

# Iditarod 2009

I wish I had amazing stories and harrowing details to share. Mostly, this was a very easy race, just long and tiring. For us, there were no big crashes or sled repair necessary. I didn't get lost. No moose encounters. I never once wished to go home or quit the race. No overflow or open water. No bad weather – oh, wait a minute... We did have a bit of wind and cold on the trip.

This year was described by some veterans as some of the worst weather ever. The weather was a challenge, but the team never faltered. Some had a horrendous trip. We had a perfect, easy ride and I loved the whole thing, start to finish.

**Note:** I've listed the dates and days on the trail, but believe me after day-one you aren't keeping track, have no idea how many days you've been out, or what day of the week it is. All you can really focus on is the dogs and the very next section of trail.

**Warning:** this document was over 20 pages long before I added the pictures. It is one long description, but if you want to know every detail I can remember about my 2009 Iditarod, here it is.

**And also:** I don't have many pictures to share. I got a few from friends. I took one disposable camera with me and tried to take one picture on every leg of the trip. Got a lot of dim pictures of the rear ends of dogs. I stuck some in here so you could see things from my perspective...



## **Sunday March 8 - Day 1**

### **Leg 1 - Willow to Skwentna, 65 miles**

The start goes beautifully. I work on staying calm and collected, and for the most part I feel very relaxed and prepared. Our handlers do a great job and we just walk to the start line.

The dogs, like all teams, are very strong this first leg even though the trail is hot and slow. It is also soft enough that it is hard to set a good hook when I need to stop the team. At one point I stop to snack the dogs and Jim Lanier passes me. As he goes by the dogs surge forward, pop the hook, and knock me over. From the ground I reach out and grab the sled as it flies by me, and drag along until I can set a hook. As Jim's team runs by he yells "Hang on Karin!" Thanks Jim, I had that part figured out...



The most surprising thing to me is the unending line of fans, parties, and bonfires. Just people everywhere who want to wave, and scream, and say hello, have a party, celebrate, and cheer on the mushers. I am proposed to several times, but I assume that is just the beer talking and I don't stop to take them up on the offer.

Skeeter, in swing, is happy to see all the people. He tries to drag the team over to visit each group. He is dragging us all over the place. I want to stop and move him farther back in the team, but I know there is no way to stop the dogs long enough to do it. Luckily, Scooby and Angel are determined and strong, and manage to keep Skeeter lined out.

The worst part is - nowhere to stop and pee. I use a funnel device so I don't need much privacy, but there isn't an empty section of river for hours. I finally find a short section where there aren't people within 10 feet. Even with both hooks set and standing on the brake, the dogs are jerking the sled forward the entire time we are stopped. One hand for the ship, one hand for yourself...

I stop briefly in Yentna to snack the dogs and rebootie. The dogs love the idea of snacks. They are not so cooperative with the idea of stopping long enough to put booties on. I set my snow anchor, a shovel-like device that buries itself deep in soft snow. A few minutes later I am ready to go again, but the team has pulled and yanked and jerked until the anchor is buried several feet down. The team is frantic to go, and starts swinging back towards me and tangling up. It takes 2 checkers and 25 minutes to get loose again.

We run for just over 7 ½ hours to Skwentna – faster than I anticipated. I had planned to camp just beyond the checkpoint where it is quieter, but the deep snow (and lure of home cooked food and hot water on demand) helps me decide to stay at the checkpoint.

I park the dogs and take care of them. My routine will change little over the course of the race. First, get straw down so the dogs know to stop. Later in the race straw will come after food to

encourage them to eat before they lay down. But this early in the race the dogs aren't easy to stop, and the straw helps them realize we are taking a break. After straw I need to get the dogs fed and watered as soon as possible. They seem to eat the best right after stopping. While the dogs eat, I take off booties, do any massage, wrapping, or other dog care that is necessary, and get my sled reorganized. Whenever possible, I get a second meal soaking for the dogs. If it is too cold to leave a bucket of food soaking, I will have to get up earlier to get it ready. Once all these chores are done, I have time to eat, sleep, and take care of myself. Two hours before leaving I get up to feed one more time and repack my sled. I also make sure to eat another meal myself and get hot water for my thermos.

Keeping myself well fueled and hydrated makes a huge difference in my energy level and ability to cope with whatever challenges come my way. Sometimes on longer runs it might be 15 hours or more between meals, so I have to be sure to eat and drink as much as possible. With 45 minutes to go I will start to bootie and switch dogs to their new positions.

At Skwentna the chores go really quickly. Volunteers have drilled through the ice to the fresh river water and are manning a giant barrel-stove to heat water. Once the dogs are set, I head up the hill to the cabins. The Skwentna Sweeties greet me at the door with a hot, lemony cloth to wipe my face and hands, and then serve up an enormous amount of delicious food. After a 2 hour nap on the floor I get back up to get going again. We pull out at 4:30 in the morning after just over 6 hours rest (for the dogs). The dogs are crazy to go and it takes 2 checkers to help hold my team and get us out of there in one piece.

## **Monday March 9 - Day 2**

### **Leg 2 - Skwentna to Happy River Camp, 55 miles**

Leaving Skwentna, the trail begins to climb up and over forested hills. We are heavily laden as we must camp before the next food drop, and so are carrying food, fuel, and straw. It is very warm (25 degrees?) and a wet snow is falling. The snow is really deep, and the snow machines that preceded us obviously struggled. Every time they got stuck their tracks dug a deep wallow which filled with bottomless sugar snow.



The dogs repeatedly fall into these 'sugar-holes' and then have to drag themselves out again. The sled follows right behind, an unending crash, stall, lurch up the trail. The dogs are working hard

to haul the sled out of the deep holes, and I am working hard to keep the sled upright and help heave it loose. If the trail is like this for 1,000 miles we are going to be out here until April.

Although I never have a serious crash and tumble, I am tipping over and picking up the sled on a regular basis. At one point I leap off the tipping sled and my shin collides with the runner. Serious nauseating pain ensues, but the dogs are fresh and they aren't going to wait for me, so I jump back on the sled. Over the next few days the bruise on my leg swells to ridiculous proportions, but I am too busy and focused on the trail to pay it much attention.

We finally get to Finger Lake around 10:30 in the morning. After 6 hours of dragging through wallows and sugar holes, the dogs are still not ready to stop and neither am I. Bruce Moroney waves and tries to tempt me with breakfast, but we just load up half a bale of straw and carry on. The dreaded Happy River Steps are coming up next!

It is only 10 miles to the Steps but after more than an hour and a half of looking and waiting for the "Watch Your Ass" sign, I sort of think we might never get there. There are lots of short, steep drops along the way to distract me, but none of them turn out to be the real deal. On one drop we pass a couple of photographers. I start to laugh at Luna, who barks and shrieks at the unexpected company. I figure the Steps must be coming up soon. And suddenly we are on the river bottom, and it is done, and I have covered the whole legendary drop laughing my ass off at my silly dog. Apparently it is a bit of a trick in icy years but with all the fresh snow this year it was not much of a challenge.

I've been planning to camp at Finn Bear Lake, which is another 8 miles past the Happy River. There is long steep climb up off the river next. The dogs are very strong, but not moving very fast. As the race progresses I come to realize that we slow down more than others during daylight, regardless of temperature. Then at night we surge forward like a crazy freight train.

We've been going for close to 8 hours and it is just after noon. It has been a long, hard grind. So I decide to camp on the river for 4 hours instead of continuing on. Cindy Gallea comes up right behind me and camps at the river bottom too. This is the first time I see her on the trail, but not the last!

It can be very restful to camp out away from the busy checkpoints but it often means a bit more work, as one must melt snow. Most checkpoints have at least cold water, which makes feeding and watering the dogs much easier. But it is quiet and peaceful on the river and I get a few short naps in.

## **Monday March 9 - Day 2**

### **Leg 3 - Happy River to Rohn, 52 miles**

I sure am glad we camped, because the slope up off the Happy River is a long, grueling, steep climb out. After their rest the dogs just fly up the hill!

The run into Rainy is supposed to be very tricky with lots of icy side-hills. Again, the fresh snow makes the trail relatively easy and we motor into Rainy after a fairly easy, if fairly slow run. The dogs are not moving fast, but they sure aren't interested in stopping much!

All the other teams coming in are stopping in Rainy, but we have been going only 4 ½ hours and there is no way the dogs are going to rest. It is just getting dark as I come through, and I am a little apprehensive about running the most treacherous section alone and in the dark. But the weather is good and the dogs are pulling hard, so off we go.

Up to Rainy Pass and down through the Dalzell Gorge is beautiful. There is just enough moonlight peeking out from behind the clouds that I can see the towering peaks. I almost wish I could wait and see it in the daylight, but there is no way we're gonna stop right now. The trail is soft but easy to navigate, and the notorious winds and ground blizzards are absent.

I stop to let Jerry Sousa pass me. Of course my dogs rip out the hook and run me over, twisting my knee in the process. For the next hour my knee hurts so bad I'm worried my race might be over. But it goes as quickly as it came and never bothers me again.

As night comes on, the dogs get stronger and crazier. Forget trying to stop to undo a tangle or rebootie. These dogs are on a mission and they don't care if I come along or not. The toughest part of the trail is just above the Gorge, where a small, tight gully has been X'd off. The trail we are supposed to follow sweeps left and then clings to the side hill above the gully, but I don't see the re-route in time. The team enters a winding slot so narrow that I can touch the walls on either side. There are more and more holes in the trail where the snow bridging over the creek has given way. The dogs are leaping over the breaks in the trail and I am dancing the sled around to keep from falling in the holes. I start envisioning a huge drop-off up ahead, and wonder what the hell we'd do. Even if the dogs stop (doubtful), there is no way we can turn around in this narrow space. Just as I am starting to worry that it might get really bad, we rejoin the main trail and I breathe out my relief.

After some more sidehill and a long steep drop, we roar down into the Gorge with barely time to realize I am there. The trail is really great and all the snow bridges are in perfect shape. Once again, kind conditions mean a crash-free run. With the clouded moonlight I can barely make out the towering cliffs and incredible scenery. This whole run is eerie and beautiful, and here I am, running the Iditarod (!!!) with my own dogs who are so fit and excited about running that they are scaring me. I can't imagine a better place to be.

After a 9 hour run, we reach Rohn at about 1:45 in the morning. I see Ryan and Ray Redington as they come in (behind me - weird, huh?), and am parked right next to Cindy Gallea again. After hauling water from the river and taking care of the dogs I head into the cabin. I bed down on a bunk with Linwood Fiedler, and wake up later next to Dee Dee Jonrowe. It is strange being this close to the front runners, but the dogs are doing their thing and I am just sticking to the plan.



When I wake up Bruce Moroney is there to make breakfast for the volunteers. Bruce's breakfast is a tradition in Rohn, but it is not for mushers – I'm stuck eating split pea soup. Bruce promises to relay a message back home that we are having a blast and the dogs are going like mad.

Outside, I talk quite a bit to Bruce Lee. He's is a former Yukon Quest champ, but is here as a journalist this year. I laugh that my team is trying to kill me and they just keep getting stronger. He says dryly that this is called 'peaking', and that mushers spend their careers trying to achieve this at Iditarod time. I ask him about bootying for the next section, which includes some glare ice and overflow. Some advise not to bootie because the booties are slippery on ice. Others say to definitely bootie the dogs because the ice is only a short section and the rest of the trail is rough on feet. Based on Bruce's input and the fact that I know my dogs will not stand still for the 20 minutes it will take me to bootie the entire team, I decide to bootie before leaving Rohn.

I also decide to drop Luna. She has worked her tail off helping the team over the Alaska Range, but her heat cycle, which is supposed to be nearly done, does not seem to be ebbing. She is busy distracting the rest of the team, yipping, waving her tail, and prancing around. Enough already – this I don't need.

### **Tuesday March 10 - Day 3**

#### **Leg 4 - Rohn to (almost) Buffalo Camp, 40 miles**

After an 8 hour rest we pull out. It is 9:30 in the morning, and we're looking at a daylight run. I know we'll be super slow after they blow off some steam in the first few hours. Of course, it's during the first few hours when we'll encounter the most challenging parts of the next section trail.



We take off down through some really spectacular mountains. I'd like to take a picture, but the trail requires my attention. We are running down the notorious glare ice. We tiptoe from gravel bar to snow patch, the dogs always looking for someplace where their feet don't slide out from under them, and I am working to keep the sled from sliding and slamming into obstacles. Angel and Chase are following my directions really well, and we come up off the river with no problems.

I catch my first glimpse of Allen Moore as I flub the entrance to the Glacier, a steep climb past some cliffs on glare ice. Following the markers over to the cliffy outcropping, I notice a team charge up the hill to my left along a deep, but snow covered trail. Obviously I am following old markers – change of direction. Luckily Angel sees the same thing I do, and navigates back across the treacherous ice to the good trail that Allen is following. We top out above the ice field and cross a section of sharp cobbles and rocks the size of basketballs. Just beyond that is more ice, and Jim Lanier in a huge tangled up mess. There are photographers

flocking around him, even a helicopter overhead. They seem to take pleasure in watching us struggle. Actually, the media is everywhere during Iditarod, at checkpoints and out on the trail.

Next is bare dirt and rolling tussocks. At least one musher gets badly hurt through here, but I just kept it facing forward and we grind right on by with no problems.

Staying hydrated is super important. At Rohn I melted snow and poured it in my thermos. Somehow the fumes from the cooker permeated the water. Although it has a horrible 'exhaust' taste, I am dreadfully thirsty as we work down this hot trail. I keep sipping at my water, trying to keep my mouth from drying out completely. My stomach is desperately unhappy with this arrangement, but my throat keeps insisting we need more water. I should have brought bottled water Next year...

We arrive at stunning Farewell Lake. The ice itself is a mosaic of glassy green ice, bubbles, and fault lines. The mountains make a stupendous backdrop. As we cross the lake, my stomach finally rebels against the tainted water and sends it all back up. I am leaned over the side retching as the dogs trot along, which is about when I look up to see Jeff Schultz trying to get a photo of us. Hopefully a team and scenery type picture, and not a close up of the green musher.

Eventually we are back on snowy trails that just roll through the hills for miles. True to form, after the first couple of hours the dogs slow down. It is warm and sticky and our pace falls off drastically. I know we have to be close to the Buffalo Camp, but the dogs are really crawling.

After 6 hours I call it quits. I decide that camping early might be helpful since we would miss some of the heat of the day and we would unload some weight as we used up straw, Heet, and food. So we stop and I let the dogs nap for a few hours. It takes me about that long to melt snow for their meal and to refill my thermos. My cooker seems to be clogged and no amount of poking and shaking seems to help. After a nice 4 hour break we get going again about 7:30 that evening.

### **Tuesday March 10 - Day 3**

#### **Leg 5 - (almost) Buffalo Camp to Nikolai, 40 miles**

The trail from our campsite all the way in to Nikolai is pretty much the same for a long time. I pass the Buffalo Camp (hot water, fire, company) after only about 20 minutes. And that's the last landmark for hours. The trail is long and straight. Coming off of one hill you can see it disappearing into the distance, arrow straight, going on forever.

Once it gets dark the team picks up speed again. I know we are close to Nikolai when the dogs start running hard again. They must smell the smoke or something, because they always know long before I do when we are close to a checkpoint. We get to Nikolai about 11:30, so the second 45 miles or so took me only 4 hours, as compared to the first 35-40 at 6 hours.



Nikolai is really welcoming. We pass a team carved out of snow as we pull into town. The checkers bring Heet, straw, and drop bags right to us. They have water heating in a barrel nearby. The school is all decorated with an island theme – flowers, palm trees, etc. and there is a delicious moose stew for us mushers. The best part is the ‘nap room’, complete with wrestling mats to sleep on and little pillows set out.

But before I get to eat and rest, first I must take care of the dogs. And this starts with catching Fly. He is clearly not tired. In his spinning and playing he manages to get loose. He leads me on a chase all over the dog lot. He stops to visit other teams, checks out the drop bags (and pees on some), runs by the water station, and generally makes a nuisance of himself. This dog never seems to get tired. This is a good thing, but right about now I am not amused.

Given the stresses you put your body through during Iditarod, you have to assume that you will pick up a bug somewhere on the race. As expected, by Nikolai I am feeling really cruddy – runny nose, cough, sore throat and just tired and achy. I start downing cold meds, and I keep it up until Kaltag when I start feeling better. When I see Harry Alexie in Shaktoolik much later he is just coming down with it and I give him the rest of my meds.

I mean to rest 6 hours in Nik but it takes me a little longer to complete my chores, including changing runner plastic, so we do almost 7 and take off at 6:15 in the morning.

### **Wednesday March 11 - Day 4**

#### **Leg 6 - Nikolai to Takotna, 66 miles**

This is a long, hot, sticky, slow run, as all my daylight runs seem to be. The snow is really wet and the dogs are miserable. They are tearing booties off as quick as I can get them back on. Who wants to run in wet socks anyway?

None of the landmarks I have listed in my trail notes seem to match up, so I am happy when we finally see McGrath after 6 ½ hours. Even though that was a decent length run, the dogs are happy to keep going right through the checkpoint and back down to the river. Since I didn’t demolish my sled I don’t have to switch to the spare sled I had shipped to McGrath, and we are in and out in minutes.

It takes us another 3 hours to get over the last 18 miles of long winding climbs to Takotna. The most fun is seeing the orange and cream colors of N255OZ, Bruce and Diana’s Cessna 185 airplane, overhead. They must have spotted us, too, because the plane makes a few circles overhead, wings wagging.

We arrive in Takotna at about 4:00 in the afternoon. Cindy Gallea is parked right beside me, and Ray and Ryan Redington are also nearby. Although the dogs were crawling along the trail, they don’t seem to be particularly tired and are bouncing all over as I set camp. I have the dogs fed, bedded down, out of their harnesses, on longer drop lines, and in their dog coats to protect against the wet snow fall in only 35 minutes.



Once I get the dogs comfortable for the long 24 hour break, I head down to the kitchen for some of Takotna's famous food – by this point I am ravenous! I start with a great big moose steak, fries, salad, and pie. Then I feed the dogs once more and go up to the church for a nap. For some reason every flat surface in the church is covered in mouse droppings, but it hardly matters to the tired mushers.



I take my boots and bibs off for the first time. My shin is incredibly swollen where I whacked it in the sugar holes after Skwentna. The swelling is all trapped above the cuff of my boot, so I have an odd, 2 inch overhang. As I fall asleep I wonder if I will be able to get my boot back on once the swelling evens out into my now-uncompressed leg. And I remember that I forgot to bring camp booties, so every time I want to get up for the bathroom or to eat, I'm gonna have to wear my still damp, giant arctic boots. Next year....

I sleep and eat, and the dogs sleep and eat, for a full day. I work on their feet and take them for a short walk to stretch them out also. I never get more than a few hours sleep at a time before I wake up so hungry I can barely function. I eat burgers, salads, pancakes, chili, and lots and lots of pie. This driving hunger will continue throughout the rest of the race.

While in Takotna I get my first chance to call home. It is great to talk to Varan, and fun to tell him what a great time we were having. I also have to take time to fix my cooker. I poke out the jets and drill some extra drain holes in the burner to make sure the fuel can reach the jets. It seems to work because I don't have any more problems after that.

I see Bruce and Diana Moroney, Bruce Lee, and lots of mushers here. I am a bit overwhelmed by all the compliments and comments about my team, who are looking very strong. Someone points out that I am 5 hours in front of the nearest rookie. When Jeff King slaps you and says "Everyone is talking about your team, kiddo", it makes you wonder just what the heck you have gotten into. It's true they aren't resting much, and I still have 15 dogs bouncing all over and goofing around. Looking at run times, I know my speeds aren't that good and I doubt I can stay

ahead of Chad Lindner and Harry Alexie, the next closest rookies. But it is fun to think about and wonder if we could do it.

The next section of trail is long and there is plenty of wet, heavy snow coming down. I had planned to split it into 2 runs, but after talking with Allen Moore and some others, I decide that could make for some really long runs due to the slow conditions. So I change plans to break it into 3 separate runs of 6 hours.

### **Thursday March 12 - Day 5**

#### **Leg 7 - Takotna to somewhere past Ophir, ~ 40 miles**

We leave Takotna at 5:15 in the afternoon. It is hot and slow. It feels like we are crawling. It takes us just over 3 hours to go the 25 miles to Ophir, so I guess our speed isn't too bad but it just feels painfully slow. After 6 hours I start looking for someplace to get off the trail. Finally I find a wide spot in the trail where someone has camped before – extra straw and hopefully the bottomless snow will be somewhat stomped down. The deep snow makes for tough camping but we aren't there for too long, just 4 hours. Mike Williams, Jim Lanier, and several other mushers pass by, all saying something about Rookie of the Year. It is sort of weird, since Harry Alexie and Chad Lindner passed me while I was stopped, and I am no longer out front.

The dogs eat well and rest. I manage to lie down for a while, but I'm not tired enough to really nap. We get going again somewhere around 3:45 in the morning.

### **Friday March 13 - Day 6**

#### **Leg 8 - Somewhere past Ophir to somewhere closer to Iditarod, ~ 45 miles**

We run another 6 hours and then stop again just before 10 a.m. The dogs are moving better in the dark, but still don't feel super fast to me. I pass Ray Redington and Chad Lindner on Windy Creek after about 3 hours, which I thought was supposed to be about 1/2 way. After getting home and looking at mileage, I realize it was closer to 2/3. If I'd known my distances better I would have known I was closer to Iditarod and might have kept on going. I must have passed Harry Alexie somewhere, too, because he follows me into Iditarod later that night.

Again I am stuck with camping off to one side in deep snow, which makes all the chores very difficult. The dogs seem slightly irritated that I keep stepping over them as I go up and down the line to straw, pull booties, and feed, but I simply can't navigate the snow off to the side. On one step it will hold my weight and is only knee deep, but on the next the snow gives way and I'm stuck up to my waist, trying to swim free of the deep, sticky snow.

Cerveza was limping a bit as we pulled into camp. Now, as I gently touch her leg looking for a problem, she is shrieking and snapping. I know she is a drama



queen – this is a dog who screams about vaccination shots. Plus, she wasn't limping much at all so her over-reaction is probably nothing to get worried about. I rub her shoulder gently and put some chemical handwarmers between her skin and her tee-shirt (she gets harness rubs). Just as I suspect, she shows no signs of a limp when we head down the trail again. Still, she does have at least a mild injury so I have to watch her carefully.

### **Friday March 13 - Day 6**

#### **Leg 9 - Run into Iditarod, ~ 23 miles**

We start our next run at close to 2:00 in the afternoon, the hottest, slowest part of the day. I expect to run another 6 hours into Iditarod, maybe longer if we continue to plod along.

My trail notes say that the last 18 miles into the Iditarod checkpoint will be on a river. After 3 ½ hours I am starting to get a little worried; we still haven't hit a river, and I am hoping not to run too long. At last I pop over a bank and onto the river. I figure another 3 hours to the checkpoint, and so we aren't too far behind schedule. Immediately after dropping onto the river we come around a bend, and suddenly we are there. So much for landmarks.

I guess the checkpoint didn't have any warning either, because there is no checker there to guide me. Normally this is not a problem, but the airplane taking off 20 feet to my left has my dogs in a panic. It is a real struggle to hold the dogs, keep them from tangling, and try to figure out just where I am supposed to be.

Finally I get signed in, park the dogs and get them bedded down for a planned 6 hour rest. Iditarod is a pretty rustic checkpoint, and there is no water available. We have to melt snow for the dogs. This is a challenge because there isn't that much snow around. I scrape an inch or two off the river ice, and end up clearing a really large area to get enough snow.

Chad Lindner pulls in about 45 minutes after us, and I know he must be moving much faster. Still, we are the first rookie team to the halfway point!

Cerveza is a just little off again. The vets take a good look at her and tell me she'll be fine with massage and care. But I know the next section is pretty rough and hilly, and I still have a large team of 14 other strong dogs, so I decide send her home. I really don't need that many dogs and this way I can sleep more.

At this point I have one of the healthiest dog teams around. Besides Cerveza's minor problem, no one has any injuries and I'm not doing any massage or wrapping. No one has had diarrhea (a frequent problem in distance racing). Everyone's attitude and appetite is great. This remains largely true until the end of the race, a minor miracle that really makes my trip easy.

I do not get much rest at Iditarod. After taking Cerveza over to the dropped dog area, I head into the mushers cabin. The stove is cold and the cook pot for heating musher food is dry. I am starving, but there is no way to thaw my pack of stroganoff yet. First I have to take time to get the stove going again. Then I have to gather snow to melt in the cook pot. It takes a lot of snow, and it takes a lot of time for it to heat up to the point it will thaw out my meal. Finally I get some

food and water and I'm able to lie down. I only have about 1 hour before I have to be up to feed the dogs again and get ready to go, and I just can't drop off to sleep. After a bit, Robert Nelson comes in and lies down on another bunk. My cold is hitting hard, and I cough so much that Robert tells me to go sleep outside so no one else would get sick – I'm pretty sure he was just teasing...

Before leaving I thaw out some stew and eat quickly. It is not very appetizing, but I won't do more than snack until we reach our next destination so I force it down. I sent out 6 different kinds of meals, all designed to be as appetizing and easy to thaw as possible, as well as packed with calories and protein. I sent out cardiac soup (potato, bacon, swiss cheese), split pea soup, beef stroganoff, chili, stew, a tangy sausage and potato dish, and barbecue brisket. The cardiac soup and barbecue are fantastic – I catch myself growling at the packages as I try to rip them open. The split pea soup is ok but not exciting. The potatoes in the sausage dish and the noodles in the stroganoff don't freeze well and the pasty, dry results can be hard to choke down. For some reason the stew and chili, which taste fine at home, are just not appealing out on the trail. I think the key is smaller portions and much more variety. I find myself eyeing the food that other mushers sent out to see what works for them. Next year....

### **Saturday March 14 - Day 7**

#### **Leg 10 - Iditarod to Shageluk, 65 miles**

This leg is extremely hilly and the new snow really slowed previous teams down. Since I am running young dogs, I plan to take a break part way through and let the dogs rest. But it is a night-time run and the dogs have other thoughts. We leave around 11:30 that night and power through the hills and climbs. The dogs have so much energy that I don't even consider stopping.

It is really hard to stay awake at 2:30 in the morning. I doze off repeatedly, only to snap awake just before crashing into trees. Standing up does not help, I just jerk awake when my knees buckle. Sometimes I drop off with my foot on the drag, which makes the dogs look back at me to see what the heck my problem is. They are a starting to slow just a bit during the last few hours, but I know they will be fine to finish this run. Around 7:00 in the morning I start to wake up a bit, and not long after that the dogs see the lights of the checkpoint and really hit the gas. Déjà, our mini sled-dog, is having a hard time keeping up so I stop to give her a ride in the sled.

The run takes 8 ½ hours, which is a pretty good time considering the constant hills on this run. Despite the climbs this was one of the faster legs we ran, with an average speed over 7 ½ miles an hour.

We arrive at 8:00 in the morning. I declare my mandatory 8 hour break when I pull into Shageluk, and park next to Melissa Owens. There is hot water in the Washeteria (the sole



source of running water in the village), and the checkers share their fried chicken with me. Normally I'm not a big fan of chicken skin but in my current starving, fat-craving state, I've never tasted anything so good. The round community building is chilly but I manage to get a few crappy hours of sleep. We head back down the trail around 4:00 in the afternoon.

### **Saturday March 14 - Day 7**

#### **Leg 11 - Shageluk to Grayling, 43 miles**

I am right on time getting ready, and we take off immediately after our 8 hours are up. I saw some other teams have a hard time getting going again, but my dogs jump right up and we roll along at a decent pace for the 25 miles into Anvik. At places the trail is a narrow trench winding through trees and river sloughs.

Déjà is back at work, but now I am worrying about Voodoo who is skipping on his left hind leg. I'd been watching him do it off and on all season and could never decide if he was favoring an injury or stuck between gears; not quite a trot, not quite a lope. In Anvik, vet Jerry Vanek looks him over and even rides along a short way to watch him move. His summary is, if he's pulling, run him. And so Voodoo continued to skip all the way to Nome, but not without me watching, wondering, and worrying every time I see him make his funny little move.

I'm also worrying about Trouble. He is having a bit of diarrhea, and he has stopped his mad barking every time we stop. He is still working hard, but I know he must be feeling down when he quits cheerleading.

We pass Harry Alexie, who is camped at Anvik but looks like he is getting ready to pull out. After Anvik the trail drops down onto the River. That's the Yukon River, and it is a huge, empty expanse. The run is fairly nice, although the wind is starting to pick up and I stop to put coats on the dogs. It is only another 18 miles to Grayling, and we pull in at 10:30 p.m.

The checkpoint seems almost abandoned. There is just one person to check us in, and he also tries to park my team. He doesn't seem to be very familiar with the process. As we wind through the buildings to the dog area, he cuts the corners so tight that my sled is being pulled into the buildings. Then he parks me on used straw full of old dog food and frozen poop (more than once, as I keep asking him to please park us in a clean area – it takes several tries before we are parked on clean snow, and I cannot figure out why it was so difficult when there was plenty of space). There are vets to check the dogs over, but no race officials, as we found out later.

I plan to rest 6 hours and get going around 4:30 a.m. But as I get up to get going again, Ryan Redington and Jim Lanier return back to the checkpoint. The wind has obliterated the trail. Jim says that his dogs were getting exhausted trying to find a trail, wallowing through deep snow and struggling through drifts. A lot of teams have arrived in Grayling by now, and we are all trying to figure out what next, how bad the trail is, and if we can get a snow machine to break out the trail again. There is no race official available, and in the end we decide to wait until morning and then run as a group for a safety and to share trail breaking. Once I hear that, I go lay down to get more sleep. In the end, the team gets 12 hours of rest, and it was a good thing because the next leg was going to be one of the toughest the whole race.

It is easy to become emotional when you are sleep deprived and physically exhausted, but so far I've been doing great with just taking the next step and enjoying my time on the trail. Before we head out, I call Varan to tell him what is happening. That may have been a mistake. I'm so used to relying on his help, and I realize how much I miss him and how worried I am about this next section of trail. I decide I'm not going to call home again; it's just too difficult to keep my mood steady.

### **Sunday March 15 - Day 8**

#### **Leg 12 - Grayling to Eagle Island, 65 miles**

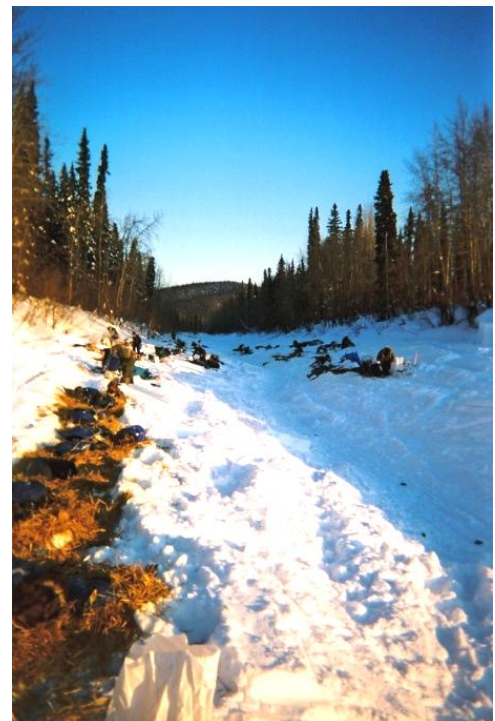
Nineteen teams leave between 10:00 and 10:30 the next morning. It turns out that running as a group does not help – I leave just behind Bob Bundtzen and Harry Alexie, but never see them again. Their tracks in the snow are immediately blown away, and I can catch only occasional glimpses of packed trail. We run for hours through a hard blowing wind on a trail that the dogs can feel but not see. We follow the trail markers and the faint traces of trail I can spot. The leaders, Chase and Angel, fight the head wind, feel for the trail, and follow my directions for hours and hours. Around 6:00 p.m. I finally see another team – it is Chad Lindner, and he is moving much faster than we are. We talk briefly about how tough and long the trail is, speculate about how much farther we have to go and if there is anywhere reasonable to stop, and then he disappears into the whiteout. My dogs are steady, but so much slower!

The dogs don't seem to be tired, but they are stopping to scrounge for food at any place another team stopped to snack. I don't think they are hungry, as I have been snacking every 2 hours. They are just using the food as an excuse to take a break, and all my shouting and scolding is not making any impression. Angel and Chase are going right by the food (their dedication and drive is amazing), but the rest of the team is more interested in a feeding frenzy.

After 12 hours Ryan Redington and Bill Cotter pass me. They left Grayling an hour and a half after me, so I know we are really crawling. At this point I am worried that the dogs might quit on me, but in retrospect I think they were just going slow. I pull in behind Bill and draft him all the way into Eagle Island. At one point Bill and I have a very intense discussion about Brazillian ice cream manufacturing. Not a hallucination, just a mini-dream. It's been a long run.

It takes us almost 13 hours of hard pulling to get there, and we arrive just after 11:00 p.m. For once Fly is ready to take a break.

Eagle Island is a tent camp oasis set up in a little slough just out of the wind. The checkers have worked really hard to pack down camping spots for the dogs and make the tent and kitchen area as cozy as possible. There are a whole lot



of teams crowded in a very small space, and a whole lot of mushers crammed into the tents. The folks in Eagle Island are so helpful, dragging our heavy drop bags, Heet, and straw through the deep snow and up the hill to where we are parked. After the long run I am really grateful I don't have to go hauling all my gear up the hill to the team.

Once I feed and care for the dogs it is time to take care of myself, and I really need to eat. I haven't eaten real food since about 9:00 in the morning, and it is now close to 1:00 a.m. Each tent has a stove with a pot of hot water on it where mushers can thaw out their meals. I partially thaw some soup and eat the frozen lumps quickly, then find a space in a tent and crash.

A few hours later, Melissa Owens and I both wake up choking on acrid smoke. The cook pot has gone dry and someone's dinner (and plastic packaging) is on fire! We fight to open the tent door, then wake everyone in the tent to make sure they are ok. David Sawatzky, on the other side of the tent, threw the cook pot and burning contents outside in the snow but didn't let anyone know the fire was out. None of the rest of us know what is going on or what is burning. I shove my feet in my boots and run around to the other side, unzip the door, and finally figure out that the fire is out. I leave the door open so the smoke will clear. It is still awfully smoky – so bad you can barely see across the tent, but the sleepy mushers inside are complaining that the open doors are too cold. I don't want to sleep in the toxic, smoky mess, so I grab my sleeping bag and vacate to a different tent.

When I get up to feed and check the dogs again, I see that Scooby has little bit of swelling in his wrist. He has also been getting terrible sores where his dew claws rub against his legs (the reason why sled dogs have their dew claws removed as newborns). Combined with the cold and wind and his history of frost bite, I decide to send him on home rather than risk him out on the next section of river. It is hard to say goodbye to the big guy, but I know he will be safe at home before we get to Nome.

I am pretty worried about the next section, which is another 65 miles or so of river, and just as windy and cold. I don't know if my young and inexperienced team will keep going for another marathon run like the last one. Allen Moore, Bill Cotter, and John Korta (checker, but also experienced Iditarod musher), all reassure me that I can handle it, the dogs can handle it, and to just take shelter with the sled and feed the dogs if they shut down.

We rest for almost 13 hours (sticking to the equal run, equal rest program), and take off the next day around noon. The long runs and rests mean I am getting more sleep than earlier in the race, although I am still sick and popping cold medicine every time I think about it. I am aware of feeling lousy, but I'm too focused on doing whatever is next to worry about it much.

## **Monday March 16 - Day 9**

### **Leg 13 - Eagle Island to Slough, 35 miles?**

For the first few miles we run up the slough through deep, unpacked snow. The dogs are willing, but constantly distracted by food that other mushers left in the trail (thanks a lot Ryan!) After a few deep, slow miles, we pop right out onto the river again. And guess what? It is even windier

than before! Snow is blowing by in gusts, and it looks like we are heading out onto a big white ocean, with everything moving and billowing around us.

It is hard to estimate wind speed when there is nothing but blowing snow and drifts around. Most guides refer to branches moving or twigs breaking, and there are no trees out on the river. But I would guess it is easily 30-40 miles per hour, as it is difficult to walk in this wind. Several times as I walk back to my sled after caring for the dogs I find that my steps are v e r y l o n g . The wind sort of picks me up and hustles me along. At one point I make it past both my second wheel and wheel dogs in one step. So I guess some of the gusts are quite a bit stronger.

I heard reports that it there was going to be a windchill of 50 below or more. I don't find that a windchill of 50 below is anything like an actual temperature of 50 below. Sure, it is cold in the wind, but that is what parkas and overmitts are for. So even though it is obviously chilly and the wind is blowing like crazy, I am never really cold out on the river. I do make sure to have wind layers on me and the dogs. In these conditions it is also important to keep the dog's feet covered with booties, so I frequently stop to replace any that come off in the deep snow we are navigating. I also have to stop every 15 minutes or so to clear the ice build-up from their faces and out of their eyes.

Keeping the calorie intake up is also important. The dogs are inhaling any food I give them, and I am steadily working on my cheese sticks, nuts, jerky, and granola bars – not so easy in the wind, and not so appetizing, but it must be done. The dogs are again stopping to grab any leftover food on the trail. I grab a broken trail marker and start slapping my sled. Before long the drive-by snacking has almost ceased.



**No trail or markers visible, but at least the drifts are**

Angel and WSU are up front. Although Chase did a fantastic job the day before, he is only two years old. WSU is slower, but this is not a factor on this type of trail. She's an experienced leader, so I am counting on her to keep the team going. Having a team quit out here in the storm



would be disastrous. The trail never seems to go near the banks, we are wide out in the open, being sand-blasted by blowing snow. There is simply no shelter from the wind.

Angel and WSU do an amazing job. The packed trail is nearly invisible, hidden by blowing snow and frequent, deep drifts. Most of the drifts are one foot or less but some are much larger. Angel and WSU wind between them, trying to avoid too much climbing and wallowing but still stay on the packed trail. Those two little girls just put their heads down and nose into the wind. Sometimes when they are working around obstacles and are not facing directly into the wind I see them stagger or get blown sideways by the gusts. They work together well and help steady each other through the storm.

I am very worried about the dogs quitting. If just one dog refuses to go on, the rest of the team can shut down too. Every time I stop to snack or clean ice off their faces or rebootie, the dogs curl up in the snow. Later I realize they were just conserving heat and keeping out of the wind, but right now I worry each time we stop that we may not get moving again. I start to realize that I should have more faith in these dogs, because every time I go back to my sled and say 'ready', they jump up and keep working through the storm. It brings a lump to my throat to think how willing they are and how hard they work every time I ask.

Mercedes and Aberdeen are rock steady in swing. They run nearly the whole race in that position, two very reliable and easy dogs who never cause a tangle or bunch up the front of the team. When she arrived in fall I never thought that spooky, awkward Mercedes would even make the team, but she is proving to be a great asset. Aberdeen's presence on the team is even more of a surprise. He was a standout yearling last year, but in the spring we found a large lump on his hind leg. We had the cancer removed, but the vet said it was sure to come back and would likely result in him losing his leg. He also said that the tumor had been growing around the tendons and hock joint, and there had been some damage in removing it, so he would likely have joint problems. The lump did start to reappear, but we put Deen in training this fall just to keep him happy. He never looked back and never showed signs of a problem.

The dogs are working well, but I do not think I can ask them to do another 12 hour or longer run through these conditions. I plan to run for 8 hours or so, then hunker down and rest for four hours in the best shelter I can find. After hours of running we have not seen even one protected area that would offer any break from the wind. If we have to, we can just tough it out – tip the sled on its side to make a wind break and gather the dogs in a group in the lee. After 7 hours, I really start looking for any possible shelter. Of course, there is nothing – we are in the middle of the wide open river. I plan to go one more hour and then stop regardless, when suddenly I come around a corner into (relatively) still air and hear dogs barking! There are four other teams up ahead, resting in a sheltered slough.

I park the dogs next to Bill Cotter and David Sawatzki, and watch Harry Alexie pull out and continue into the storm. I immediately feed the soaked commercial food that I have been carrying and the dogs curl up in the snow. It is not a great place to rest. The snow lies on top of overflow, so it is damp and cold, and the temperature is dropping quickly with the sun. But just being out of the wind is a huge relief, and the dogs all appreciate a meal and a nap. Since I am relying so heavily on Angel to lead us through the storm I take her back to the sled and let her

curl up inside where it is warm and dry. She seems to like this and I have to talk her into crawling out of her nest later when we get ready to go.

While the dogs sleep, I sit on my bucket and shoot the breeze with Bill and David. We wonder how cold it was, how far we've come, how far is left to go, and how fast we've been travelling. We have no idea and can only guess. We laugh, because we know everyone tracking the race from home already knows the answers while we out on the trail are left to wonder. It seems to be getting colder and we are all shivering as we sit around. Bill again reassures me that we'll be fine, and even if the dogs decide to quit, they will get up and get going again after a rest and a meal. Regardless, there is not much choice but to carry on.

Bill and David leave before I do, but Mike Williams has arrived so I still have some company. Mike is from Bethel and is used to the wind. He stopped a few times out on the river to change his runner plastic and feed the dogs. While I was terrified of getting stuck out in the wind, he seemed unbothered by it. He takes some time to show me the package he is carrying in his sled and tell me about Dr. Gollub, who was killed by a drunk snow machiner while out mushing earlier this year. Mike is carrying some of his personal items on his journey to Nome. Mike, who has lost 6 brothers to alcohol, is always carrying a message about sobriety.

## **Tuesday March 17 - Day 10**

### **Leg 14 - Slough to Kaltag, 30 miles?**

At 11:30 p.m. the dogs and I head down the trail, off the slough, and back into the wind. The conditions are, if anything, worse. The temperature is much colder. The wind is just as strong, and the drifts are higher. Many of the trail markers have broken off or blown away, and there are long, scary sections with no visible trail and no markers in sight. You just have to carry on in the same direction, make sure not to get into the deep snow, and keep scanning for markers. Getting lost off-trail in these conditions would be very serious, but sometimes it is hard to tell if the dogs are wallowing through yet another drift or are have lost the trail completely.

The darkness is actually a good thing – now the dogs can follow my headlight beam instead of having to rely only on voice commands when I spot the trail. Also, it is easier to pick out the trail markers from a distance in the dark because they have reflective tape on them.

We run through the dark and wind for almost 6 more hours. Although it is the 'dead zone' time when mushers have a hard time staying awake, I never get sleepy. I am too busy searching for sight of the trail, scanning for the faint glow of a distant marker, constantly checking each dog to make sure they are moving well, and stopping to wipe ice off the dog's faces, check their booties, and throw snacks at them. Finally we roll into Kaltag at 5:15 in the morning after a total of 17 hours on the trail, 13 of them in motion.

We rest in Kaltag for almost 8 hours. The dogs are still looking great. They lost a lot of weight out in the wind and cold, but the vets say they look better than most teams coming in. Kaltag is windy and cold but not like the river, and the dogs are happy to bed down in straw. I don't recall doing an interview while I was taking care of the dogs, but I must have because it is on the Insider when I get home. I was even making sense. (Not remembering the interview is not a

reflection of my state of exhaustion, but rather a result of doing so many of them that they all become muddled in your mind.)

Like most villages, the round community building is open and we can heat our meals and rest inside. But no one in Kaltag seems to care that we are here. Ryan Redington offers a woman who runs the local café \$100 for a hamburger – or even grilled cheese – but she says they don't have any and goes home. There are lots of mushers here and we're all pretty glad to be off the river finally. I manage a 3 hour sleep before it is time to go again.

## **Tuesday March 17 - Day 10**

### **Leg 15 - Kaltag to Old Woman Cabin, 50 miles**

I am feeling a little short of leaders. Angel and Chase have proven themselves, and I know WSU can lead me through the teeth of a storm. Every other dog in my team has done quite a bit of leading during training, but none of them is up for leading at this point in the race, not even Skeeter who I count on as a main leader. Aberdeen has been fighting some pretty bad diarrhea, so I don't want to put any additional strain on him. Déjà is still showing signs of fatigue. I tried Fly up front thinking maybe he'd finally get serious about leading, but he was the same unreliable goof off as normal. Every time I try to put someone else up front, they start out fine but quickly falter or become distracted by the dogs behind them. Then is it Chase or Angel back up front. We'll be fine as long as they stay healthy, but I am also trying hard to keep them from burning out – leading requires the dog to do a lot more than just run along and is much more tiring.

When we leave, it is once again Angel and Chase in lead. We head out at 1:00 in the afternoon – full daylight and our slowest time of day. It seems to take forever to get to where we are going. The trail traverses a seemingly endless wide tundra valley. Ed Stielstra told me to look for the most perfect pyramid mountain you could imagine, and the cabin where we plan to stop will be at the foot of it. When it finally shows up, way in the distance, I cannot believe we still have to get all the way to the base of it.

We finally pull up to Old Woman Cabin after maybe 7 ½ hours. Allen Moore and Harry Alexie are just leaving. Ryan Redington and Cindy Gallea are there, along with Bill Cotter and David Sawatzky. Ryan has stoked up the fire so hot that he is forced to get out of his heavy mushing gear. He is out on the porch cooling down when I come in, wearing only tan thermal bottoms. At first glance I think he is completely stripped down and I wonder just what kind of party I missed!

I feed the dogs and bed them down and go inside. By the time I get my food thawed and I am ready to nap, Bill and Ryan have left and the cabin is cooling off. I don't actually sleep much because it is really getting chilly. After 4 hours we pack up and go on down the trail.

## **Wednesday March 18 - Day 11**

### **Leg 16 - Old Woman Cabin to Unalakleet, 39 miles**

It is dark as we leave, and we run another 5 ½ hours to Unalakleet. The trail is more of same, although we pick up speed because it is night. As I come into Unalakleet one of the checkers

says they have a lot of new intakes, and asks if I could please help Jeff King clean up the new monkey before I take care of my dogs. I look across the large empty warehouse to a utility sink in the back corner. Sure enough, there is Jeff, doing his best to wash a squirming monkey. Another mini-dream – gosh I have some strange ones out here!

About an hour before we get to the checkpoint we pass some cabins and the dogs really perk up. They think we must be getting somewhere. My notes say that there is often overflow on the river, but I never saw any water the entire trip. Others were not so lucky, like Aliy Zirkle who had to create boots out of spare pants when she got her feet wet in deep overflow out of White Mountain.

We arrive in Unalakleet at 6:15 in the morning to a whole greeting crew; mom, Aunt Carol, Kathy (Ray Redington’s mom) along with checkers and vets. I have a lot of chores to do – clean out the sled, change the runner plastic, and sort through my gear. But it is cold and windy and dark down in the dog lot. I usually get all my chores done before going up to eat and rest, but this time it makes more sense to rest now and get up an hour earlier to get everything done. So after taking care of the dogs I head up to the community center, where I soak food for the next meal, eat some soup, get heckled by Bill Cotter and Ryan Redington, and take a nap for a few hours.



Before leaving I drop Déjà so she can go home. She seems tired and is having trouble with diarrhea. She’s been pulling sporadically since Shageluk 250 miles back. She worked hard on the river and when the team was slower, but now it is time to send her home to rest.

Trouble is still feeling a bit sick, still not barking to go, but he seems to be hanging in there. Each time I think maybe I should send him home, he seems to perk up a bit. Aberdeen has terrible diarrhea but has been strong and steady in harness. I decide to keep them on and just watch carefully.

Cindy Gallea and I have been running together off and on for most of the race. Our teams have almost identical speeds, and we keep finding each other out on the trail. We are both planning on leaving about the same time, so we decide to leave together. The only problem with this is, I get my times confused and agree to leaving at 1:00 p.m., when I was originally planning to leave at 2:00.

As we get ready to go, I can’t figure out how I have wasted three hours getting ready, yet I’m still rushing around to get everything done. I go into fast mode (no mean feat when you are sleep deprived) and get the runners changed, the sled packed, and the dogs bootied in order to leave on time with Cindy. I don’t even have time for the pizza Mom ordered. She sends me and



Cindy down the trail with pizza slices in hand. They make some great pizza in Unalakleet! Only as I settle into my run do I realize that I had cut the rest short and done all my normal chores plus the extras in 2 hours, not 3. No wonder I had to rush!

### **Wednesday March 18 - Day 11**

#### **Leg 17 - Unalakleet to Shaktoolik, 42 miles**

Leaving Unalakleet you head straight towards the hills and peaks. After a short traverse across open ground, you begin to climb. For the next 4 hours we are either going up a hill or down one. Finally we reach a long slope that descends all the way to sea level once more.

During the long descent Bruce flies by a few times, then buzzes in low just for fun. I am goofing around, pretending to duck as he goes by. Eventually he flies off. When we finally reach the bottom of the hill, I find that he has landed on a frozen puddle and is there taking pictures. It is always fun to have a fly-in visitor!



Throughout this run, Cindy and I trade lead a couple of times. Usually the chasing team is a little more motivated to catch up, so when your teams are as equally matched as ours, the guys behind always want to pass. Her Montana trained dogs pull the hills a bit faster than we do, and we catch up to her and go by on the flats later, pulling into Shaktoolik within minutes of each other. Her big leader Hammer really reminds me of Scooby – something in the way he moves and how his front paws work. I enjoy turning around to watch him move as she follows behind. It is really nice running with her and having some company on the trail.

The dogs do well in the hills, but for the first time we have trouble passing straw where another team has rested. The dogs want to stop and rest too, and I have to drag them back to the trail. This after only four hours, so I know they shouldn't be tired yet. When we hit the long, flat, windy final stretch into Shaktoolik they really slow down. I am (once again) really concerned at our speed. They don't even speed up when they see the checkpoint ahead, just kept plodding along until we get there. I should have thought about it and realized that Cindy's team was going

through the same thing, as they were visible behind us but not catching up. Instead I worry that something is wrong. We get to Shaktoolik at 7:30 p.m., after just over 6 hours on the trail.

Shaktoolik is a windy little place. The locals have done a great job putting up snow berms around the tiny little parking area and have even spent time cutting snow blocks to help shield the dogs from the wind. Inside the National Guard trailer it is cramped but friendly. The checkers are busy cooking up food for the mushers; anything you wanted, anytime of the day or night. One of the rooms is filled with what looks like a giant fire engine with portholes, which is actually a composting toilet that you have to climb up on top of using a small set of stairs. They call it the Big Red Monster, and there is definitely a sense that it might swallow you whole as you perch on top.

I get the dogs fed right away and plan to pull out again after 6 hours. The vet is going over the team and tells me he is concerned with Angel, as she looks tired, slightly dehydrated, and has pale gums. She eats well, but now I am worried about my main leader; I'm relying on her to get me to the finish line. The vet is very kind and caring, even building a little wall of snow blocks around Angel to help block the wind. Actually, I'm worried about everyone now.

He tells me he is just a first year Iditarod vet, so we come back out later with Denny, a more experienced Iditarod vet. Denny says there is nothing obviously wrong, but I should trust my instincts and the solution is simple – extra rest. So I tuck the dogs in under even more straw (they look like haystacks, is there a team under there?) and go in for a long nap. We stay 11 ½ hours. At 7 in the morning we pull out into the wind again, and I am praying the team is better.



## **Thursday March 19 - Day 12**

### **Leg 18 - Shaktoolik to Koyuk, 58 miles?**

This stretch crosses the sea ice of Norton Sound. It is long and flat and bleak. There are no landmarks and nothing to look at except ice and sky. It is notorious for horrible wind storms. The front runners were caught in a vicious storm here (the same one we ran through out on the river). Luckily for us, the winds are only moderate as we cross. Still, I have on my wind gear and I'm ready for anything.

After about 2 hours there is a shelter cabin on a point of land, and that is the last landmark you see. At first we make good time and pass Mike Williams, who left 45 minutes before us. He disappears into the blowing snow behind us. Then the dogs seem to peter out, and we trudge along, barely trotting.

Everyone says that you will experience drastic mood swings during the Iditarod, from horrible, dark depression, to elation and joy. It has been compared to a vision quest, with intense ups and downs. I somehow got lucky and experienced only the super highs. Almost all the race was a delight and I never had any real lows. But this section on the sea ice gets me as down as I ever got.

The trail from Shak to Koyuk is listed as almost 60 miles long, and I estimate our speed at 5 miles per hour. Even though the trail is hard and should have been fast, we are crawling along. It looks like it is going to be a 10 hour trip, maybe more. Everyone before us was doing the run in 7 hours. At this rate we won't get to Nome for days. I imagine pulling in to a deserted town with the arch already dismantled. We'd miss the finisher's banquet and everyone would have flown home. I wouldn't get to see all the other mushers I had spent time with on the trail. I wouldn't get to party!

My nagging and wailing at the dogs has no effect, so eventually I just sit and pout. I should have thought about it and realized that Mike's team was going through the same thing, as they were not catching up (same as last run!)

I start out trying to carry Angel in the sled to give her some extra rest. She puts up such a fuss, whining and struggling, that the rest of the team keeps looking back to see why I am torturing her. After a short time I give up and put her back in the team. I can at least give her a break from leading, and here I make a great discovery. I put Alis up front for one more try. Earlier in the race she had not been a willing leader. But across this vast empty expanse that is sucking the energy out of everyone, she just churns along, a perfect partner to Chase. It took her a few hundred miles (ok, 900), but she has come into her own as a race leader.

I am glooming along, whining to myself, when I realize I can see something appearing ahead. Gradually a toy town, with red and green and yellow buildings materializes out of the whiteness. It takes forever to grow into a real town, but finally we arrive!



Veterinarian Jerry Vanek, last seen in Anvik, is there in Koyuk to greet my team. I ask him to check really carefully, since the dogs were so slow and I am worried I have pushed too hard or that they might be coming down with something. He laughs and says everyone is flat on the sea ice, everyone thinks they are moving too slowly. He points out that we had made the run in only 6 ½ hours, quite a bit quicker than any of the other recent teams. (Obviously the distance was much shorter this year, taking a more direct route across the ice.) Jerry looks the team over and

says they are fine, ready to go, and not even particularly tired. He is right. They are rolling around and lounging in the sun, looking pretty happy.

I realize that we had overstayed at Shaktoolik. The vets in Shak were cautious, but boredom with the trail is not a good reason to give extra rest! I change plans from 6 hours of rest to 4 hours – I want to get to Nome!

After caring for the dogs, I go inside to grab some food. Cindy Gallea is in sleeping, and Harry Alexie is just getting ready to go. The folks in the checkpoint are happy to see us –it’s been a bit slow for them. They are busy calculating how long it will take for the next group of mushers to arrive. They are looking at a gap of several days, and are scheming ideas for borrowing snow machines, going flying, or something to entertain themselves until the other teams got closer.

Someone has brought moose prime rib and all the fixings for sandwiches. I wrap up a thick slab of meat in a lettuce leaf and I’m in heaven. I also down more of the rich cardiac soup from my drop bag, and I’m so full I can barely breathe. I have about an hour before I have to go out and get the dogs ready, and I am happy just to sit inside where it is warm and still.

Cindy wakes up and comes out to eat. I pass her some of my sunscreen as she is looking really fried (me too, that arctic sun is hard to protect against). Even though she left Shaktoolik almost three hours before we did, her run time and her rest in Koyuk were longer, so our times are just about synched up again. We decide to leave together for the run to Elim. All too soon it is time to gear up and get going again.

## **Thursday March 19 - Day 12**

### **Leg 19 - Koyuk to Elim, 48 miles**

We pull out on the trail to Elim at 5:30 in the afternoon. Of course it is daylight, so the dogs are once again slow. Every time we hook up to go, I check in with Trouble who is still a bit under the weather. I sweet talk him and even bark a little to see if he will start yapping to go like normal. This time he finally responds, bouncing and barking. The rest of the dogs join in with a little howl. From here on out, before each run, I give a little howl and the dogs answer back. The dogs enjoy it, and it makes me happy to know they are feeling good enough to make a ruckus.

We run across some more sea ice and then start rolling over small desolate, wind-sculpted ridges and dips. For the last 15 miles or so we join up with a road. As darkness falls the dogs hit their speed, leaving me gasping and hoping no one is out driving on the road. We can’t stop, not for anything, and the high snow banks would make it impossible to get off the road.

Flip, Skeeter, Voodoo, Shotgun, and Fly have been doing the majority of the heavy work in





wheel. So far they've had no health issues, I'm not trying to save them for leading, and they are strong enough to handle the extra effort. I am careful to rotate constantly, never keeping one dog in wheel for more than one run.

We pull into the checkpoint at the Elim Volunteer Fire Department. I wonder what they'd do if there was a fire, seeing as how Iditarod has taken over the fire hall. It is just before midnight, after 6½ hours on the trail. Of course it is windy (isn't every place on this trail windy?), so I bury the dogs in straw after feeding. The checkers are up and happy to make us burgers, hot drinks, whatever we need. I am debating cutting rest a bit (like 2 hours) since the dogs still have a surplus and sure don't seem tired. Harry Alexie is still holding a steady 4 hour lead so I probably can't catch him, but it would give me a chance (Chad Lindner is long gone). Bill Cotter and Ryan Redington counsel me to take it easy, rest the dogs, and make sure I have a strong finish. So I lie down on a big stack of sheet rock and take a 2 hour nap.

### **Friday March 20 - Day 13**

#### **Leg 20 - Elim to White Mountain, 46 miles**

I leave Elim at 6:00 in the morning. Once the dogs burn off their usual 2 hour speed burst, we are back to our normal day time routine – plodding. The trail climbs one steep, long hill after another. A family on a four-wheeler (yes, a whole family packed onto a single four-wheeler, like an arctic clown-car) keeps trying to pass. I pull the team over and they chug by, low-riding all the way. Then just about when I think they are finally going to get clear, the struggling machine coughs, sputters, and dies. This happens repeatedly, interspersed with other attempts where the wheels grab into the soft snow and lurch to a halt. Then they roll off on all sides and start digging the vehicle loose. After several miles they finally manage to putter by and slowly, slowly pull away in a cloud of low hanging fumes.

Cindy Gallea left Elim about ½ hour behind me, but her hill-trained dogs catch up after just a few hours. It is amazing how much quicker she is in the hills, and how much quicker I am, regardless of terrain, if it is dark. This section also includes plenty of sidehill, which would be tricky except the snow is soft and it keeps the sliding to a minimum for me. Cindy, on the other hand, struggles. I watch as her sled constantly lurches and slides. She battles to keep the runners tipped into the hill, throwing all her weight to one side to counter balance. At the end of the run she is exhausted and soaked with sweat, while I have run most of this section sitting on my bucket. I am not sure exactly why my sled handles it so much better – maybe having the weight in the middle? – but I almost feel guilty for relaxing while Cindy, only 100 feet ahead of me, is working her tail off.

The hardest climb, loaded with sidehill and plenty of wind, is getting to the summit of Little McKinley at 1,000 feet above sea level. This area is notorious for terrible wind. Although it is breezy and there is blowing snow, it is pretty mild for us.

During the long gentle glide back to the sea ice I see the strangest and most beautiful sight of the entire trail. Cindy's team is just ahead, softly swishing through silent, white snow. There are no trees or other landmarks, just gently rolling, snow covered hills sloping down to the flat, white sea. Even the sky is almost white in the bright sunlight.

Flights of ptarmigan in their winter white fly across the trail, crossing just behind Cindy's team. With their stout white bodies and strangely stubby, paddling wings they look like white penguins swimming through the sky. Group after group glides by just in front of us. It is incredibly beautiful and very surreal. I gaze about in wonder and wish there is someone there to share it with, but Cindy can't hear me and the dogs never get excited about scenery.

Finally the long glide is over and we are back on flat, barren, white open space. A long, straight trail marches up the ice towards Golovin. Poor Golovin, the whole town comes out to wave and cheer the mushers on, but they aren't a checkpoint and nobody stops. They are too close to White Mountain, where we have to take a mandatory 8 hour break. But the dogs are excited to see a village, and trot happily through the streets.

Until we pop over a bank and right back onto ice, where they promptly start dragging their feet and looking at me like I am crazy to want to keep going. I can see why some mushers have argued with their team at this spot. My pups are great, though, and keep on trudging even if they are sulking. And this time I am smart enough to realize they are sick of the flat boring trail, not tired, not ill. And to realize that Cindy is moving at the same slow speed.

I pull into White Mountain just behind Cindy at 1:30 in the afternoon. Allen Moore is getting ready to depart in an hour or so, but he comes down to say hello and welcome me to the last checkpoint (!!)

The dogs eat well, and I bed them down well, again covering them in straw to protect against the icy wind whistling down the river.

As I am finishing my chores and changing runner plastic for the last time, Cindy comes over to tell me that the Solomon Blowhole, about 30 miles away, has been blowing so hard that some teams were trapped in the shelter cabin. There is a rumor that at least one dog had died there. It is already getting cold and the forecast is for 30 below. Just when it seemed the race was almost over, no more worries, just one more run...

Cindy and I are both a little stressed out. We agree to buddy up and run this section together. Allen tells me that no matter how hard the blowhole is gusting, it is only 13 miles across and we had seen much worse on the Yukon River. That helps steady me but doesn't take away my fear entirely. There is always something to be concerned about, and I know we're gonna go do it anyway, I just don't want any major catastrophes this close to the finish.

We watch several teams leave. None look happy to go. Some have to be scolded, some have to be led by the musher. Bob Bundtzen's team flat refuses to go and he spends hours on the river just outside the checkpoint arguing with them. It makes me so proud of my dogs, who willingly leave every checkpoint. I have no doubt I will leave White Mountain riding my sled while the dogs trot down the trail.

I climb the hill back up to the checkpoint building and feast on barbecue beef. Someone starts cutting up muktuk that they brought for Mike Williams. Although this fermented whale blubber is a great source of food and energy and is a delicacy among many natives, I have not acquired a taste for it. The smell of it makes me a little queasy. I head down to the pottery room where we

can sleep and I kick Ryan Redington out – he should be getting ready to go by now. I take his place and manage to sleep for a few hours.

We leave right on time at 9:30 p.m. Only 77 more miles to go! My excitement at starting the final leg of the race is balanced by the knowledge that many teams have scratched here, even this close to the finish line. And the news about the blowhole is still not good...

### **Friday March 20 - Day 13**

#### **Leg 21 - White Mountain to Nome, 77 miles**

We run for hours up one steep climb and down the other side. Who knew this race was so darn hilly? After 31 miles the shelter cabin just before the blowhole appears. There was not a breath of wind the entire run so far, and I am pretty sure that the blowhole is on pause.

We get to the shelter cabin right about 1:00 a.m., which means we made great time over all those hills – almost 9 miles an hour. Cindy and I agreed to wait for each other here at the start of the blowhole and run the dangerous section together. Cindy is behind – it is dark so I have my ‘fast team’. As I wait for her I put on my wind gear and put WSU and Angel up front. It might not be windy now, but I don’t want to be caught unprepared.

We seem to have hit a lucky break in the breeze – not so for almost every other team that came through. Still, for all I know the wind is going to crank up again. There is a reason there are heavy tripods covered in reflective markers about every ten feet on this section. As we jog along I doze off and on. I check frequently for signs of the shelter cabin on the far side, and it just never appears. I think we must have really slowed down, even though it seems like we are moving at a good pace. Finally I check my watch and realize 2 hours have gone by. I snoozed so hard I passed the cabin without ever seeing it. The dogs are trail hardened and savvy, and have been cranking right along without any help from me. The wind never appears, and I learn a lesson about listening to trail rumors. Next year...

I never see any of the other landmarks I’m looking for either; crossing the Solomon River, the abandoned locomotives of the Last Train to Nowhere – how do you miss seeing a train for Pete’s sake, even in the dark? It just seemed like a long, dark, trip with glowing tripods flashing alongside like the lines on a highway.

It is here that I see my one and only hallucination of the trip. Hallucinations, some quite detailed and lengthy, are common in this race. The lack of sleep combined with physical stress and fatigue, irregular nutrition, and often long-term mild dehydration trigger some pretty crazy mind games. My vision is less than ½ a second, but it nearly gives me a coronary. I blink my eyes open after a doze and see, instead of 12 dogs, a line of 12 aliens with scary glowing eyes and open mouths, all staring at me. I snap all the way awake with my heart slamming hard and my legs quivering.

Even though we are blasting along and have left Cindy behind, the next closest mushers departed White Mountain hours in front of me. There is no real chance of catching them. The main goal is just to get to the finish line, but anytime my dogs are moving well I am very happy.

At some point the trail becomes a wide packed road, but it has a soft layer on top. The leaders swerve back and forth searching for a smoother trail. They must be going an extra mile for every mile forward, and they keep dragging me into the deep snow as they veer all over. For some reason I am sure it is WSU who is responsible for all the swerving, so I put Chase back up. Still swerving. I move Angel back and put WSU in front again. Maybe it's Chase. I move him back and try Alis up front. It has to be WSU – I put her back and try Angel once more. Finally I just quit worrying about it, and eventually we turn off the road.

We pull into Safety at 5:00 in the morning. We've been going for 7 ½ hours, but it's only another 22 miles!! The dogs don't seem tired at all, and I stop only long enough to let the checkers help me put on my bib. It's a three person job to get the bib on over my parka, ruff, and all my bulky layers.

We continue down the long packed trail, and then turn off to climb Cape Nome. This is a long, fairly steep climb that seems to go on forever. Ahead of me I am surprised to see a team stalled out to one side. The musher is off the sled, untangling dogs. I hope they will follow my team. At first they seem to get going, only to stop again. The musher, David Sawatzky, ends up leading them himself for many miles before finally calling it quits only miles from the finish. He has done the race many times and was disappointed not to finish well this year, so scratching was ok for him.

As we near the top of the hill the lights of Nome appear ahead. The dogs speed up, and we roar down towards the town. Except we still have 10 miles of ice to go. It seems like those lights are receding as we run along, because they seem never get any closer! The dogs stay motivated, but I am experiencing a combination of impatience and elation.

Finally we approach the town as the sun just starts to light the sky. Cars pull over and honk and wave. The siren that announces incoming teams is sounding. Mercedes is barking like crazy at all the people. The dogs are really hauling ass now, but still looking all around at the buildings and cars, which we haven't since we started.

In the distance I see the ramp where the trail goes up from the beach onto Front Street. At the same time I realize there is another team up ahead of us! The dogs notice the team too, and take off in pursuit. We are gradually catching up to the team – what team is it? Rick Larson left a few hours before us, it has to be him. He disappears up the ramp and we follow close behind.

The dogs can't figure out what the Welcome Gnomes are, and are barking and swerving as I laugh myself silly. We top out on Front Street and race down the middle of the road just a short distance behind Rick, but I can see we are going to need another ¼ mile to catch him. No matter – we are here! We cross the finish line at 8:30 a.m. with the sun coming up behind us.



Varan is waiting there under the burlled arch, just like I had dreamed it back in January. Mom, Aunt Carol, Joan, Bruce, and everyone else is there too. Even Allen Moore, who finished hours ago, got up to greet us. The smile on my face is a mile wide. The dogs are rolling around and wagging, and even after a 11 ½ hour run I feel like we could keep going forever.

But we don't have to. That's it – we did the Iditarod, finished in great shape, and conquered one of the worst years ever.

