

Iditarod Recap 2014

This year I could write an entire novel just about the Gorge, and I'm not even sure I want to remember all the gory details. So just the highlights this year. I hope it is enough. I'm also going to do it in installments. I told myself it would be easier to write this way, knowing I don't have to think about it all at once. And so I promised myself that Part One would get done tonight, and it would be easy; everything up until things went crazy.

A note about helmets: I didn't wear one. I thought about it, and here is what I thought. They make my neck hurt and that gives me debilitating headaches, which makes it pretty tough to run Iditarod. They don't fit under my parka hood. They make it impossible to wear a decent hat (necessary if it is below zero!!) It's hard to fit a headlamp on one. They are expensive. Finding one that works and then retrofitting all my gear to work with one just ain't gonna happen in the last few days before Iditarod (which I spent at work, finishing up projects so I would be allowed to take three weeks off).

Many stories from the trail have already been told, and everyone has heard that Iditarod 2014 was a matter of sheer survival. I don't think that any of us, going in, had an inkling of just how bad it would be. But we'd heard some grim reports, and seen some terrible photos. Before the start, my imagination was running wild and I was truly stressed out, with gruesome visions of how tough it was going to be. No matter what my imagination dreamed up, it was no match for the reality I would soon face.

Part One – to the Gates of the Gorge

I'm usually pretty mellow before a race start, but not this year. Sunday morning as we drive to the start, my stress level is high and I'm (OK, I'll admit it) a little scared about the trail to come. I decide to play some bouncy, perky music to get my mood up. I choose Ben Folds Five "[Do It Anyway](#)", an energetic, fun little song to get me moving. The melody may be lively, but the lyrics are all about risk and failure and having to suck it up and "Do It Anyway", and it is a perfect fit for my fears at the moment. I decide it is my theme song for the race. There will be many, many times over the next week and a half that I will tell myself to suck it up and get busy, because we are going to "Do It Anyway".

The start goes off well, and the announcer even gets my name right. I anticipate an easy, uneventful run down the river system. I just plan to get the team in race mode and settle in to the routine. But it is not to be this year. The hard, rutted ice is rattling my fillings out. The grating sound of the brake on ice is LOUD. I'm riding the brake to keep our speed down. At least, I'm riding the brake for a few hours, until it suddenly snaps in two. Not good. This is a brand new sled and a brand new brake. It hasn't had enough miles or abuse to fall apart yet, but my brake is most definitely broke.

For the next five hours, I ride the drag to control our speed and even to stop. I'm happily impressed with my control of 16 Iditarod sled dogs, as we repeatedly stop to snack or let other teams pass using only my voice and the minimal stopping power of the drag mat.

Of course, the dogs are excited by checkpoints, and they aren't too cooperative about the whole stopping thing in Yentna. In fact, I nearly roar through without stopping to sign in. We just about take out a helper who tries to steer my team into the correct exit shoot without realizing that I won't (I can't) stop the team to let him untangle his legs from the line.

The checkers in Skwentna are more prepared for me (they probably heard me singing out "no brakes, no brakes!" as we came flying in). They do a masterful job of hanging on and slowing my team enough to get us parked.

I happen to be packing a spare brake bar and claws, ready to pop into place. It is mounted on my rear handlebar, and it takes only minutes to trade out. But I was anticipating needing this much later in the race. Like after the sled eating Dalzell Gorge or the treacherous Farewell Burn. Now I'm heading off with my backup already in place, and this is a year when you need backups for your backups.

Also, Luna, one of my best leaders, was limping badly for the last several hours, and I know I must send her home. So run one was a bit stressful.

I decide to keep my runs short, fun, and happy. Instead of making it to Rohn in three long runs, by-passing Finger Lake and Rainy Pass in favor of camping at the Happy River, we stop at each checkpoint. My plan seems to be working, because the dogs are feeling wonderful and energetic. Normally, that's a good thing.

The trail to Finger Lake is great, and we make good time. The dogs are happy to pull over and take a nice rest in the sunshine, and I catch a little nap in the straw with them.

The Happy River Steps are a breeze. The snow is plentiful, and the dogs are extremely cooperative. Just because I can, I call the dogs to whoa on each switch back, take breath, make sure we are all sorted out, and then ask them to gently proceed. Our speed is reasonable, and the new trail route (straight along an engineered side-hill sidewalk instead of the infamous last sharp left-hand plunge) makes the Steps easier than I've ever seen them. I almost laugh to myself, because really, trail rumors are always SO much worse than the reality.

We charge up the hills out of the Happy River. There are plenty of challenges, but nothing presents too much difficulty. The only problem I have is getting a root completely snarled around my brake. Jason Mackey is right behind me, and in this narrow, twisty section of trail I don't want to stop in his way to free up my brake. Instead, I keep getting up too much speed and dumping over. Which pretty much got in his way, too.

I take a short break at Rainy Pass (I'm not going to get much sleep on this schedule), and then gear up to leave. I suspect the trail is going to be challenging (or, as it was described by some, 'a bit technical'), so I put some calm and level headed leaders up front; Mercedes and Lyra. I make sure I have a spare headlamp right at hand in case the one I'm wearing gets ripped off my head. I tuck everything, including my snow hooks, inside the sled bag before heading out.

The run up to the Pass is wonderful. The snow is soft and deep, but well packed. The dogs are cruising along. Again I think about how often the trail rumors exaggerate. This is really delightful! There are no other teams in sight, and we are just rolling along on a lovely night run.

The trail continues to be wonderful up over the pass and down the other side. Sure, there is some icy sidehill that flings me downhill hard enough to whip my head into the snow (yeah, I know, no helmet!) And sure, there is that wrong turn we took.

Apparently we were supposed to turn hard right. But the trail appeared to go straight ahead, and the markers X'ing it off were (as usual) knocked down long before I ever got there. At least a few other teams went in this way before us, because we were sure following tracks. About two sled lengths in, the 'trail' peters out. To our left, a nearly vertical ten foot drop onto jagged boulders. I consider it. If we

could somehow land down there in one piece and negotiate 50 yards of the dog-house and basketball sized chunks of what looks like volcanic rock, we'd be right back on the trail. Maybe not. To our right, an impenetrable thicket of willow, which I consider taking my axe to. But I don't feel much like a lumberjack, so I begin the work to turn the team around on the narrow shelf. They are pretty excited about it, and cheerfully rush in an organized group back the way we came. I hop on the sled as it swings around and get everyone stopped. Not even a tangle! They are now lunging and popping, in a hurry to launch back up the mountains towards Rainy Pass. Turning around was so much fun, we do it again to get headed back down the way we are supposed to be going. The girls in lead take such delight in this fun new exercise that they take the very next opportunity, at a wide spot in the trail, to swing all the way around again. I put a stop to that in a hurry.

At any rate, a couple of spills and wrong turns is standard stuff for this section of trail, and I think again about trail rumors and how they should be disregarded.

In this cheerful and relieved frame of mind, we come to M***** F***** hill, the long drop that takes you into the maw of Dalzell Gorge.

It's going to take a few deep breaths and some real focus for me to dredge up my memories of these next few sections. I will do it, I swear. If nothing else it may help me process the experience. But not tonight. I'm off to bed (and likely dream that I gotta get up and get my team going) so that I can get up and go to work in the morning. Next installment soon, I promise.

Part Two – the Scary Stuff (some of it)

Sled brakes are funny things. You never know when one is going to flat out fail – either the bar snaps, or the claws get ripped off, or the bolts holding it to the sled are sheared in two. They are unpredictable, as we saw earlier in the race. In normal practice, you never want to put too much pressure on the brake unless it is biting into snow or ice. All it takes is one good stump, tussock, root, or rock to catch the brake and rip it off your sled. We all develop a really light touch, ready at any moment to lighten up on the brake to avoid a disaster. I've always had good luck with my brakes on the Iditarod, and I'm hoping this will hold true this year as we enter some of the trickier sections of trail.

We are churning along. Even though the trail seems to be pretty darn good, I have taken the cautious route, and clipped most of the dogs to their collars instead of their harnesses. I don't notice much reduction in power, but it seems like a good idea anyway. The dogs could care less. They are on a mission to see what is around the next bend, and there are plenty of bends to keep them excited.

The big drop (you know, MF Hill) gapes before me. Even on a normal year this hill is a challenge. It is steep – really steep. And long – Don Bower's notes say it is 200 feet, but it seems like you go for at least mile straight down. The dogs run flat out, but you can't slow the sled enough to hold them back. With no help from the sled to control their downward plunge, the dogs flail and scramble, but somehow always get to the bottom without injury. Every year, as I juggle desperately to keep from running over my wheel dogs, just as I think we can't go any farther without a catastrophe, we land at the bottom and race onto the ice in the jaws of the Gorge. Every year I think, how did we do that? What I'm trying to say is, it's a M***** F***** (hence its name).

This year I don't have curses strong enough to describe it. The snow has petered out, and the hill before me is a grayish/brown mess of churned up dirt and snow, dropping out from under us. Every root, every rut, every brake-bashing rock is exposed and ready to ruin my day. The dogs are screaming along in full flight, and I am two feet on the brake, desperately trying to get some control of my sled as it free-falls, independent of the dogs. The brake is catching and jerking over every obstacle, a sure recipe for brake failure. I am certain that no brake can survive this type of abuse. But it's a matter of die now (in a catastrophic crash) or die later (when I have to continue with no brake), and there is no time to second guess. I'm in survival mode.

We are flying – almost literally, since the sled only touches down every so often. I am climbing around on my sled like a monkey, sometimes on one runner, sometimes another, rocketing back and forth and bouncing off obstacles, but still with the plastic side down. There is plenty of evidence where other mushers came to grief – runner plastic, ripped from the bottom of the sled by the rocks and roots; gloves, torn from the hands of mushers, or just spares that have fallen from pockets; sports drinks and water bottles and snacks, thrown from sleds; all sorts of equipment, lost and abandoned as the teams plummeted by.

It is not over before I know it. It goes on and on. But eventually it does end. Just the hill, not the horror. For we have dumped out in the Dalzell Gorge, a narrow twisting chute lodged at the bottom of towering rock faces. There is no stopping the dogs, there is no slowing the dogs. We are running at top speed. I don't have time to think Do It Anyway, because at this point I don't have any choice in the matter. We are doing it, one way or the other.

We alternate between polished glare ice and bare dirt and rocks, with an occasional ice-glazed strip of plywood put in by the trail crew to bridge the creek. None of these surfaces allow me to so much as check our speed. We continue at a break neck pace as the trail veers from bank to bank across the creek.

I skid across mirror-shined ice that throws the light of my headlamp back in my face, and jump the gap on more than one hole across the rushing water of the creek. Somehow, by dancing hard on my runners, my drag, and my brake (still miraculously attached and functional!), I keep the sled pointed in the same general direction as the dogs and generally upright.

The dirt sections are another story. When we are in the creek bottom we are on (relatively) flat ice. But the dirt happens whenever we climb the banks on either side. Steep banks. Side hill banks. Banks with trees. The dogs run right up the 45 degree side hill slopes, and they have great traction on the frozen dirt. But there is simply no way to keep the sled from sliding to the bottom side of the trail, right into the trees. There is no way to slow the dogs before slamming into the trees. There is nothing to do but hang on and hope.

I have time to think, "Who looked at this and decided you could run a dog team through here?" and "How could you even get a snow machine past these sidehills?" and "Two miles – it's only two miles." But mostly I just have time enough to react and respond to the obstacles that are flying towards me like tennis balls from a launcher set on 'knock your head off'.

At one point my sled flips just as I try to sneak past a large spruce at the bottom of a steep side hill of dirt. The rear stanchion slams into the tree, jerking the 15 dogs to a halt. My leg happens to be in between the tree and the sled, and takes most of the blunt force of the team being yanked to a stop

from a full sprint. The pain sears through me, and I struggle to gasp in air. I am pretty sure I just broke my femur. The amount of force that my leg just absorbed is staggering. There is no way something isn't broken. The tree holds the dogs in check as I gently take a few steps. My leg is throbbing, but holding weight. I don't have time to mess around; the wild dogs are getting more and more wound up. The longer I delay, the crazier they are going to be when we set off again. I grit my teeth, pick up my sled, and we tear down the trail.

The very next impossible obstacle looks a whole lot like the one that just ate my leg. Only this time it is my hand that is in the sandwich, and I know that this is going to be race-ending, maybe even hand-ending. The dogs must have heard some note of desperation in my voice; they ease up just as the sled makes contact with the tree. My hand is pinned, but it is not crushed. I manage to rip it free, stripping my glove off. Already, there is swelling, but I have time to grab my errant glove before I tip the sled back upright and we gallop off into the night.

Suddenly we crash out into the open, onto the flat frozen expanse of the Tatina River. It is done. I survived! There was never any question the dogs would survive – they were having a ball. But for me, pretty much from MF Hill to the end of the Gorge has been one desperate move after another to keep from crashing at high speed into trees, rocks, or rock-hard ice. Escaping without a serious injury feels like I just pulled off some sort of miracle.

My relief at being out of the Gorge with nothing but bruises is overwhelming. I scream and yell and holler and cheer at the top of my lungs. I don't care that there is five miles to go to Rohn, and that it is pretty much all glare ice, gravel, and dirt. It is flat dirt, and I'm alive.

I have time to catch my breath. The sweat starts cooling on my body. I had planned to grab drop bags, straw, and fuel in Rohn and continue another 20 miles. Plans change – I'm whipped. I need a break. We're stopping in Rohn.

The dogs charge up the dirt and into the checkpoint. "What the heck was that!", I cry to the checker (OK, I have a sailor's mouth – I might not have use the word 'heck'.) The checkers are very kind. Kevin Saiki, our race official, is especially comforting. His gentle concern is like a balm. They have seen team after team arrive after devastating runs. They welcome us and ask if we are all right. And we are! I begin to settle back into race mode, and focus on my next tasks.

A flock of volunteers guide my team through the trees to our little camp spot in the woods. I don't even need straw; the dogs are all comfy on a bed of moss and pine needles. Even though I have to hike a quarter mile to fetch water from the creek (there isn't a speck of snow in sight), it doesn't take long to get the dogs fed and cared for. As I work, I can feel my heart beating in my leg and my hand. My hand looks like Mickey Mouse's hand, puffy and round, but everything works. My pants leg is now too tight, filled out by the swelling bruise that covers my leg from hip to knee. But I'm walking. It's good enough.

I head in to the cabin for some cold water to drink, hot water for my thermos, and maybe even a nap. Instead of sleeping, I lay on a bunk with Dee Dee, talking over what we just experienced and trying to process it all. Dee's race is over after getting banged up in the Gorge, but she encourages me to hang in there. As we both agree, the Burn will be nothing like the Gorge. It might be snow-less, but at least there are no serious down hills or steep sections.

And so I head out again, determined to finish this damn race after all I've been through. I am going to Do It Anyway. I am bit worried about the next section, but I'm certain I have survived the worst that Iditarod can hand out. I am wrong. Wrong, wrong, so wrong. The Dalzell was tough, but it was only a few miles of insanity. The next 35 miles will push me to the limits of my endurance.

Wow, I'm worn out just trying to remember those measly two miles. It may take me a bit to get us across the Burn in the next installment.

Part Three – More Scary Stuff

We stop at Rohn for four hours and take off around 5:30 in the morning following a pack of about 10 teams who all took off some time after 5:00.

I expect a rough ride – the Burn is always rough. This is beyond rough. There is not a scrap of snow on the trail, although there is plenty of frozen mud and ice. I leave with all the dogs except the two wheel dogs clipped just to their collars, hoping that will help reduce the power to manageable levels.

Right off the bat Elway breaks his line. The dog is always breaking something, so it is no great surprise. He shoots down the trail, gleefully skipping from side to side, stopping right in the way to sniff and pee, charging at a full gallop down the dark trail, and darting off on side trails. The rest of the team want to go with him on his mad dash, and I have my hands full keeping control on the frozen ruts and roots.

I'm not worried I will lose him, but I have no way to stop and get him back where he belongs. We scramble after him for several miles. There is simply nowhere I can set a hook to hold the team while I clip him into the line. In fact, there isn't anywhere I have enough braking power to stop in the first place. We tear down the trail after him, slaloming through dark woods and then slamming down onto river ice and gravel bars. Finally on the other side of the river I manage to stop the team and snag a tree with my hook and collect the thoroughly pleased Elway back into the team.

I am working my tail off to stay on top of the sled and avoid obstacles. There is nothing but glare ice, frozen ruts, ledges, drop offs, stumps, rocks, logs, gravel, tussocks, uneven clumps of roots, side hills, clumps of roots on side hills, glare ice on side hills... you get the picture. And every bit of it frozen dirt or ice; no snow in sight. The sled bounces off obstacles, slams into holes, crashes over stumps, and batters its way down the 'trail'.

My brake and drag are almost useless, as there is nothing for them to bite into. I am still slamming them hard, caution to the wind, knowing that one or both is going to be torn from the sled at any moment and make a desperate situation even worse. But I am desperate for a shred of control as my sled careens back and forth, most of the time only on one runner. Like in the Dalzell, it is case of die now, or die later, and my instincts to control my sled has me jumping on the brake.

The dogs are feeling energetic, to put it mildly. We are flying. Not that I need any proof to tell me that we are travelling too fast, but we pass team after team. Many are pulled over, dealing with broken sleds or other problems.

The wild ride just doesn't let up. There isn't a single place flat enough to relax for more than a second or two before I am once again clinging to the edge of control, fighting to get the sled on both runners. And

once again I am terrified. At the speed we are travelling, a crash into the stumps and rocks is going to cause injury; possibly serious injury.

I am really getting a workout; my heart rate is through the roof, I am gasping for air, and I the sweat is pouring off my face and freezing as it splashes off my jacket. I don't dare take any of my 'padding' off to cool down, so I am completely soaked through with sweat. I don't dare stop to catch my breath because the hooligans strapped to the front of the sled don't need any time to wind themselves up into a bigger frenzy and run even harder.

The dogs are learning that "Oh ****" (insert expletive of choice) means the same as "whoa". This will do me absolutely no good, because right now they are not interested in slowing down or whoa-ing for any reason. Farther down the trail, when the dogs have mellowed a bit, when the trail is not so desperate, when I am not at the edge of exhaustion just keeping the sled on its runners, a cry of "Oh ****" will bring the dogs to a halt. But for now the throttle is stuck wide open and all I can do is hang on.

The trail is littered with runner plastic, water bottles, coolers, and other items that have been torn from, or rattled out of sleds. So far I haven't lost a thing, but I also have only had a couple minor tip overs, and no serious crashes. After a couple of hours we jump down off a two foot drop onto a gravel bar, skitter across glare ice, and head up the far bank. The bank is steep, maybe three feet high, and has a side angle. Despite the dogs pulling strong, my sled slides off to the right and keeps grinding along the sand and gravel bank that keeps getting higher and higher. Now my sled is nearly vertical and the bank is as high as my eight foot runners. I am not too worried about being stuck because Charlie Benja is not too far behind me and I know he can help me shove the sled up the bank.

The dogs are going to get a short break after all, but then, so am I. And I need it. We are two hours into a long run, and I'm shaking with fatigue, drenched with sweat, and at the end of my endurance. I sip some water and focus on breathing. I am a bit down on myself for being so out of shape, and wonder if it is going to be the reason I get hurt or destroy my sled. Then Charlie comes up and shares the same miseries with me. He is most definitely not out of shape, and I start to feel better about my fitness. Even if it doesn't make the trail any easier, Charlie's cheerful help getting my sled over the ledge makes everything seem better.

The trail doesn't actually get better. It just keeps going on and on and on, at the limits of my abilities, for mile after mile. We tear up the Post River Glacier, a steep ice cliff, and across the rubble of rocks at the top. We fling over the giant dirt humps that always lurk in the buffalo chutes and they actually seem like a friendly familiar face on this horrendous trail. We ping pong over mine-fields of tussocks. We slew around sharp corners on side hill frozen dirt cluttered with roots and stumps. We slam through holes and drops and over rocks.

I need to watch the dogs, watch the trail for what is coming up. But if I take my focus off the trail immediately in front of me for more than a split second, I am in for disaster. I take a micro-glance ahead and see my dogs waver, wobble, and then dart to the left. In front of them is a hole. They swoop around the bank and back to the middle of the trail, and I can see my sled is going to be dragged right into the hole. I jam on the brakes and somehow we stop. I stomp the hooks into some cracks in the frozen mud and take a closer look. This is not a hole, it's a crater. It's a sinkhole. An opening in the earth big enough to swallow a minivan, maybe even a school bus. It is huge! It is deep! I do NOT want to drag behind my sled and wind up at the bottom of this hole!

Once we are stopped, I know I have this one under control. Carefully I take one hook and move it forward and to the side a foot. Then I carefully remove the hook holding the dogs back. They jerk forward, but my side-hook holds. I place the next hook up and over, and then creep forward again. We move, crab-wise, a foot at a time, around the edge of the giant grave-hole until all the dogs, the sled, and I are on the far side. Then we take off again at a run!

Somewhere along the line a few hours out, the bed of the sled rides up over a tree stump, skidding along on top of it. On the far side, the stump comes popping out from under my sled and snags my brake. We lurch to a stop, then break free and keep going. For some reason, the brake is still attached to the sled. But now it is cockeyed, twisted off to the side so far that the right hand claw is hitting my runner. It's not going to do me much good like that. I can spend some time trying to straighten it back out, but usually if you bend metal around too much it will just break. Since I'm already using my replacement brake I'm not too sure what I am going to do, but I don't have much time to worry about it since I am now left with just the drag matt to keep the dogs in check.

The sled skids around an off-camber corner, bounces off a tussock, and shoots straight for a tree. The toe of my boot is caught under the brake claw, which is now in an unexpected place. I am locked in place and don't even have time to holler before the sled crunches right into the tree. The dogs are yanked up short with a startled yelp. I jump off the sled to survey the damage – a stop that hard can split a sled right in half. But I don't see a problem. The gangline didn't snap. The bridle (attaching the gangline to the sled) is intact. The runners aren't bent. The bed isn't cracked. The stanchions are in one piece. The dogs are all bouncing around and happy. Gasping, I heave the sled off the tree, and we take off down the trail.

Just a few minutes later, the sled rides up over another stump and the brake snags again. I'm sure that's the end of the brake; it has taken an awful lot of abuse. But when I look down, I laugh as I realize that stump #2 has yanked it back into position. It's a little twisted and crooked, but it is functional again. Unbelievable!

We round a corner and the trail disappears. Instead, there is flowing water. It flows, knee deep for 200 yards in the general direction that I need to go, and then turns right while the trail goes straight ahead up a hill. I stop briefly to move Bree back from swing – she will never willingly go into water, and she can put the brakes on the whole team. Then I switch out Hatchet for Harp in lead. Hatch is pretty good about water, but Harp almost seems to like it.

By the time I'm ready to ask the dogs to wade into the stream, I realize a team is overtaking us. A fast team. A team with no sled! I quickly hook down my dogs and dash over to the loose team. They are happy to stop for me, and I let them all get a nice drink of water before I tie them off to some small trees. I unhook their tuglines and make sure they are secure. I am not sure what to do at this point. I'm a little worried about their musher, and I don't want to just take off. I call over to Matt Failor who is camped just on the other side, but he agrees there isn't much else I can do.

Just as I get ready to steer the dogs into the water, I hear a voice coming down the trail. I call back to say that I have the dogs and they are fine. Rick Casillo comes running up, looking as desperately worried as anyone can be who has lost their team. Once he knows his dogs are OK, he gets a drink from my big thermos, and then heads back to collect his sled.

By now we've wasted half an hour, and the dogs have lost their focus. They aren't even sure which way we are supposed to be heading, so it will be up to me to head them out. I pull my waders on over my boots and bibs, and line them into the water. I only have to lead them far enough for the entire team to be splashing in the chest deep water when Hatchet and Harp take over and the team trots by me. I catch a ride on the sled to the other side and then stop the team.

Bree has managed to escape, and is running around on the far shore. She won't come when I call. She won't follow Jason Mackey's team, who charges right into the water and up the other side. She runs back and forth barking, but I am clearly going to have to go collect her. I trudge back to the other side and coax her over to me. She knows I am going to make her go through the water and she is not too happy about it, but once I get all the way to the other side she slinks up to me. I half carry, half drag her back across the icy water and back to the team.

I decide to take advantage of the water and give the dogs a quick drink and some food while I take a look at my sled. As I suspected, the pounding and slamming has caused some damage. It's a good thing I stopped when I did, because one of the main stanchions is splitting pretty badly. With some hose clamps and hockey tape I get the split under control and prevent it from pulling loose from the runner bracket. I clamp a few more splitting stanchions, but overall things look pretty good. I collect the dog dishes, untangle the dogs from the trees and bushes they are resting in, and after a 40 minute break, we are back on our way.

Not two miles down the trail, I realize I missed something. The bed of my sled seems to be sagging. I stop and take a look. The bolt holding the bed to the forward stanchion has snapped. That is a quick fix. The rivets holding the bed together in the back have also snapped. That is not a quick fix. In fact, I meant to drill them all out and replace them with bolts before the race, since rivets can't be repaired on the trail. But I didn't get to that chore, and now I am kicking myself. But once I get the stanchion bolt replaced, it looks like it will keep the bed where it belongs long enough to get us to Nikolai, or maybe even Takotna where I can borrow a drill and do the full repair. So we are off again after yet another pause.

Hours go by. My heart is still pounding, trying to keep up with the oxygen demand. My breath is still rasping in and out. Sweat is still pouring off me. I am still quivering with exhaustion. But there is no choice but to go on. I start to feel that my side-hill dirt skills (something I've never developed before) are really improving. I start to think that tussocks aren't too bad, compared to stumps and roots. Mostly, I am just trying to hang on until the trail improves.

We keep scrambling down the trail. Although our moving speed is too fast, we are jerking and lurching and stopping so often that we aren't making that much progress. Even after our drink break back by the creek, the dry dirt trail is making the dogs really thirsty. We are starting to see snow. Just a little bit, and just on the north side of the hills, but it is such a relief. I stop the dogs and let them bite the snow and cool their thirst for several minutes. They roll around and celebrate, and I feel like cheering too. Because the rumor is the trail has snow (real snow!) on it after the Buffalo Camp, and I know we must be closing in.

We start to see more hills. Steep, ice-mud hills. The dogs are still pulling only on their collars. But I'm not even tempted to help them out by clipping them in to their harnesses. The little hoodlums have so much dang energy, they can jolly well work a bit extra getting us up these hills.

There are more and more sections of flat dirt, for which I am ridiculously thankful. The trail has to be pretty bad when you find yourself being grateful for flat dirt. Finally we arrive at Buffalo Camp. It has taken us almost eight hours to get there, although that include several rather lengthy breaks for various reasons. The dogs could use a short break. On the other hand, I NEED a few hours to eat, drink, and rest. I decide to stop for four hours. More than they need, maybe enough for me. After feeding and caring for the dogs, I head up the ramshackle wall tent. Jason, who got there just before me, has a little fire going in the smoky woodstove, and it is not a bad place to take a short nap. I lay down on the ground but don't really sleep. The rest does me good, though, and I am happy to get up and get going again. I'm thinking about moose stew in Nikolai.

The miles into Nikolai are like a dream. There is actually snow on the trail. My brake works. I can relax on the runners without exhausting myself to stay upright. I can even sit on my bucket and take a break. I can get a snack for myself and eat it while on the run. And it is so quiet! After the chattering and slamming on the dirt and ice, the silence of the snow is shocking.

We are swooping into Nik before I know it. Rhodi checks us in, and the first thing she says is, "What do you need?" Obviously, a great many mushers have come in from this run needing tools, materials, or other help. But I can honestly say I don't need anything but a little rest and food. We made it through some insane trail in good shape. The dogs are fabulous. My sled is holding together just fine. I am tired – tired enough to say 'screw it, I'm resting' and stay for six hours instead of a more realistic four. But mostly, we are pretty damn good.

There's a long way to go yet, and lots more adventures coming up in the next installments.

Iditarod Recap 2014

Part Four - Interlude

Before I leave Nikolai, I send my spare harnesses home. I've always carried some spares. In case one gets chewed or something, I want to make sure I have an extra on hand. Now I know how silly that is; these dogs don't NEED a harness to drag me and the sled for hundreds of miles.

Most of my dogs have plenty of race experience, but I do have one rookie in the group. She's just a yearling, and never even got the chance to learn about racing earlier this season since every race we signed up for was cancelled. Usually a youngster gets a bit overwhelmed on their first race when we just keep going and going. But then we go home and they learn to handle it. Muddy Waters never got the chance to learn, so I figured she'd get her little mind blown, start to look frazzled, and I would send her home.

She proves me wrong. She LOVES this! She is screaming to go, can't wait to see what is next. So I put my baby sled dog up in lead, and let her do her thing. Her thing is running fast, her thing is finding out what is around the next corner, her thing is leading. She does the whole long run smiling up in lead. Lots of dogs can lead in training. Many don't have the drive to stay out front later in a race. Muddy has just proven she is a race leader.

We leave around four in the morning and fly down the trail. Our speed is really good. I've made the run to McGrath in eight hours, which seemed an eternity. I've made the run to McGrath in six hours, which seemed blazing fast. This time we make the run in five and half hours, and we carry right through towards Takotna and a 24 hour break.

After the punishment of the last few runs, my body is sore and aching. Every muscle burns and I can barely lift my arms above my head. My leg (you remember, the one that was crushed into a tree in the Gorge) is still swollen up enough to make my bib leg too tight. At Takotna, I take care of the dogs and then take a nap. I wake up after a few hours, feed the dogs again, drill out my broken rivets to replace with bolts, and then sleep all night. I wake up feeling incredible, pain free, and full of energy. I can't believe how good I feel! I think I slept something like 14 of my 24 hours, and it has paid off!

I head out of Takotna, fifteen dogs strong, and moving fast. The trail is covered with snow, and it is so wonderful to glide along in silence! Our speed is pretty good again, and we hit Ophir in no time.

I made a dumb mistake at food drops. Instead of just carrying my food and gear from Takotna, I have to stop in Ophir to load up. By the time I sort through my bags, tie on straw, and re-booty the goofball dogs, I've wasted 15 minutes. I must remember not to do this next time! Huh. Like there is gonna be a next time....

I plan to go half way to Cripple, then take a short break. I'm still determined to keep our runs short and fun. I've only been this way (northern route) once, but I vaguely remember there is a BLM cabin somewhere just about where we are when I decide to look for a camp spot. Just after passing Allen Moore, who is camped off to the side, I smell wood smoke. We cruise up to some trees and I spot a cabin roof off to the right, mostly hidden from view. The dogs get a cozy break because there is all kinds of extra straw from previous teams. I get a cozy break because the woodstove is still burning, the cabin is warm, and there is even a comfy cot. But I don't get much break; after four hours off (and one hour sleep for me), we are again trotting towards Cripple.

Spartan starts to limp. He's still pulling, still happy, but he has a definite head bob. This is a cause for worry. Most dogs will keep on running unless they are really hurting. Also, most dogs don't weigh 70 pounds. But I've had to carry Spartan more than once over some minor injury that he is sure will kill him (and which he recovers from almost immediately). He is very dramatic! And very heavy. Truly, a dog like Spartan probably shouldn't even make my team. But he is a very strong hard worker (right up until he quits) and I don't exactly have a lot of other dogs to choose from, so he is in. And he's worked hard. I just have to hope he will find a little toughness and carry his own weight in to Cripple.

My GPS batteries die after only 20 miles. I spent years thinking that a GPS is just an unneeded distraction. They can't tell you where the trail is, since it isn't mapped, or even in a precise location most of the time. But I've really come to appreciate being able to track my speed and distance. Cripple is famous for seeming to be much farther away than expected, and I keep waiting for it to appear. Finally it does.

The guys at Cripple are super welcoming and helpful. After taking care of the dogs (and getting Spartan ready to be dropped – he did a wonderful job but he is sore, and he is headed home) I go looking for drinking water. I always like to have everything ready to go, sled packed up, water jug filled, nothing to do but boot the dogs, throw on my parka, and go. I was told they would have hot water available in the cook shack, and I plan to fill up before I take a nap. As I walk up to the door, my friend Brad throws his head out the window and asks what he can get for me. Hmmm...is this a drive through?

I really intended to just get hot water and then go nap. But who can resist piles of hot bacon and cinnamon rolls fresh out of the oven? I think I have landed in some alternate reality, not a remote

checkpoint. I think Brad has been holding out on me – I didn't know he could cook like this! After some rather hilarious conversation, I make my way over to a toasty warm sleeping cabin and drop off to sleep. Cripple has become a luxury checkpoint!

The run in to Ruby is long. It is 70 miles of hills. As usual, I argue with myself; break it up (as planned), or run straight through (we've been moving fast)? Stop for two hours, or three, or four? I have to balance the fact that we are doing our eight hour in Ruby, and they don't need any extra rest with that on the way. I calculate in the heat (we are heading out to run on a hot sunny day), and decide to take a two hour rest at the halfway point. After 35 miles we take a nice break in the sunshine, then head on in to Ruby.

All along this race, I've been noticing that Pierce is quite an incredible wheel dog. In the Burn, he jumped back and forth under the gangline, avoiding obstacles. His agility not only saved him, but also helped pull my sled out of trouble many times. And now on this run, his intelligence, ability to see a problem and solve it, and incredible work ethic are even more apparent. This section of trail has plenty of glaciated, icy sidehill. The dogs sail across it just fine, but my sled can't. Pierce knows this. More than once I see him spot a problem that he knows I can't navigate, and take matters in to his own paws. Even though he is in wheel and normally just following all the dogs in front of him, he often turns away from our direction of travel on a completely different angle from the rest of the team and lunges hard to pull my sled out of trouble. I am so impressed!

I also notice the entire team is starting to choose their path on the wide open trail very carefully. Their preference is to run along the top side of the trail. But if the angle is too steep or the surface is too slippery for the sled to follow without sliding down (and they know just where the failing point is), they will instead choose to run in the gully at the bottom side of the trail. I am constantly impressed by how smart these dogs are, and their ability to make complicated decisions that require weighing a lot of factors.

We spend eight hours in Ruby, and leave just ahead of Jason. He passes us after just a few hours when I stop to snack, but we will run this whole leg with him just in sight in front of us. Our teams have a remarkably similar pace.

Harp, who has been leading like a superstar, eating everything in sight, and brimming full of energy and delight, is limping on a hind leg. She is pulling at least as hard as any dog in the team, but soon she is on three legs. I load her in to the sled. Carrying the extra weight doesn't slow us down much. My GPS shows we are averaging over 9 mph.

In Galena the vets check Harp over carefully. They can't find anything and suggest maybe the extra six hours of rest solved her problem. I sure hope so. Not only is she a hard worker and super leader, but her sparkling energy makes me feel good.

I head in to the checkpoint to rest. I'm trying to keep to a 1.4 run/rest ratio. So if we run six hours, we'd rest four hours and 20 minutes. If we run five hours, we'd rest three hours and forty minutes. Just three years ago, this type of schedule had us working up the pack towards top-20. But not anymore. Teams just don't rest much anymore. I look at the standings. We are SO far back. We are only two checkpoints behind the leaders in Kaltag, but we are in 37th place. On one hand, I am SO tired of finishing far back. On the other hand, I am glad just to be working towards finishing, after how insane the first part of the race was, and I am sure I will finish.

My friend Kathy is volunteering in at Galena. She helps me get some food and water, and then shows me some pictures of the trail out of Unalakleet which she took on her flight over. It is bare dirt and glare ice. Instantly, my confidence in finishing evaporates. Like some sort of horrible flashback, all I can think about is how hard the Burn was. I am NOT running anymore dirt. I will NOT run on dirt. I am shaking, I am furious, I am exhausted. I am so tired of hanging on by sheer determination and I am so angry that there is more dirt!

Jim Gallea grabs my shoulders, looks me in the eyes and reminds me of two very important things: First, if I can survive the Burn, I can handle any trail out there. Plus, it will not be as bad or as long as the Burn. Second, that is still way down the trail. The next few runs are supposed to have good snow. I need to focus on the next run, not the rest of the trail. He's right. I know this. I know we are going to "Do it Anyway" - no way I'm not finishing now. I know better than to do anything but run the next leg. I reclaim my focus, get my dogs howling, and head down the river.

Harp takes off looking fantastic and so happy to run. But after a few hours she starts skipping, then hopping, and she's back on three legs. I load her back into the sled, and know I have to drop my happy girl in Nulato. I'll be down to thirteen dogs; not too bad for this stage of the race, but it's always hard to send leaders home.

Getting ready to leave Nulato, I notice Mercedes' wrist is huge - puffy and swollen. I am not ready to drop another leader! I massage her, wrap the wrist up in a compression wrap, and load her in the sled. Sweet, cooperative little Mercedes snuggles down and relaxes inside the sled. I'm hoping the rest and treatment will take care of her. This means that I will have hauled a dog on all but a few miles of the Yukon River.

Luckily, the weather has been great; coldish, but not brutal; a bit breezy, but only a few small drifted areas. Despite carrying extra weight, we make good time once again. In Kaltag, Mercedes looks great. The swelling is down and she doesn't seem to have any pain. As long as I massage and wrap her well at each rest, it looks like she will be fine.

Leaving Kaltag, they tell us there may not be any snow at Old Woman, where I plan to stop. Instead of hauling a dog on this run, now I am hauling a full bucket of water. Except this run is grinding up over hills instead of running down the river. And the sun is blazing down on us. I expect this is going to be a slow slog.

It is. We are not breaking any speed records when we are moving, and I am stopping every hour or so to check in with the dogs, play with them, make sure they are staying happy, and most importantly, let them cool off.

We pull in to Old Woman Cabin and it turns out there is plenty of snow. There isn't much leftover straw though, which I was counting on. At least I don't need to cook for them. I get the dogs as comfy as I can in their jackets, and get them fed. I spend time massaging Mercedes. I'm worried about Hatchet, who has a really sore triceps. Sable was inconsistent too, but I can't track down a problem.

As usual, I am second guessing myself. The run from Nulato to Kaltag is short, and I gave them a short rest in Kaltag. The run to Old Woman was longer, but I don't want to rest them too long, because I really want to give them a solid six hour break in Unalakleet. I'm dithering over whether two hours is too

short, four hours is too long, whether I should have rested longer in Kaltag to prepare them for less rest en route. It is silly. I know better. But I'm tired and not thinking well. Just about then, Jason Mackey shows up at Old Woman. He helps me think it through and decide on three hours. I realize that I really need to get more confidence and quit relying on other people to reassure me. I know what I am doing, if only I can believe it!

Staying at Old Woman cabin is an Iditasport walker. Actually, she says she is going to finish the run to Nome, but was disqualified after destroying her pulk sled in the Burn and having to get a replacement. A person walking across the Burn destroyed their pull behind sled. Incredible.

After a short and chilly break (there is no wood to burn in the cabin), I am ready to head down the trail. The lovely interlude (you know, running on a trail that has snow on it) is just about over. Things are about to start getting difficult again.

Iditarod Recap 2014

Part Five – The Coast

Leaving Old Woman, the trail deteriorates into a ribbon of ice peppered with gravel, sticks, and clumps. It is loud and chattery. It is not relaxing. But after some of the trail we've seen, it's really no big deal. Just have to pay attention and keep the sled pointing forward.

Hatchet is looking uneven. Not precisely limping, but not quite square. He is cheerful and pulling hard. I promise him I will take care of him, and if he gets too sore he can have a ride. There is no point trying to load him into the sled now. Until he burns off a little energy it would be almost impossible to keep him in there anyway. I can see that I will have to drop him in Unalakleet, and it makes me sad. He is absolutely driven and is one of my strongest, toughest leaders. Beyond that, he is silly, affectionate, and happy. I will miss his company.

Flip is looking uneven too. After a while I can see that he is struggling. He is such a stoic hard worker, but it is time to give him a break. Flip has been with me in every race, finished every race, and never ridden in the sled in his life. He isn't too sure about doing so now, but I coax him into the sled bag, and after a few miles he gives up trying to worm his way through the Velcro and leap out. This will be Flip's last Iditarod; he already has a wonderful retirement home lined up. I would love to have him with me the whole way, but I will just have to remember all the other times we've finished together.

Now I have to hope that Hatchet doesn't start looking any worse, because hauling two 70+ pound dogs would really make handling the sled across the slippery ice a real challenge, not to mention slowing us down to a crawl.

As soon as we drop out of the hills on to the rivers, the trail turns from hard ice to something polished like a mirror by the wind. It is a glassy skating rink. There is a slope where the ice slumped to the outside of the river bend. The sled just skids sideways down the slope, passing up the team and yanking them off their feet. Nothing I can do will stop our forward momentum until we land in the bottom of the bowl. Once we are done skidding, the dogs can barely find the traction to pull us up out of the hole. I try to help push the sled and can't keep my footing even with studs in my boot soles. The wicked slippery ice continues, and I know it is about eight more miles on this icy river into the checkpoint. The first place I

can set a hook, I rip all the boots off the dogs to help them get better traction. Then we cruise on in towards the lights of Unalakleet.

Wee hours of the morning or not, Mom and Aunt Carol and Joan and Gloria are all there to greet me. I get the dogs taken care of, say a sorrowful goodbye to my good boys Flip and Hatchet, and head up for some cold pizza and a nap. I sack out and sleep for a good 2 ½ hours.

Since Takotna, four days ago, all my rests except Ruby have been fairly short. I've had a grand total of maybe nine hours sleep in this time, which is pretty good; I'm very efficient in checkpoints and I make myself maximize my rest. I'm still feeling pretty good, but it isn't going to get any easier until we finish.

We take off mid-morning, and right away I see that Sable is done. She is sore and unwilling. With the big hills coming up, I'm not going to be able to load her up and give her extra rest or baby her along. So I spin around quickly and drop her off with a vet. Then we get turned back around and head for the hills.

The run to Shaktoolik can be a pretty tough run, but it always ends up being one of my favorites, mostly for the sense of accomplishment at conquering those hills, but also for the huge sense of space at the top, the incredible views, and the feeling that we are closing in on the final miles of the race.

The first eight miles or so are on the flats. This year we alternate between wind-blown gravel and glare ice sprinkled with rocks and driftwood. I usually change my runner plastic in Unalakleet, but this time I decided to take it along and change later. Good decision; this trail is eating plastic. It is littered with tiny corkscrew shreds of colored plastic where previous sleds came grinding through. It looks like some sort of festive confetti, if you don't know the reason why it is scattered everywhere. There won't be much left of the plastic on the other side, even if it doesn't get ripped all the way off the sled.

Like the last run, this one takes some concentration and skill. Like the last run, after what we've been through, it is not a big deal. For the most part, it is 'flat dirt', and that is just not the challenge it used to be. Soon we head off the lagoons and start climbing into the hills. The uphills are steep, but seem much shorter than I remember. The longer, more gradual down hills are rutted and tussocky. There are icy side hills and other obstacles. More than once, the sled gets to skidding on the polished ice and slams right over when we hit a ridge or rut or rock. I probably tip over more here than I did in the Burn. But by now the dogs are listening, so when I say "Oh ****", they at least slow. On one steep little drop, just as the sled lurches over, I think dang it, I just don't want to slam my shoulder again! I somehow jump over the sled as it crashes onto its side, and land on top, riding the capsized sled to the bottom of the hill.

After climbing and descending, but mostly climbing, for several hours the trail just drops out and slides all the way back down to sea level. It is long and steep and there isn't a lot of snow, but it is enough to keep our speed in check. As long as we don't zoom around a corner into anything unexpected, we should be fine.

We hit the bottom of the hill, and it's only 12 more miles to Shaktoolik. It isn't far, but it always seems to take forever. This time it takes even longer. The lagoon is nothing but slippery ice, and as the wind freshens the dogs are really scrambling to keep their footing again. The farther we go, the windier it gets, until soon I can barely see the dogs, barely see the markers (what's left of them), and barely keep the sled from blowing out of control onto the rocky shore.

Bullseye can't seem to learn how to back off and tiptoe, so she is scrambling a bit, but the rest of the dogs are handling the wind and the ice really well. It has definitely slowed our progress, but we are steadily working our way closer to Shaktoolik. The wind keeps blowing us up against the sea wall, and we can follow that right into town. I'm not sure I'll be able to spot the checkpoint building when we get there, but just as I start to wonder, a team of volunteers appears in front of us in the white out.

The wind is really picking up. I have to build a snow wall around my cooker to get it going. The volunteers stack straw bales and snow blocks around my team, who nest deep down in the straw. They are covered with snow almost instantly. That's actually a good thing, because they will be warm and sheltered under the snow layer.

The dogs eat well and are looking really strong. Mats Peterson and I decide we'll leave together after around five hours. His team is much faster than mine, and he laughs and says I must not be resting much because I keep showing up right behind him. It's true. I've been working hard, taking shorter rests and trying to slowly work my way up through the teams. It seems to be paying off. I'm happy to have seen the last of some of those teams behind me. I hope to get under way soon and beat them all to Koyuk.

The wind picks up even more. Teams are trickling in, and they look battered. Some talk about having to crawl in front of their teams. Some are frostbitten. No one is leaving. In this storm it would be difficult to make any headway across the barren sea ice. It would be easy to get blown off course or turned around. It would be easy to get into trouble.

We sit and watch for updates. We catch up on our sleep. We go out into the hurricane to feed and check on our dogs. I have mine all bundled together in a dog pile, and they barely poke their heads out of the drifted snow when I come out. Hours go by. Instead of five hours off, I watch the clock tick through 10 hours, 15 hours, 20 hours.

We're just waiting to see if the wind will drop a bit, if teams on the other side are getting going. We make plans for leaving, choose who to pack up with. In a sudden rush, like a flock of birds that all takes flight at once, we are heading out. Me, Paul Gebhardt, Jason, and Mats decide to get moving and get out in front of the pack. We don't stop to booty – too slippery anyway – so we are on the trail in just minutes.

Paul, the most experienced musher in the group, leads the way. It looks like the wrong way to me. I can see some sort of tripods off to my left, but then again, there are some sort of markers on the trail we are on, too. I don't see Iditarod markers, with their orange tops and blue flags, anywhere. The wind may have let up, but it is blowing hard enough to make it hard to see much beyond the dogs, hard to hear anything but the flapping of my wind pants. The other teams are pulling away. I don't want to be out here on possibly the wrong trail by myself. Soon I can't see a trail or markers anywhere, so I start hustling to catch up to the other teams.

Before long we are tucked in right behind Jason. We're definitely on some kind of trail with snow machine tracks, but this one follows a winding river; we're pretty obviously on the wrong trail. Soon a guy on a snow machine cruises by, waves us to follow, and guides us to the trail we're supposed to be on. As soon as I see the blue flag fluttering on the markers I feel like cheering!

Of course, we've wasted about 20 minutes, and a whole stack of teams (who went the right way) are now all in front of us. It's frustrating to be behind so many that I'd worked so hard to pass. But it's good

to run in a group with people I know and have a lot of confidence in. The wind isn't the strongest I've ever been out here in, but you never know when it will change for the worst.

I hunker down on my sled and stay out of the wind. In front of me, Jason is kicking and poling, but I feel like we make better headway when I keep my big flapping wind-sail of a jacket out of the main gust of the wind. I also marvel at Jason; he must be incredibly strong to keep pushing and poling for hour after hour.

Regardless of how we help our teams, the dogs just crank along on tandem. In some places the snow is so granular it is like running on sand – the sled just won't glide on this stuff and our speed drops way off. In other places, the ice is blown clean and as slick as can be. In one place it's so slippery and the sleds are getting pushed around so much by the gusts that we are all off our sleds, grabbing our leaders to help guide them towards the next markers, which are way across a frozen bowl.

We're all moving about the same speed, so we stay in a little convoy. We all stop to snack at the same time, and Jason asks how things are going. Come to think of it, I'm having a great run! The dogs are doing good, and running in a group like this is really low stress. I've always crossed this stretch by myself and it is really nice to have company on this wind-swept, wide open space.

Even though we were in Shaktoolik a long time I don't feel like the dogs got too much rest hunkered in the wind there. After the long and windy run across the Sound, I feel like they need a good solid rest in Koyuk. This is wrong, I realize later. But at the time it makes good sense to me, so I settle in for six hours.

Koyuk is wonderful. Not only does it represent the end of a run that is never fun even if the weather cooperates, but the people in the community are wonderful. The kids are always out playing and wanting to help with the dogs. Later, everyone gathers in the community hall to visit and greet the mushers. They bring food – caribou stew and eskimo ice cream, full of berries and so sweet-tart I can't get enough. I ask who brought the stew, and one man shyly says his wife made it. A few minutes later he offers that he went out last week to get the caribou; he wanted to make sure we had some good food. I thank them all very much, and tell them that Koyuk is the best checkpoint on the race.

By the time I get ready to go most of the other mushers I came in with have already left. All those teams I so slowly pulled ahead of over the last few hundred miles, gone. We leave around two in the morning. I keep dozing. We hit intermittent patches of slippery ice, and every time the sled starts skidding I jerk my eyes open and drive. The rest of the time I'm moving along in a kind of fog, but it's fine because the dogs are feeling good and don't need much help from me. At one point we pinball off some driftwood, sliding hard and then rebounding with a CRACK as the runners smash into the wood.

I get to Elim in the early morning – worst possible timing. We'll rest through the cool morning hours and be climbing steep mountains in the heat of the day. I load up my bucket with nice wet soaked kibble to help the dogs hydrate during the tough run that is to come.

Leaving Elim we run along on the sea ice near the shore for a short ways. We have to cross a tiny trickle of water as we turn towards the hills. It is about six inches wide, and I have to roll my eyes at the dogs, who decide they can't possibly jump across. I walk up to my leaders and drag them across. Honestly! Travis, who leaves a few hours behind me, tells me later that his dogs went slightly off trail and broke through the ice into deep water. Christian, a few hours behind that, has to wade through waist deep

overflow. So I guess I got off lucky, but at the time I am just exasperated that my dogs need my help here.

We start grinding up the hills for which this leg is famous. I am pumping and running, and shedding layers. When I hop back on my sled I realize it is making an appalling creaking noise as I pedal. I look around at the rear section and realize that the loud crack last night was not the driftwood breaking, it was the sound of one of my stanchions shattering as the runner flexed underneath it. The stanchion is no longer connected to the runner, and it is in about four different pieces. I'm not sure why they are all still sticking together, but I need to do something to stabilize this mess before I lose some of the parts.

It's going to take some serious repair work, but I don't want to stop for long. I get busy taping – that will hold it well enough to get to White Mountain. Before I can stress out over it, I remind myself that we are almost there and I can make it work even without the rear part of my sled. I'd really prefer to be able to sit down for some of the last miles, but nothing is going to stop us now.

And I remind myself that Travis Beals' sled has been disintegrating around him for the entire race. I expect to see him driving a plastic kid's sled loaded with his gear and strapped behind his dogs next time I see him. He's still going, so I have nothing to complain about.

So I tape the thing together, resolve NOT to do any tipping over until I've done a more permanent repair, and get moving again. I don't even need to sing "Do it Anyway" to myself, because this is barely even a blip on the challenge-meter.

Just as we hit the hardest, toughest hills, hazy clouds block the worst of the sun. The wind picks up and ruffles the dog's fur. The dogs charge up the hills. I can see we aren't going to have any problems on this part of the run, and I just enjoy the trail as we crest one hill after another.

The side hill near the top of Little McKinley is a challenge. There isn't much snow on it, and it's tough to keep the sled balanced and the team under control as we start to head down and around. It takes a few agile moves from me, and some great cooperation from the dogs (they are getting really good at helping out when they hear "Oh ****"), but I get through it without tipping my fragile sled over.

The long glide downhill back to the sea ice is less of a glide this year, and more of a teeth rattling tussock-fest. Once again, I'm feathering the brake and drag to try to keep our speed down as we clatter over bumps and ruts, skipping and banging all the way. But I get through this upright, too.

Now we are on the sea ice, working our way towards Golovin. It takes an entirely different set of skills to maneuver the completely flat, wind-blown ice without skidding out of control, but also without interfering with the team. With just a light cooling breeze and excellent visibility, we are having a great time. I am glad for the break in the weather, because real wind would just blow you around on this slick ice. Not to mention that all the markers are knocked down and there isn't a landmark in sight to indicate where to go, as the trail tracks across the middle of the featureless frozen ice.

The dogs, with Lyra and baby Muddy up front, have decided that they LIKE glare ice. Even Bullseye has gotten the hang of it. Now that they have learned a light-footed little shuffle, they've also learned that it is much easier to pull the sled across ice than across snow. So they are avoiding the trail, where there is a light layer of snow packed down by traffic. They are avoiding the ripples of snow drifted here and there. They are sticking to the polished, frictionless ice. At first I keep calling the girls back to the trail,

but after a while I quit hollering at them. They know where the trail is. They are following the path of least resistance, but they keep correcting their direction and aren't veering too far away from the marked trail or going too far out of the way. It's just amazing to watch these girls work together, weigh their options, and decide the best route. We weave through the drifts and fly along at a really good clip. It's almost a disappointment to reach the Fish River and the end of the glare ice section. It's just a few miles up the river to White Mountain and an eight hour break.

We're almost there. One last push to the finish...

Iditarod Recap 2014

Part Six – Blowing to the Finish Line

I get the dogs all fed and bedded down. It is getting chilly and the wind is rising. I tuck each dog under a fleecy blanket. School kids from all over the country donated blankets for mushers to use on the trail, and I sent them out to several places. The set I sent to White Mountain is all cheerful pastels; aqua, lime, tangerine, pale yellow, rose, lavender. The dogs look like Easter eggs covered in their cute little blankies.

Next I get busy repairing my sled. First I use about four hose clamps to strap an aluminum splint to the shattered stanchion pieces. With yet another clamp, I attach the splinted section to the angled stanchion that meets it at the top. The bottom of the stanchion is broken off, so it is no longer attached in the runner bracket. I use parachute cord to lasso the bracket bolt, then cinch it down tight by tying off on the cross piece where all the stanchions are yoked together. That should hold it down well enough to make another 77 miles, even if they are rough.

Up in the community center I eat and then get in a good nap. As I start to doze, I am entertained by some very interesting conversations in the next room about the life history of platypus. My layover is done at 3:00 in the morning. The weather report as I am leaving calls for snow and wind. Even after what happened to the race leaders a few days ago, for some reason I am not at all concerned. I just get my wind gear ready to deploy and think no more of it. I know this run will mostly be on my own; as similar as Jason's run times are to mine, I doubt I can make up the hour lead he has. Danny Seavey is 45 minutes behind me, and much faster, but beyond that there will be no one within hours of us.

Getting ready for our final leg, I have so many leaders to choose from, it is hard to decide who to put up front. Lyra and Muddy just led a long stretch, so I figure they can use a break. That still leaves me with Chase, Cutter, Bree, Aberdeen, and Mercedes to run up front. I choose Cutter and Bree, who are both very strong leaders and have been out of the front line for a bit.

I call up the dogs and get them lined out as we wait for the last few minutes of our eight hour break to expire. They are barking and howling, but when it comes time to actually get going, we sort of meander. There are lots of potty breaks and it is slow going. No lack of motivation, no concern that we will get underway eventually, it's just a bit of a slow start. Cutter is driving straight ahead, but Bree is more interested in stopping to smell where all the other teams have been through. And there is little Muddy, screaming and leaping to go; there's a dog with some motivation. I put her up front once again. She has been doing more than her share of leading, but if she insists, I can hardly disappoint her. Bree comes back into the team, and off we go.

With crazy Muddy shrieking and barking, the team starts charging down the trail. There is a light snow, but it is travelling horizontally in front of us as the wind blasts into us. We're all so accustomed to

blowing sideways on glare ice that we barely even notice that conditions are less than ideal. We wind through the Topkok Hills and the dogs barely slow down enough on the steep climbs for me to be able to help them. Soon we are descending towards sea level again.

As I expected, the lagoons beyond the shelter cabin are blown free of anything resembling snow. There is no traction to speak of. I expect the wind and challenging trail will begin to tell on Muddy. She is just a baby, and she's never seen anything like this, much less led her team through it. I am all set to move up Chase, my rock star, my fall back plan. But Muddy has other plans, and she seems to be out to prove something.

I can see Cutter and Muddy working marker to marker, and they obviously know just where they are headed. The rest of the team is right behind them, powering the sled along as the wind sends it skittering across the ice. In places where all the markers have been knocked down, Cutter and Muddy nose along, following scratches in the ice. Even without any help from me they never hesitate a moment and keep right on top of the brake marks from previous teams. At other places there are no markers, no scratch marks, and no sign of the trail. My leaders confidently charge along, the wind buffeting over our right shoulders. Just about the time I start to wonder how far off the trail we might have gotten, the dim reflection of a trail maker will glimmer up ahead. Without good leaders this section would be nearly impossible.

Soon we exit the lagoon area and start to traverse the notorious Solomon Blow hole. The winds pick up even more. All I can see of the team is the reflectors on their coats, showing dimly through the white-out. The wind and low visibility here can be really dangerous, and there are tripods made of huge logs and covered in reflectors to help keep you on the trail. Many of the tripods have toppled to the ground, which I find out as I am blown sideways into half-covered obstacles under the drifting snow. There are areas where there are no tripods left – all knocked down. In some places I can see we're still on a well-traveled trail, and I don't worry. But there are other stretches, long stretches, where I can't see a marker, can't see a tripod, can't see a sign of the trail for long minutes. All I can do is hang on and hope.

At one point I see snow machine tracks taking off to the left and down a hill. But Cutter and Muddy are insistent on turning sharply to the right. I don't think the trail should turn at all in this area, but straight ahead there is nothing but drifts. There isn't much time to think it over because I want to keep the dogs in motion. Plus I can't see anything well enough to figure it out anyway. I decide to trust in my leaders. I hope that if we get off trail I will be able to figure out which direction to head and work back towards it once we get out of the Blow Hole.

Tense minutes go by. I can't see much of anything, but we are rolling along at a good clip on our way to somewhere. I haven't seen a marker in a long while. Just about the time I think we are pretty screwed, I see some scratch marks on the ice. A few minutes later, a tripod appears up ahead. We were on the trail the whole time. I should have had more faith in Cutter and Muddy. They knew exactly what we were doing and where to go.

The wind is plastering us from the side. I am riding the right hand runner, hiked out to the side to try to counterbalance the blast. Even with all my weight thrown into the wind, the sled is getting pushed all over the place. As long as we are moving forward, we are skidding sideways, too. Stopping to control the sideways slip doesn't get us down the trail, so it's a constant balancing act to keep from sliding out of control. And every so often we clip into a chunk of ice or rock, and no matter what I do, the sled slams over. Once we start tipping, the wind just rolls us over and over.

I'm getting barrel rolled, but the dogs don't seem fazed at all. In fact, they appear to be having a blast, heads up, barking in the wind, waiting for me to get the sled on its runners again. That's easier said than done with the wind slamming me back over repeatedly, and no footing on the ice. I would be stressed out, but the energy from the dogs is so infectious I'm actually sort of having fun.

Suddenly we are out of the Hole. The wind dies to a gentle breeze. I can see the dogs. I can see the trail. I can hear something besides the roar of the wind. Whatever zing of energy the dogs were getting from running in the wind seems to have evaporated. Now we are just trudging along the Nome-Council Road. The trail off to the side is slow and boggy. The icy road is much faster, but it's sharply crowned and I can't keep the sled from ditch diving. Either way, our speed has dropped way off. It's a slog in to Safety and past it towards Cape Nome.

As I pedal and jog up the long steep Cape, I realize that Danny Seavey is right behind us. He dogs are fast, and he's made up a lot of time. There is nothing I can do to keep up, and he slowly pulls ahead. We keep plodding. I'm not worried about speed, just focused on getting to the finish line. And dreaming a little bit about a long hot shower.

It's hard to describe the feelings when you finally hit the burlled arch. Actually, they start a bit earlier. Like when you crest the Cape and see the lights of Nome. Or when you start seeing cars pulled over to wave and take pictures. Or when you hear the siren. Especially when you pull up off the shore and onto Front Street. But especially when you set that final hook, there under the arch.

It's a mixture of sadness to be done with a great journey, and relief that it is finally over. It's a combination of immense pride in the dogs that have been your partners, and possibly regret for not finishing better. You would think it would be nothing but jubilation, but for me it always a touch bittersweet. I never know if I will manage to get myself here again, I never know if this is my last trip down the trail. And so I always take a good look around and try to remember how it was when I drove my team from Anchorage to Nome.

And no matter how many more Iditarods I ever do, I am always going to be able to say "I finished in 2014", and it is going to mean something.