he was doing and he sat down heavily and told me about the snow machine attacks on Aliy and Jeff. The news was hard to hear. It is one thing to have an accident, and we are always wary of snow machines out on the trail. But to be deliberately targeted and attacked is really scary. I instantly regretted leaving my Glock behind. I often carry a fire arm to protect against aggressive moose. In this low-snow year I decided I wouldn't need it. Sadly, most of us will likely never run unarmed again. With this disturbing news rattling around in my head I laid down and tried to get some sleep.

I managed a two hour nap and got back out to the dogs. It was a hot sunny afternoon, but we had rested five hours and it was time to go. The trail to Nulato was longer this year, going overland and through the back sloughs for much of the way. The dogs got up with energy and were barking to go. Sumlin and Glow were really kicking up a fuss. Even though the team was loud and fired up, I knew that they were still a little shaky. Like last time, we were fine as long as we were in motion but getting back underway after any little stop was a problem. On this run Elway was back to leading, but I still judged that he was along as a co-leader. Without Ember to take charge we were going nowhere.

Like last time, Cutter rode most of the way. I was still hanging on to hope that Cutter would bounce back if I babied him. I would really need his experience farther down the trail. This was especially true because I realized I needed to drop Hatchet, my only other experienced leader. He had really been struggling with diarrhea since just after Cripple. He was still trying, but he was having to stop so frequently that it was slowing us down. He wasn't getting better, and he wasn't having any fun.

We made it to Nulato at 10:45 p.m. after just over 7 hours on the trail. Nulato is always very welcoming, but I think they made extra effort this year. It was a great place to stop and take a break. Sticking to my conservative schedule with plenty of rest, we settled in for a nice six hour stop.

We left in the wee dark hours. The clocks had changed, so what felt like 4:45 a.m. was now 5:45. Somehow I had remembered to reset my watch, and had managed to figure out the correct time to get up. Clock math is always a challenge when you are sleep deprived.

### **Sunday: Kaltag, Tripod Flats**

With Ember once again leading us, we headed down the trail for Kaltag. I was glad to be running in the dark and cool. It was a nice fast run down the river and only took us four hours to get to Kaltag. I thought about grabbing my drop bags and running on to Tripod Flats while the going was good and it was still cool. But it was another 30 miles to Tripod, which made for a long run. I could have stopped short of Tripod; camping in warm, calm weather is no problem. But that would have made the next run into Unalkleet even longer. I decided I better stick to the plan and take a short three hour break in Kaltag.

I only had time for a quick 30 minute nap before it was time to be up and going again. We headed back out and it was the worst timing ever. It was 1:00 in the afternoon. It was blazing hot, around 25 above, and the sun was beating down. The trail wound up through the trees, climbing through sticky snow. The dogs plodded. They looked back at me. They sulked. We crawled along.

I kept encouraging the dogs. We weren't going to go far. Just to Tripod Flats, and then we'd stop. They weren't convinced. Ember kept the team moving, as he had been all down the river and now up into the hills. The rest of the dogs pulled, just not very fast, and not very happy. Whenever we stopped, they barked their heads off, so I guess they didn't want to stop either. I managed to keep them moving down the trail for the four hours it took us to reach the Tripod Flats cabin. When we finally reached our goal, they barked and screamed and were completely uncooperative about turning off the trail to park. Clearly a case of mental fatigue, not physical.

We stopped for three and a half hours, plenty of rest after a short four hour run. I lay down on top of my sled, but there wasn't really enough time for a nap. When it was time to get going at 7:30 p.m. the sun was still up and it was still hot. But I knew the dogs would be fine after our little break, and the sun would lose the sky soon.

I was really keeping an eye on Ember. Once again he was in lead. He was the only dog keeping this team going. Elway, Tilt-A-Whirl, and Whatck-A-Mole were taking turns leading with him, but they were all acting as co-leaders. None of them had the focus or drive to really lead. Without Ember we weren't going to go anywhere. That is a lot of pressure to put on a young dog, and I could see he was getting fatigued. He was also sick. Everyone in the team still had the runs, but Ember's was the worst. I kept dosing them with medication, and carefully watching for dehydration. Despite all the stress and not being 100% healthy, Ember continued to lead strongly. I was incredibly proud of this young dog!

We pulled out with plenty of good attitude and energy, but I had my concerns about the rest of the dogs too. This team had fallen apart, and it was not coming back together. The dogs weren't physically tired; our speed was good, they were strong, they were barking to go. But the united, focused team I had run the first 500 miles was gone. In its place was a bunch of young, inexperienced dogs who were a little overwhelmed and wondering if we would keep getting up and going forever.

I reminded myself that last year they had a horrible experience in Bryan's team, running too fast and then pushing on through terrible weather until they gave up and quit. As far as they knew, we were going to do the same thing again. I could see their fear and uncertainty. The only experienced veteran's I had, Elway, Pierce, and Cutter, weren't feeling well, and couldn't provide the leadership that could have pulled the team back together. It was up to me to give them the confidence they would need to keep going.

### **Monday: Unalkeet, Shaktoolik**

We rolled the miles into Unalkeet, picking up speed as the sun went down. The team continued to be a strange mix of very fast and very excited to run, and yet fragile and unstable. Lots of times it's hard to stay awake when you run all night into the early morning hours. This time, between the rocket fast pace of the team, and needing to really watch the dynamics and keep an eye out for trouble, I was wide awake all the way to Unalkeet.

It was 2:30 in the morning when we pulled into the checkpoint. Even at that hour, my mother made her way down to the dog yard to welcome me to Unk. She was a little bit late because she didn't expect me to travel quite so fast. She was also surprised to see me running so far up in the pack (I was solidly in the middle) because I had told her I would likely need to rest and take care of my back. I expected to be far to the back of the pack this year. There was no denying that my injuries were causing me problems and it was taking me longer to do many tasks. And yes, there was plenty of pain. But I wasn't interested in letting it hold me back. I didn't feel like wasting time on resting – it is a race after all, not a camping trip! As long as I could manage, I was going to keep pushing as much as my fragile team would let me.

As I pulled into Unalkeet, I knew I had to send Cutter home. He hadn't really been pulling since just after Cripple, almost 200 miles before. He had rested and ridden in the sled for most of that distance, but he just wasn't bouncing back.

I hated to drop him for so many reasons. Because I had run so many, many miles with him and I wanted to run under the Burred Arch one more time with him. Because it's always tough to say goodbye in the middle of such an intense experience, even though we know they will be fine and well cared for and happy to be back home. Because I knew I needed a strong experienced leader to finish this race, and Cutter is one of the best I've ever run. I'd been hoping desperately that he would recover his spunk and attitude, take the team down the trail, and solve all my problems. But it wasn't going to happen that way. And so I bundled him up, gave him a kiss, and sent him off with a veterinarian to take the long ride home.

Now I didn't have any experienced, veteran leaders. Now I had just Ember left to guide the team. Now I was left with only two dogs who had ever travelled the trail to the finish line. I had a real



challenge. Despite our fast run times, I knew I was going to have to do something drastic or these dogs were going to fold up. I especially needed to keep Ember feeling fantastic. It was time to pull back and baby these dogs. I decided I would be taking eight hour breaks from here to the end. Physically, the dogs don't need that much time to recuperate and be able to carry on. But mentally an eight hour break can do wonders for a dog's attitude. I needed these dogs to feel completely rested, fresh, and happy to go.

On top of being extra rested, I thought it would help to get these dogs onto a schedule they could count on so they would know exactly what to expect. A moderate run followed by a long easy break, and then up to run again. If I kept things very consistent then the dogs could fall into a predictable routine of rest, run, rest, run. And each time they would know we were to take a long break. No surprises.

And so I took my time on chores. I replaced my runner plastic, I cleaned out my sled and repacked it. Then I went up to the community center and had a nice relaxing breakfast and took a good nap. I wouldn't be leaving until morning.

We got up and going from Unalakleet at 10:30 in the morning. If this is all starting to sound repetitious, it really is. No matter how varied the terrain, how amazing the views, how difficult the weather, how crazy (or completely mundane) the run is, there is an overriding consistency to the run/rest cycle.

As I was preparing the team to leave, I decided to drop Oreo. He was looking thin and dehydrated. He was the only dog who wasn't eating or drinking well. He was still working hard and cheerful, but I didn't want to take the chance of pushing him too hard in the tough hills ahead. So now I was down to ten dogs, all of them holding my heart.

Ember was in lead with Elway again. For most of the first hour I worked hard to hold our speed down. The only indication that the team was not firing on all cylinders was the fact that I had almost zero steering. All of my dogs know their directions and are generally excellent at following command. But in their mental fatigue they just weren't coping well. It took a bit of work to convince them to turn away from the main path into town and take the less visible trail up the river ice and under the bridge instead.

A few miles out of town, the trail took off on a slight angle from a plowed, icy, gravelly road. The dogs insisted on following the road. I couldn't set a hook in the hard packed ice/dirt of the road, and I couldn't convince the shrieking, excited dogs to take the trail. It took several minutes and some tricky work on my part to drag the team onto the correct trail without losing them altogether. As soon as I got back to the sled they shot back onto the road and lunged forward, heaving the sled forward. We played this game several more times before I won out and persuaded the dogs that we were NOT going to take the road.

Then we were on the main trail that winds up through the Blueberry Hills; no more steering problems. I always love this run. The views are fantastic. There is such a sense of accomplishment at conquering the steep climbs. And this far into the race, the team has usually

morphed into a running machine. It is glorious to watch them crank through the punishing hills with a single purpose.

This time I watched the dogs fizzle and sputter after their initial burst of energy faded. I knew I was going to have my work cut out for me to keep them from getting completely demoralized. Each time someone needed to pee, or the sled went over a bump, or bush looked interesting, we ground to a stop and then collapsed into a heap. The dogs would bark and jump as if they wanted to go, but they wouldn't stay lined out and facing down the trail. It was as if the team was huddling together looking for support.

I would go up and line them out and get them organized, but by the time I made it back to my sled they would be all messed up again and I'd have to walk up the line and get them squared away. Sometimes it took me two or three tries to get us rearranged and ready to go. And then we would take off like a shot.

Normally I stop every so often on a steep hill to allow the dogs a breather. This time it was too risky. I wasn't sure I would find a way to get them going again. Instead, I found myself running and pushing the sled to keep us moving. Running up hills and helping the dogs is a pretty normal thing to do, but I was not normal this year. I knew if I overdid it, my back could seize up with cramps, my pain level could sky rocket, I could have serious problems. But I didn't see a way around it, so I pedaled, pushed, and ran. And by keeping the sled moving forward, I kept the dogs from petering out and milling around, which could have been disastrous.

One lesson I have learned (several times) is that you cannot think about the entire trail, all the challenges coming up, all the miles left to run. You can only focus on the next thing you must do, the next mile you must cover, the next checkpoint you must reach. That is all your brain can manage without overloading. And it is all you have any control over anyway. And so I thought only of going over those hills and then down the ice to Skaktoolik. I knew we could do that much. I wasn't sure about continuing past there, but I was confident I could cajole, encourage, and, if necessary, scold these dogs all the way to the next checkpoint.

We ground up one rise after another and they just kept coming. Of course the sun was out. Of course it was hot and miserable. Whenever I thought we had topped the last big hill, the trail would continue along the ridge line and then climb again. The dogs continued to hold great speed as long as we were in motion, but I was dealing with more and more confused halts. Finally, with me encouraging and talking the team up all the way, we mastered all those tough hills.

From there, the trail zoomed down and down and down, all the way back to sea level. Fifteen more miles to Shaktoolik, but they weren't going to be easy ones. The wind was blowing hard, slinging the sled all over the polished glare ice, and pulling the dogs with it. These dogs had almost no experience with wind, almost no experience with glare ice. In their brittle mental state, I really didn't need anything demoralizing like this.

In spite of our problems with getting going again, I needed to make a quick stop. I put Pierce, who does have experience with ice and wind, up in swing to help give the rest of the team

confidence. I pulled booties off to give the dogs traction. I was moving as fast as I could, hoping to keep our forward momentum. After a few tries, we were moving forward again.

I was working hard to control the sled without jerking the dogs. My team was handling the conditions really well. When the sled was being blown sideways across the ice and they were being pulled off their feet, they weren't letting it phase them. They just kept aiming for the tiny patches of snow where traction was best, digging in strongly when they could, and tiptoeing when the footing was slick. It almost seemed that they united and worked together as a team better on this stretch than anywhere in the past several hundred miles.

We pulled into Shaktoolik at 4:45 in the afternoon. Even with all the stops and stalls and difficulty keeping going, our run only took a bit over 6 hours. This is a reasonable good time for this run. We were the only team there, and were parked right up next to the building, sheltered from the wind. It's almost pointless to give the dogs straw in Shak because the wind always flings it into the sea. But this time we were parked next to a huge bank of straw raked up from previous teams. The straw pile was several feet high, and the dogs burrowed in with glee. It's never a good idea to let the dogs rest on straw fouled by previous teams. But there was no way to keep them out, and the dogs were so happy in their enormous bed of straw that all I could do was laugh. It was time for another long, eight hour break, and the dogs were as cushy as could be.

### **Tuesday: Koyuk, Elim**

Time in Shaktoolik was up at 1:00 in the morning. I was happy to be running in the coolest part of the night. I was happy to do this stretch in the dark, so the dogs would not be overwhelmed by the vast, endless whiteness of the sea ice crossing. I was really happy that the perpetual winds in this area were barely gusting this night. It looked to be the easiest possible crossing coming up. And we were going to need it. This was not a dog team that was prepared to battle through difficult conditions.

I kept Elway and Ember up front, my two strongest leaders. Right off the bat, Ember pulled us sharply to the left and would not listen to my corrections. I stopped the team before we left the trail behind completely and veered off into the empty ice. As soon as we stopped, Ember came right back to visit the other dogs and Elway came with him. All the dogs were milling around and looking clueless. I lined them out and we moved forward smartly for about 20 feet. Then Ember swerved left again. He was clearly not in a good frame of mind to lead. I put Tilt-A-Whirl up front to see if she could give Ember more support, but Ember again pulled his left-handed nonsense.

Meanwhile, I noticed Whack-A-Mole barking and jumping. I hadn't tried him in lead since Ruby when he was being such an idiot about pestering all the girls. But he looked ready to move out now, so I put him up with Elway. Like magic we were moving forward. I had found the right combination, and for the first time in hundreds of miles, it didn't include Ember. My 'co-leaders' had stepped up to main leaders.

The miles rolled along. This is a very long, very boring run across frozen sea ice with no landmarks, nothing to look at, and no relief from the endless trail markers clocking by on the left. Our speed stayed good, and my two big boys up front were doing a really nice job leading. If we

had encountered typical winds, I knew this team didn't have the drive to keep marching, but in the light breeze we were steadily moving across the open expanse. My worries about stalling out mid-way across the ice eased up. I knew I could get this team to Koyuk, and that's all I needed to know right then.

We cruised over in six and a half hours, arriving just after the sun came up. I settled the dogs down for a nice long rest. By this point pretty much everyone had diarrhea, but they were all still eating and drinking well. Another eight hour break meant that I had time for four or five hours of sleep myself, plus time to eat and clean up. I was feeling strong!

While I was eating, I talked to Martin Buser a little about the challenges I was facing, and wondering if I was doing enough to keep the team whole. They were carrying on, but they sure weren't re-bounding even with all the extra rest. I'd been struggling to find leaders since Ruby, 300 miles before. Martin looked at me and said simply, "The leader is on the back of the sled." And I thought, "Well, that's real helpful. I know that. That's why we're moving as well as we are. But it doesn't help me when I don't have a dog that will run up front."

We headed out from Koyuk at 4:00 in the afternoon. After doing a fantastic job on the last run, Whack-A-Mole had burned out entirely. He was no longer focused enough to stay up front. But Tilt-A-Whirl and Elway were doing just fine. Like usual, once we got under way we charged down the trail.

After an hour of great running along the gently rolling hills of the coast line, I started seeing signs of trouble. We were still moving very fast, but I was getting look-backs. That is what happens when a dog is feeling tired and checks back with the musher to see if they are paying attention. A dog who is looking back is starting to think they don't want to keep going. If they decide to sit down, the rest of the team is very likely to join them. And I was getting looks from all the dogs. Repeatedly. This was a VERY BAD SIGN!

We still had 35 miles or more to go. I had to change these dog's attitudes fast, or we were done for. I thought about Martin's words some more. I had faith, on each run, that I could push the dogs to the next checkpoint. I knew we were going to get there, one way or another. And each time, we did. But my attitude was based on grit and determination. I was missing the joy and energy that had made the team so incredible in the early parts of the race. If I didn't have it, how could I expect the dogs to?

Instead of focusing on the very real worry that the team might stop, I focused on gratitude and wonder. I looked at the incredible beauty of the landscape we were running through, a place so few ever get to experience. I thought of how amazing it was that we were here, despite all odds, running Iditarod again. I gave thanks for the excellent trail and easy weather this year, which made all the difference for me being able to manage with physical limitations.

Most of all, I looked at my lovely dogs and marveled at how beautiful and tough and sweet they are, and thanked them for their hard work and dedication. No matter what happened next, they had done a fantastic job to this point. In that moment, all that mattered was truly feeling and

being right where we were. I focused all this buoyant energy and sent it forward through the team, sharing love and energy and elation with every dog.

The look-backs stopped. Our speed actually increased. As the temperatures dropped the team got more and more focused. I had complete certainty that we were going to run all the way to Nome. Better than that, I knew these last few runs were going to be wonderful, and I was beyond excited to share them with my marvelous dogs.

I thought of my friend Chris singing at a party a few weeks ago giving us chills with his voice, and I sang;

Trail leaving town  
You know how I feel.  
Sun going down  
You know how I feel.  
Moon coming round.  
You know how I feel.  
It's a new day.  
It's a new trail.  
It's a new team.  
And I'm feeling good.

We ran strongly up the hills and into Elim under a beautiful moonlight clear sky. I was energized and filled with bliss to be out here running these dogs. Every dog in the team was working together and happy to be running. The run was almost over too soon, after less than six hours on the trail.

Our time from Koyuk was faster than almost everyone running nearby; exactly tied with Martin, who is known for speed. I knew the extra rest was needed to keep the dogs together mentally, but I hadn't counted on how much it would speed up our runs.

I had the team parked and fed and bedded down, and was in eating my own meal inside when other teams started showing up. I knew they wouldn't be staying as long as we were going to. It was hard to sit and watch other teams come in and overtake us. But I knew what my dogs needed, and we were going to do another eight hour break.

### **Wednesday; White Mountain**

We left Elim just before 6:00 in the morning. After traversing the sea ice for several miles, the trail begins a series of long steep climbs, going up 1,000 feet in elevation over the Kwiktalik Mountains. The trail then drops down all the way back to sea ice and Golovin Bay.

I had Elway and Ember back in lead and we no longer fumbled around and struggled to get moving; my well trained team was back. The dogs were still not united and focused like teams usually are for the last half of the race. But we were moving strongly and everyone was cheerful.

I had to work to keep our speed under control for the first hour, but after that we started climbing, and I could let the dogs motor up the hills. We were really making good time. We had left at the same time as another team and I kept expecting them to catch us, or at least see them on the trail behind. But we never saw them again. We were really moving.

All of us were enjoying the beautiful day and beautiful run. There was a breeze on top of the hills and the sun hadn't yet reached its full strength by the time we were done with the tough climbs. All that was left was to slide down the back side of the mountains towards Golovin Bay, and then it was flat easy running all the way to White Mountain.

People came out to wave and greet us as we came into the village of Golovin. The dogs trotted along purposefully. We'd only been going 26 miles, and we had another 18 to go. If you rest in Elim there is no reason to stop so soon in Golovin. But mentally it can be a very tough place to get through. Many teams have stalled out here (including mine in 2011). I wondered if my dogs would wobble, but was convinced we'd sail through just because I believed it.

As we exited the other side of town to face more flat open ice, Ember lost his focus and tried to turn us left into a maintenance building. I laughed at him. Silly dog. We weren't going to stop here, we had to get to White Mountain! I headed the team down the trail again, and Ember once again tried to turn us. Poor guy, I was asking too much of him. Tilty was in swing, and was looking forward down the trail. I switched her to the front, and she and Elway just took over.

Never once did I worry that the team might quit. Never once did I think we might not make it to White Mountain. We were too close, the day was too nice, the dogs were too strong. We weren't a united and focused team. We weren't strong and invincible. But we were going forward, and no doubt in my mind that we'd see Nome before too long.

Instead, I just marveled at my tiny, delicate little Tilt-A-Whirl who doesn't appear to have an ounce of tough in her body, who was up in lead yet again. I admired my big, tough Elway, who has been knocking my socks off since he was a puppy, but never indicated he could take over and lead when no one else could. They made a funny pair, my smallest, most fragile-looking dog matched up with an enormous monster of a mutt. But attitude is everything, and their attitude was focused forward.

We rambled up the long bay and into the wide river valley. Once again, the run was almost too short. We hit White Mountain after only 5 ½ hours; faster by far than anyone running nearby. It's a mandatory eight hour break here; at least this time we weren't going to be giving any time up to teams who weren't resting as much.

We left White Mountain just after 7:00 p.m. We pulled out 20 minutes in front of Kristy and Anna. I didn't think they would be able to catch us; we'd been travelling faster all along, just resting longer. We had completed the trip from Elim a whopping 30 minutes faster.

For the very longest leg of the race we'd be running all night. Perfect! I let Tilty and Elway stay in lead; they were doing a fantastic job. After a quick group howl, we headed down the trail with no hesitation. I knew we were going to have a great run in.

The trail winds up and down over the windswept Topkok Hills for hours. Some of the hills are gentle, but some are rather steep. I pedaled and ran up all of them. I knew it was going to be a long, tiring run, and I knew if I overdid it my back would make me pay. But I also knew I had a long rest and a hot bath waiting for me.

By 10:30 p.m. we were dropping down the last long break to the beach. That is when I always feel like we are almost there. Of course we aren't – there are still many hours to go. But it just feels like we made it somewhere. There is a little shelter cabin nestled at the base of the hill, for this is where the winds can start to become really vicious. It was calm and clear this night, and we were all set to dash right by.

But there were voices and lights and the smell of wood smoke coming from the cabin. Someone called out my name, and the dogs were convinced we were pulling into a checkpoint. Our mental fragility reared its tiny little head again. We'd been running a few hours, and the dogs were certain it was time to stop. Nope. Keep moving. I had to talk them through a few stops and starts, but once we were heading down the trail we fell back into rhythm. It was still 6 or 7 more hours to the finish. And miles to go before I sleep...

We left the shelter cabin behind and skittered down the frozen lagoon. There were almost no markers left in the ice, but I knew where we were headed and Elway was really listening to my directions. Watching the team navigate the slippery surface with confidence and skill just made

me smile. This team of babies were becoming veterans. We cruised along the ice with almost no friction, moving swiftly and easily.

After some miles we joined the road that goes all the way in to Safety. There was almost no wind, just a calm, clear night. But there certainly had been wind at some point. All the snow had blown off the crown of the road and there were vast patches of sand and gravel. The dogs know that hard packed dirt is great footing and easy to run on. They aimed for the dark, snowless patches. The sled runners don't slide well on gravel and sand. We jerked and stalled each time the sled ran over the rough spots. I tried hopping off to run next to the sled, but couldn't keep up. I tried calling the dogs to stay on the snow, but they weren't cooperating even a tiny bit. I tried leaning the sled, unweighting the sled, pedaling. Nothing really helped. I resigned myself to lurching along over the snowless bits. Our speed fell off drastically, but we were still making progress and everyone was still feeling good.

We kept lurching down the road, jerking from snow to sand. Except there was more and more sand and gravel, and less and less snow. There was a perfectly good trail just to the right of the road that we could have flown along on. But the dogs had zeroed in on the firm footing and were determined that we should run on it. I tried switching leaders. I pulled Elway out and put up Whack A Mole up. We didn't go anywhere. Back to fumbling and confusion. I put Ember up front, but he came back to visit instead of lining out. No one else looked like they might want to take us down the trail.

I was back to Elway and Tilty, my only functional leaders. They would go forward, but they were not interested in taking directions. And so I simply accepted it. As long as we were in motion, we were making progress. Very slow and painful progress.

My confidence in finishing was strong; I knew we'd get there. But watching these dogs blunder through this minor challenge, I could see we clearly did not have a solid foundation. I wondered how difficult it might be to get through Safety. In Safety we have to check in, put on our bibs, and have a quick vet check. You might only need to stop for two minutes. But in those two minutes the dogs may decide it's a time for a break. You've been running six to seven hours by then, there's a building, checkers, and all the sounds and smells of a checkpoint. And these mutts (except Elway and Pierce) had no way of knowing it was only 22 miles to the finish line. Well, I had no intentions of resting in Safety. If I had to walk a few miles to get the team moving again, I would, but we were going through one way or another.

Just about then I realized my left runner was grabbing and sticking. I looked down and realized my runner plastic was gone, yanked clean off by the sharp, grabby rocks. Not only that, but from the way the sled was moving, it was obvious that rocks were lodging in the center channel of the runner. They were dragging through the dirt and providing a lot of drag – the dogs were pulling hard and we were barely moving.

I had to get new plastic on that runner, and the dogs were not being too cooperative about stopping. I stopped them anyway and flipped the sled on its side. I tossed some meat snacks at the dogs to remind them to stay put, and started grabbing tools and spare plastic from my sled. Right about then I looked back down the long road and saw headlamps.



I was moving fast before; now I was flying. Running on the sand had slowed us down, and I really didn't want to get passed now!

I jammed my needle nose pliers into the channel on the runner, digging out sand and gravel. I had to pry and pound to free up a couple of good sized stones, and then chase them all the way to the end of the runner to pop them out. Once the track was clear, I fed new plastic on, crammed a new clevis pin through the hole, slapped a few washers on, threaded the clip through, and the plastic was on. No time to saw off the excess length, I just bent it upwards sharply to crease it and keep the tail from catching. I slammed the sled back over, ran up the line to sort out the dogs, and whistled them up. We were off down the trail again in only minutes.

Elway and Tilt A Whirl were keeping us going forward, although still dragging us on the path of most resistance whenever they could. I kept an eye on the headlamps behind me. They appeared to be running a little farther to the right (on the actual trail perhaps?) They appeared to be catching up. I didn't allow my frustration to get a foot hold. It didn't matter as long as we kept heading towards our goal, which was just to finish. But I sure wanted to stay out front!

We made steady progress down the almost bare road. Finally I saw the lights of Safety appear. About this time I realized my right runner was grabbing and jerking more and more. I could see the edges of the plastic on either side of the runner, so I knew it was still attached. But something was not right. I knew that the trail would leave the road shortly, and there was no point switching plastic while we were still running over the bare dirt. I dug through the sled to get all my tools and be ready.

A few straggling trail markers showed where we were supposed to drop off to the right. The dogs saw no reason to leave the wide, obvious path of the road. After a short discussion and the use of my headlamp to light up the markers on the new trail, they agreed to go my way. At last we were sliding easily on actual snow!

But I had to stop and see what was wrong on that right runner. I anchored the team, flipped the sled, and took a look. The runner plastic was still technically attached, but there was just nothing left of it. It was shredded. The gravel had ground completely through the plastic to the aluminum runner beneath, leaving just the tattered edges. No wonder it wasn't sliding well! I worked quickly to get new plastic on. I was now out of spare plastic, so I hoped we weren't going to travel over too much more bare trail.

I looked up frequently as I pulled out the old plastic and fed on new. I could see the headlamps getting closer as I worked. Kristy and Anna passed me as I was just finishing up. They were kind enough to stop and make sure I was OK.

I was not too happy that the twins had made up so much time and would likely finish ahead of me once again. But I thought of how rested and physically strong my team was. If I could just keep them focused another few miles they would see the lights of Nome and our speed would sky rocket. Plus, now we could draft behind Kristy and Anna's teams and hopefully fly right

through Safety. The sled was fixed and the dogs were eager to chase. We were right on their tail for the last mile into the checkpoint.

### **Thursday; Safety, Nome**

It took a few minutes to check all three teams through. My dogs were confused by the delay, and the longer we sat, the more they thought that maybe we were done for the night. Kristy's strong team headed out with no hesitation. It took a few more minutes before Anna was ready to go. I was worried the two teams would be long gone before we were signed through. Anna was incredibly generous – she waited until we were released before she took off. My dogs charged right after them, and we were through Safety.

I was riding the brake and trying not to tailgate Anna. Now that we were going, my dogs wanted to go. I was reluctant to pass after they had helped us through the checkpoint. Also, I was pretty sure the dogs had more energy to chase than they did to just run down the trail. But she stopped anyway, and so we headed on by. I was right. The teams were evenly matched, and now it was her turn to ride the brake.

Kristy was not too far out in front, and after a few miles she stopped to wait for Anna. We passed them just as we rounded the bend to begin the long climb up Cape Nome. I kind of felt like a big jerk to pass them there, in the final stretch, when they had led me through Safety and kept my team going. But since we were now out in front....I hustled and pushed and pedaled to get up that big hill first and leave them behind. I wanted to put some distance between us.

At the top of the Cape, with the lights of Nome in view, when it's all downhill from there, when the end is finally, truly in sight, when the dogs fire up as they sense the end; that's when I usually stop. I walk up the line. I tell the dogs how proud I am of each one of them, and pet them all and hug them. Then I swallow my tears and kick it for the finish line. This year, with Kristy and Anna just behind, there was no time to stop. We crested the Cape and kept right on rolling down the other side.

All the way in to Nome I was checking behind me for their headlamps. Somehow beating them to the finish line became very important, and the dogs picked up on it. We seemed to be pulling away, but oh so slowly. No room for problems, no time for errors. I had helped the dogs over the Topkok Hills, pedaled and pushed down the gravel road, and run most of the way up Cape Nome. My back was burning and seizing, but here I was pedaling and pushing to make sure I finished a couple places higher. I have a stubborn competitive streak that doesn't always listen to reason!

I had been planning to let Ember take the lead for the last few miles and under the arch. He had certainly earned it. He had led more than half the race. He had kept the team going when no one else had the spark to do it. He had hung in there even when he wasn't feeling well. He and Elway had saved the race so many times. But there was no time to stop and switch leaders. It would be my mis-matched pair, Elway and Tilt A Whirl in lead at the finish.

And really, Tilty had earned it just as much. It was too easy to discount little Tilt-A-Whirl, almost invisible up there but always keeping the line tight. She had stepped up to lead coming in

to Ruby when the team first started showing signs of problems. She had stepped up again leaving Ruby, when no one else would help Ember in lead. A few runs later, she had led the team across the dismal sea ice, then up over the mountains, and every leg for the last 200 miles of the race. She'd earned her place in front as well.

Finally we ate up the last remaining miles. I heard the siren go off. At 5:00 in the morning, there were still cars pulled over watching us come in and people on foot cheering. We dashed along the shore and up onto Front Street. Once again I had zero steering. My dogs know the rules of the road, and they know they are supposed to run on the right side. And so we did. Along the gutter. Around the parked cars. Completely on the bare pavement.

In the middle of the road there was a nice packed snow path for us to run on. But the dogs just weren't listening and there was no way to stop on the asphalt. We bumped along for a few blocks until Scott Jansen saw my problem and dashed out to help. Once Elway and Tilt-A-Whirl got lined up on the 'trail' we glided up to the burlled arch and stopped. Three minutes in front of Kristy, three minutes in front of Anna. As if that mattered.

I looked down the line of ten strong dogs who had just run their hearts out with me. Big Elway, who I had put in lead just for fun way back near Ophir. Tiny Tilt A Whirl, stepping up with quiet confidence and showing an unexpected steel core. Pierce, sure and steady in swing, the only one of my truly experienced veterans to go all the way. Sumlin and Glow and Shanahan, my little cheerleaders, still shrieking and screaming whenever we stopped, and always, always running tight. Ember and Whack-A-Mole, beautiful, shinning, happy dogs who had led many miles of trail, and were still happily throwing their weight into their harnesses. Pine Top, ever cheerful and hard-working, trotting out with a swing in his stride and a cocky little switch to his tail. Little Nome who always puts in an honest effort and had been quietly doing her job for almost 1,000 miles.

I don't care how much people love and adore their pet dogs, even think of them as their children. Nothing can compare to the intense bond you form with dogs who are your team mates, your life line, and your heart and soul.

It's these dogs that drive me, that make me push so hard. When I lay broken and unable to move, I thought about running dogs. When I was working at rehabilitation and trying to walk without agony, I thought about running dogs. When I was struggling to just do daily chores and make it to work and back, I thought about running dogs. For every challenge I overcame, the only reason I kept trying was to get back out to where we belong, running with these dogs, living with these dogs, traveling with these dogs.