

Iditarod 2017

I hate to be a downer, but Iditarod 2017 just wasn't that thrilling. There was no Alaska Range or Farewell Bend to challenge us, just a long series of runs down the Yukon River, lots of extra camping between checkpoints, and a cold spell that made for some uncomfortable times.

To start with, I wasn't motivated. The whole season drained me. I had a great handler who was reliable and responsible. I had caring, wonderful friends helping out. I had a good man giving me moral support and encouragement. But this year it just felt like work. Back forth to my job, hurry home to train dogs, struggle to keep trails open and equipment working and get the miles on the dogs. It is always exhausting, but this year I couldn't find any joy in it.

Add to that my ongoing physical issues – I'm just not as strong, agile, or fit as I used to be. I have to take special care to manage the pain and adjust to my limitations. I truly believed that I would get better each year. But that doesn't seem to be the case, and I'm having to adjust to a new reality that isn't going to improve. Anyway, I was exhausted before we even got on the runners.

I was also kind of worried about the cold. Since the accident, I've been having trouble staying warm. The same gear I used to throw on for 20 below, I now needed at 10 above. On top of that, whenever I get chilly, the shivering makes my back seize up completely. So staying warm was both a challenge and a real imperative.

When they announced that Iditarod would start from Fairbanks I was less than excited. On the one hand, I NEVER want to run a trail like we did in 2014 again. I was glad they made a sensible choice to route us on a trail that was reasonable. But ughhhh – hundreds and hundreds of miles on the Yukon River...

Running on big rivers is downright boring. The scenery doesn't change much. Sometimes, in the middle of a mile wide river, there is no "scenery". It's just white. The wind has an unimpeded path, and a good wind storm can be scary dangerous out there with no shelter. Also, it's boring to run mile after white mile down the straight and level river. The cold settles into low lying areas, including river bottoms, so you're faced with the most frigid temperatures. And it's boring too. Did I mention it's really dull? All in all, I was pretty gloomy.

To top it off my team just didn't feel strong. Over the last few years, circumstances being difficult for a number of reasons, I hadn't had many puppies. The team had dwindled from just-barely-enough, down to really-too-small. I tried buying a group of dogs to bump up my numbers, but it turned out to be a disaster; even the three I kept just made me shake my head most of the time.

Getting ready for Iditarod, I had only a handful dogs that were true rock stars: Elway, Whack-A-Mole, Pine Top, Muddy, and Tilt-A-Whirl; athletic, motivated, Iditarod veterans with tons of drive. I had several dogs that had lots of race experience, but weren't always the most motivated; Shanahan, Sumlin, Glow, McCaffrey, and Nome (all smallish females). I had Oreo, a pointer mix with a great work ethic, but a thin coat unsuited for the rigors of Iditarod and maybe not as tough

as a true husky. I had Coal and Harp – both strong leaders, both courageous and focused, but both with earlier injuries that may or may not hold up. I had Boom, a strong, happy pup, but only a yearling. I had Flame and Sabin, two of the purchased dogs – hard workers but low on common sense. And no one else; no back up plan, no spare dogs. Every dog in the yard that was fit to go – they were on the team.

Sounds pretty whiny, huh? I really was. I am usually pretty relaxed approaching Iditarod, confident, excited, a little nervous, but mostly just ready to hit the trail. This year I just didn't want to go. But I had to – no backing out just because I felt wimpy and unfocused.

So we drove to Fairbanks and my friends sent me off with good wishes and cheer. I left the start line filled with reservations and resignation and some real doubts about why I put myself through this year after year.

Fairbanks felt pretty nice, just about -10, which is a fine temperature to run in. We ran down the river past crowds of people celebrating spring. The dogs quickly got down to business, settling into a steady trot. As gloomy as I was, it was hard not to smile and be proud of the dogs. I may not have had a lot of extra choices, but every dog in my lot is special to me; partners, team mates, and friends. It felt good to see them doing so beautifully what I had spent my days and nights teaching them. They were confident and competent, working well as a team. We were moving out well, keeping a solid pace. I worked hard to keep our speed down to 8.5 miles per hour. We had trained all year at slow speeds, and it definitely payed off, as the dogs found their normal rhythm and didn't fight too hard to sprint down the trail.

I had Harp and Pine Top in lead. They are both good, responsive leaders, but I had forgotten what a problem Pine Top might create. When he stops to poop, he STOPS. With a big string of fired up dogs behind him, stopping to accommodate him was not an option. True to form, after about half an hour he hit the brakes. So did I, but there was too much power to stop quickly. Half the team flew over and around and through the front end. Between the soft trail and the fired up dogs, there was no way the hooks would hold while I ran up to untangle Pine Top's mess. Luckily there were some nearby onlookers, and I drafted one poor lady to stand on my hooks and hang on to the handle bar while I sorted things out. I am sure she didn't expect to be holding a screaming, crazed Iditarod team but she stepped right up and held the team while I rushed to solve the problem before the dogs took off with her on the sled.

Back on track again, and the dogs just rolled along. All the way to Nenana, 50 or so miles, we ran down the Tanana River. The teams were all bunched up, faster teams passing, teams stopping to snack on different schedules, teams pulled over dealing with issues; lots of opportunity for conflicts. My dogs handled the mayhem like pros. I kept my foot on the brake while team after loping team zoomed by my trotting dogs. I knew it would pay off in the long run.

It was chilly, but also sunny and calm. The dogs (except Oreo) ran without coats; one of the only runs we would have where they weren't bundled up. We pulled into Nenana just after 5:30, earlier than I had figured, only a six hour run.

Nenana is on the road system. It was weird to see a big crowd as we came into a checkpoint. On a normal year, once we leave the start we are in remote territory all the way to the finish. We were required to have handlers at Nenana. This was also really weird, because usually once we launch we are on our own, no assistance permitted. But Caleb and Michele were there to help me. They weren't allowed to touch the team, but they could have water already heated up, and bring me my drop bags and straw. This made chores quick; I had coats on the dogs, booties off, straw down, and a meal for the dogs in less than an hour.

I grabbed my personal food and drink jug, and made my way up to the community building set aside for us to rest in. It was cold and dark inside.

There was, apparently, a bigger building down the road with lots of food and lots of people; locals, excited visitors, handlers. I was already in race mode; I didn't need any distractions. I had my own food and my priority was to rest. I had no interest in visiting with lots of people, even if there was moose stew. It was colder than I expected in the building – so cold that all the plumbing was frozen, full of ice. Michele and Caleb brought me a sleeping bag from the truck so I wouldn't have to repack the sleeping bag I take on the trail. I settled down on the floor and dozed. In just a few hours it was time to get the dogs booted up and get on the trail.

We rested a little over five hours, and pulled out just before 11 pm. This was a very easy schedule which I knew would build the dogs up and make them stronger over the course of the race. What with working full time and commuting two hours a day on top of training and preparing a race team, I can't really do the type of training needed for Iditarod. The best thing is to train like you plan to race, which would mean a series of back to back runs with short rests in between. There's no way for me to do those kinds of runs and still hold down a job, so we have to do some of our conditioning during the race. This is NOT the way to train to be competitive, but we can always throw a solid middle-of-the-pack effort.

Pine Top and Harp were still in lead as we left Nenana. Tops has always been a good leader during training but has never been willing to lead in a race. I hoped to keep him working up front as long as possible to keep the other leaders fresh for later. Along with Harp, he was doing a great job. He had his ears perked straight ahead as we scrambled along, and he was excited to explore new trails. The dogs were really charged up and I had my work cut out to hold their speed down.

The trail climbed up off the Tanana River and darted in and out of wooded sections following a power line. After a few hours it turned west and worked its way back towards the river again.

We started out pretty comfortable, but I could feel the temperature dropping. My fleece gloves were icing over, so I put handwarmers in each one. When the material on my parka and bibs started sounding crackly, I knew it had to be getting pretty chilly. I checked the thermometer attached to my sled. It was hard to get a good read while we dashed down the trail, but it looked like it read about -45. So far so good. I was managing the cold ok. I snugged my ruff around my face and we charged on.

The farther we went, the colder it got. The handwarmers weren't cutting it and I had to double up, with two in each glove. I had heavy beaver mitts along, but they are so big and bulky that I can't really hang on to the handlebars. That's fine later in the race when the dogs are calmer and might even stop when asked, but this early in the race I didn't want to chance losing the team.

My neck fleece froze up solid over my mouth and nose, and the icicles on my eyelashes were getting unruly. Temperatures like that, exposed skin can freeze in just seconds, so I was really paying attention to nose and cheeks.

Right about then, my headlamp started malfunctioning. Every time I moved my head, the light went out. Cracked wire – hard to avoid when the mercury drops that low. I could dig my spare out, but it would be hard to get to under the straw and food supplies I was packing. I decided to just keep turning the thing back on (and hope it kept coming back to life). The light from the half-moon helped. Every time things went dark, the team sped up. Very helpful! Despite the cold, I was having fun wrangling this bunch of crazy mutts.

I kept a close eye on the dogs, especially ears, lips, and flank where the thin skin is more prone to frostbite. No one had any problems; even thin-coated Oreo was just fine, all bundled up in a heavy duty dog-parka. They were full of energy and excitement to be on the trail and weren't very interested in stopping, even for chunks of beef or salmon.

I planned to run 45 miles, halfway to Manley, before stopping to rest. We had been told that Tolovana Roadhouse would be open, but it was 53 miles out. That was little farther than I wanted to run, and it would make the following run a little too short. Still, I was debating it because the idea of a warm place to rest was pretty appealing.

Just as my GPS (kept inside my parka to keep from freezing) rolled over 45 miles and I started looking for a good place to pull over, a little cardboard sign showed up in my headlight. "Roadhouse, 5 miles. Warm fire". That did it. It was only five more miles. I was not gonna pass that up. We ran on. The dogs didn't want to stop anyway.

We roared into the Roadhouse, and it was a complete zoo. I couldn't even see where the through-trail went; teams were parked all over the place. There was nowhere to pull over, and the dogs were pulling and screaming and lunging so hard I could barely hold on to them. Ryan Redington very kindly grabbed my leaders and tried to help us park by making a sharp turn through some deep snow and willows. I got dragged through the snow and bushes and floundered around trying to get things sorted out. At least the flailing around warmed me up!

As far as I could tell in the dark, we were in a good spot to stop. There were teams scattered all over in all directions. Just then Dave, the owner of the historic roadhouse, came out and said we would need to move because we were actually on the outgoing trail for the teams parked around back. Dave grabbed my leaders and turned us around through some more willows and deep snow and I floundered around some more trying to wrestle my sled into place. He stomped out a little spot in the deep snow off to one side and I heaved and hauled the heavy sled out of the way. Finally we were parked! I was ready for a break (and a functional headlamp). The dogs were really full of energy, barking and trying to head down the trail, jerking the sled forward. But as

soon as I set a leader hook, they knew the deal. They settled down to rest like the well trained pros they are.

First step was to get the cooker going and melt some snow. It was so cold the alcohol fuel refused to ignite. I didn't bother to check my thermometer again, clearly it was darn cold. When fuel won't even light, you probably don't want to know. I fussed with the wick and weakly burning matches until I got the flames going. While the snow melted, I took off booties, put down straw, handed out kibble and meat, repacked my sled, and got ready for the next run. Soon I had hot water and made the dogs a nice soup. Even with the extra effort in the cold, I still got all my dog chores done in less than an hour. And I was ready for a break out of the cold.

I stepped over to the roadhouse. What a lovely surprise inside! It was toasty warm. There were drying racks set up near the wood stove, hot water in a kettle, snacks set out on the counter, and even warm beds with comfy quilts. Heaven! We'd been running about six and a half hours, so I owed the dogs a five hour rest. Plenty of time for me to get a good couple of hours of sleep. We had run all night, and the sun was just starting to come up. I was ready for a nap!

After a luxurious, comfortable rest, I got up and started getting ready to leave Tolovana Roadhouse. It had warmed up to -35, which felt pretty good. The day warmed even more under the strong sunshine. Most of the teams had left already, which always feels a bit discouraging. But the trail in front of us was a lively dash through the forest, and the dogs were full of fun. I put Whack A Mole up in lead to give Harp a break. We were rambling along, only 32 miles to Manley Hot Springs, with me holding the dogs back the whole way.

Despite a few solid hours of sleep, and the brightness of the day, I kept dozing off. After about 3 hours I opened my eyes with a jerk. The dogs were confidently crossing a road, navigating through cones and barricades, and passing crowds of people with no need for guidance from me. They had things well in hand. The people lining the trail laughed at my surprised reaction to suddenly being in town.

Manley was super well organized. The checkers were waiting for us as soon as we rounded the bend, and we followed a snow machine guide around a big berm of snow to a sunny, sheltered spot. Drop bags, straw, and Heet were in place before I had the team stopped. There was cold water, so it took only minutes to heat it up and make a meal for the dogs. There were dozens of volunteers purposefully keeping the camp running; hauling water, loading up return bags (all our stuff that we want to send back home, things like extra booties and gloves), tossing trash bags into a pickup (mushers generate an enormous amount of trash – all those bags for meat, kibble, booties, and every other item we use on each run and each camp), raking up straw, and guiding teams in and out of camp.

Even though it was a short run, I knew the cold and the upcoming series of long runs could bring the dog team down. I decided to give them equal rest. We rested from 2 to 5:30, the warmest part of the day, and the best time for the dogs to really relax and recuperate. I hadn't been able to stay awake on the sled, but once I had a chance to sleep in the sun, I was wide awake. I tried to stay off my feet at least, and rested on my sled while I chatted with friends Clint and Pete. The dogs dozed happily in the sun.

We had a long run down the Yukon River coming up, 70 miles to Tanana. I loaded the sled up with straw and food and fuel; we would break this run up and camp out half way. When it was time to go, the dogs leapt up and we stormed out of Manley and onto the river. It was warm in the sunshine, but as the sun went down it cooled off quickly.

After running only 3 ½ hours, I pulled the dogs over to rest. They weren't quite ready, but I reminded myself that extra rest early would ensure a strong team farther down the trail. We stopped from 9 to midnight. It was just enough time to bed and feed the dogs, lay down on my sled for a couple of hours, and get up and going again. That was fine – it was cold enough that I wasn't going to get any sleep anyway.

After the first nice run, the next run was a mess. Coal, a really talented three year old with wonderful happy attitude and tons of athletic potential, started limping. He had injured his shoulder a few weeks before Iditarod, and it seemed to be flaring back up. I knew I would need to send him home. He had been really progressing as a leader, and I was disappointed that he wouldn't get to see the rest of the trail with me.

It was cold. Not as cold as the night before, but I was chilled and sleepy. To top it off, I started coughing. It's not uncommon for the stress and exertion of the race to make us more susceptible to any viruses floating around out there, but it was pretty early in the race for it.

Running in the wee hours of the night is always a struggle. It's a low energy time for dogs and mushers both. The dogs were unfocused and frazzled. Every time a dog would stop to poop, the whole team would grind to a halt. My leaders would fuddle around and I'd have to go untangle them. We were just messing around, stalling out, and fumbling down the trail. This kind of run is not uncommon when the team is tired or stressed out, but again, that is something that usually happens much later in the race. And not usually after the amount of rest I had made sure we had. We were making progress, even pretty good speed, but the whole run felt off.

Luckily we didn't have a real long run to deal with; only 35 miles. Pretty soon we smelled birch smoke. That smell will always fill me with comfort – it's the smell of a checkpoint coming up, rest and warmth and food nearing. The lights of Tanana started sparking in the distance and then we ran up the bank onto the roads outside of town. We ran for what seemed like hours along the roads. The dogs, knowing we were nearing a checkpoint, perked up as much as I did.

I checked in and parked. It was about 4 in the morning. As I took care of my team, Ray Redington stopped to chat. He told me I ought to take my eight hour mandatory break now, and hope things warmed up soon. The forecasts kept calling for warmer temperatures, but so far we just weren't seeing it happen. Each run was just as cold as the last. I had quit checking my thermometer – it didn't matter how cold it was, we were going ahead regardless.

Tanana was wonderful. There was cold water to make chores quicker, a good place to dry gear, plenty of extra food, and gym mats to sleep on. A little cushion makes a huge difference when you are used to sleeping on hard floors. It was a good place to take a break, but it was really early in the race to take the mandatory eight.

After thinking about it I took Ray's advice and did my eight hours even though it was early. I was cold, sick, tired, and generally miserable. I'd stopped coughing, but started puking. I didn't know if I was sick, or just not handling the normal nausea that comes from being exhausted and not sleeping enough. There was a very long river coming up and I needed to get my spirits and energy up, get the dogs back on track, and hit the trail in a better frame of mind. So a longer rest was in order. I fed the dogs again, piled the straw up around them, and went back in for another nap. A lot of other mushers decided to take a long break here as well.

After eight hours I still was feeling pretty unmotivated. In fact, I wanted to go home to my warm house and comfy bed and forget this silly racing business forever. I had to have a serious talk with myself, and remind myself that quitting is really not an option.

I dragged myself outside and started getting the team ready. I had already dropped Coal, sending him on his way home to recuperate. As I went down the line booting dogs I noticed that both Flame's wrists were swollen. She hadn't shown any problems on the way in, and it was too late to try to treat them now. And if an eight hour break hadn't resolved the problem, I sure didn't want to risk taking her on a long run where I might have to carry her for over 100 miles. I had been impressed by Flame so far. Despite her small size, she was a very hard worker and had abandoned some of her silly behavior from earlier in the year. Throughout the race she had been barking and trying to pop the snow hooks, eating everything in sight, and generally just showing a wonderful attitude. I had been excited to see how she did farther in to the race, but it was not to be. I let the vets know I needed to drop a dog, pulled her harness off, put her coat back on, grabbed a drop cable, and got her ready to go home. Then I worked on down the line getting the rest of the dogs ready to go.

As I started to put the last booty on Boom, my sweet, tough yearling, I ran my hand down his leg. His entire right hind leg was swollen and hot. Just like Flame, he looked just fine coming in to the checkpoint. Some massage and wrapping and stretching might have helped heal the problem while he rested, but it was too late now. Another problem I couldn't take down the trail with me. He had to go home too. Here was another talented young dog that I would have loved to travel farther with and watch as he learned the trail and learned just how tough he really was. I got him bundled up too.

I was really sad to part with such good dogs, and so many! Three dogs going home already in Tanana, only 200 miles in. I usually keep a pretty large team all the way through the halfway point, so I was dismayed to be down to 13 already. But there was nothing to do but go forward, so we did.

From Tanana to Ruby was a long 120 mile stretch, all of it on the wide, white, featureless Yukon River. We would break it into short legs. The trail is never fast through here, and 60 mile runs on a slow trail tend to take a very long time. Short runs and short rests were a good plan to keep these dogs perky. Long, tiring runs, even with good rests between, can take a dog team down. My plan was to do three runs about five to six hours each, broken up by four hour rests.

On a normal Iditarod there are several times we make double runs with one camp in between. This time I was packing for three runs and two camps. That is when I discovered that my new sled bag just didn't have the capacity of my old bags. I'd camped with it a few times, but hadn't had to really load it up. My sled is not huge anyway, so it was really packed to the gills with all the meat, kibble, fuel, booties, and other things we would need. If I had any dog that needed a ride I was going to have to get creative.

We headed out of Tanana just before noon. The meant we'd be running in the warmest part of the day, and trying to rest while it was colder. But no matter how we broke it out, it was going to take us about 24 hours to get to Ruby, and part of that time would find us stopped while it was cold. At least there was no wind, and I wanted to take advantage of that.

The long rest did me good. I still wasn't excited about chugging down the river for several runs, I wasn't excited that it was still so cold. I wasn't excited that I still felt ill. But I sure as heck wasn't going to quit, so there was nothing to do but carry on. As I pulled the hook to leave town, I reflected that it sure was a lot of work, money, and stress to get to Iditarod if I wasn't going to enjoy the journey more than this.

I may have been a bit unmotivated, but the dogs were feeling good after the long break. We were way up on rest, and whatever attitude issues we had on the previous run were gone. Elway and Tilt-A-Whirl led the team straight down onto the river and we began the journey to Ruby.

The trail was soft and slow. Our speed was down, but I was fine with it. Our speed up until this point had been a bit fast, so one run at slow speeds wasn't the end of the world. It took us five and a half hours to cover 40 miles. The sun was still up and it still felt warm (warmth is relative; it was likely -20 or colder), but once the sun set I knew it was going to cool rapidly.

I started looking for abandoned straw to bed the dogs on. I had wanted to use half a bale at each camp, but there just wasn't enough room in my smaller-than-expected sled to haul a whole bale of straw. Camping on used straw isn't ideal because the dogs are more likely to be exposed to any viruses the earlier team might have been carrying. But it was going to be awfully cold and there weren't any trees or other vegetation nearby that I could cut for bedding.

Right at 40 miles I found some nice straw beds off to the side of the trail. The camp spot was ideal, located in a sheltered slough that wouldn't get too windy if a breeze came up. I took care of the dogs, ate, and took a nap on my sled. The sun had been down for several hours, but it had just started really cooling off when we got up to go – perfect.

The next run looked exactly like the last run. Mile after mile down the wide, white river. I couldn't stay awake. I kept dozing off and jerking awake as my knees buckled. Pedaling next to the sled or dancing around on the runners didn't help. As soon as I stopped moving I dozed off. Singing didn't help. I was too sleepy to remember any songs. I tried singing "The Ants Go Marching" since it is simple and you can keep it going forever. Except I couldn't keep it going. When I paused to try to think of a rhyme for the next number, I'd doze off. Eating didn't help. One time I woke up still holding a piece of cheese in my mitt, with a bite of it still in my mouth.

All the while I struggled to stay awake, the dogs marched relentlessly down the trail. They were all business and running strong. We covered our 40 miles in five hours. It was 2:30 in the morning. It was cold and it was breezy, but it was time to stop. I found a snow machine track off to the side, but the dogs refused to turn off. After several attempts over a about a mile, I finally took Elway out of lead – he wasn't listening at all, just wanted to keep going! I put Whack-A-Mole back up front, my best command leader. The next time I saw a likely spot to turn off the main trail, I called Gee, and I still didn't get a response. No one was listening. The dogs were in traveling mode. We were definitely going to stop and rest, 80 miles was way too far for this team to do in one run. I just had to figure out how to make them take a break!

Finally I set my hooks, unstrapped the straw bale, and shook out little piles for the dogs while they jumped around barking in the middle of the trail. I had to really watch them because I wasn't close enough to catch the sled if they managed to pop those hooks loose. The dogs love straw and I figured they would come right over and get cozy once I had their beds made. Nope.

More jumping and barking. I dragged the line sideways over to the straw, but the dogs weren't having it. They scooted right back to the main trail. I pulled the leaders back off the trail and set a leader hook to hold them. The rest of the team jumped and lunged in the middle of the trail. Then I dragged my sled sideways until it was off the trail, and set my hooks hard, tightened up the line and reset the leader hooks, and ignored the goofy shrieking madhouse that was still in the main trail. I got busy melting snow and getting their dog dishes distributed. Eventually the amped up dogs gave in and settled down. It had taken a lot of effort to get this team parked and settled, but I wasn't upset. Dogs that don't want to stop is not the worst problem you can have.

About half an hour after the dogs finally got settled I started getting really chilled. Standing on the runners is pretty sedentary no matter how much you move around. Getting the dogs parked had helped me warm up but I still had over two and a half hours before I needed to get up and start bootying. I pulled out my sleeping bag and crawled in. I curled my body around my wheel dogs to make a wind break for them, and dozed off.

After about an hour I woke up, cold and shivering. I had to get up and get moving. After tromping up and down the trail, doing jumping jacks, and jogging in place I knew I wasn't going to get any more rest. I spent the rest of the break stomping around trying to stay warm while the dogs slept soundly.

We pulled back onto the trail as the sun lightened the sky; 6:30 a.m. More river. The miles rolled slowly by, with an unvarying sameness. The dogs were moving smartly, but I was still struggling. Even with the daylight my eyes drifted shut constantly. I didn't dare sit on my cooler to rest, because then I when I dozed off I would fall off the sled. I fought the whole run to keep from passing out and just lying down in the trail for a nap. Even as the cliffs of Ruby appeared in the distance, I faded in and out.

Coming in to Ruby the trail makes a 90 degree turn off the river, and then climbs steeply to the village perched high above. I didn't see all of this – I had dozed off again. The team was moving purposefully, and didn't need my help, so I wasn't even aware we were approaching town. I've always trained my dogs to love going up hills. Every time we hit a hill, I let them charge. And so

it was, that when my team came into Ruby they hit that 90 degree corner at a full gallop, and went sprinting up that hill. My sled skidded sideways, hit a rut, and slammed me face down into the ice. The one and only time I would crash the entire race – flying up a hill.

We took a five hour break in Ruby, resting from just before noon until 5 pm. The afternoon was still cold, but the sun felt good and the dogs got a really nice break with plenty of straw and hot food.

Sumlin had not been pulling for a couple of runs. She wasn't limping, and I hadn't tracked down the problem. When we arrived in Ruby I checked her over and she finally let me know what was bothering her. She's a pretty tough girl and finished with me last year, so when she winced and whimpered I took her seriously. I massaged and wrapped her sore wrist, and hoped it would feel better when our rest was done.

I went inside, ate, drank and laid down on the linoleum floor of the community center. It was hard and dirty and crowded, but it was the first warm rest I'd had since Tanana. I slept deeply for a good hour before forcing myself back onto my feet and out the door.

First task was to check Sumlin. I gently flexed her wrist, and she flinched. It was still very painful, so she would be getting dropped, sent home to recuperate. I was down to 12 dogs already! I told myself not to dwell on it too much – whatever would be, would be. Worrying wouldn't change things. But I would miss sweet Sumlin, her cheerleading antics, and her veteran trail experience.

Even with the extra tasks of getting a dog drop arranged with the vets, we pulled out of Ruby right on time. We dropped back down to the river and headed west. It was still well below zero but we were so used to the temperatures by now that we barely noticed. The run into Galena was fast and easy. The dogs had been doing great since Tanana. On this run I was feeling stronger too, and looking forward to a nice long break – we were heading for our 24. Hopefully by the time our long break was up, the promised 'warmer' weather would finally arrive!

The trail was more of same; wide, white, featureless, but it only took six and a half hours. Sometimes a six hour run feels pretty darn fast, and sometimes a five hour run goes on forever – time is relative on the trail. We got in just before midnight. For the first time since the race began, there was hot water available and I didn't have to break out the cooker. Even a tiny luxury like hot water makes everything easier when you are tired and painful. I got the dogs all taken care of and went inside to rest and eat. There were lots of extra chores, but they could wait for daylight.

The community center was packed – lots of mushers were 24ing here. Even though we all ship out plenty of our own food, the people of Galena had stepped up to feed us. There was a huge array of crockpots, plates, and baking dishes full of delicious food. It felt wonderful to shed my heavy gear, sit, and eat. Once I was full of good food I laid down to sleep. I was back on dirty linoleum, but it was warm and it felt wonderful to rest my back. I didn't need to get up for hours, and I was looking forward to a real sleep. But of course I was so used to one hour naps that I kept snapping awake, ready to hit the trail again.

I passed the night in a series of mini-sleeps until the sun rose and I felt too restless (not to mention sore) to lay still any longer. I got up and ate, then went outside to check the dogs. Once the sun rose, things warmed up rapidly. The dogs were still covered with the bright fleecy blankets I had tucked over them. They looked like colorful Easter eggs all nestled in the straw.

I refilled their food dishes with warm soup in case anyone was hungry, then got busy on other chores. I checked over my sled for damage or loose bolts, replaced runner plastic, sorted and organized gear, repacked my sled, and cleaned up our parking spot. A lot of the dogs were showing signs of diarrhea. Other teams had been bothered by a virus all race. I felt fortunate that we had so far not had any problems, but it looked like we weren't going to avoid it entirely.

Once the maintenance chores were done I checked over each dog carefully. Muddy hadn't been showing any signs of a limping or pain, but her front leg was really puffy. I had noticed it when I took her booties off the night before when we arrived. I had done some massage and wrapped it up, but it didn't look any better. Lisa, a highly recommended orthopedic vet, examined her with me. She felt up and down the leg and said that the swelling felt more like an infection from a small wound instead of a strain or sprain. Muddy didn't have any wounds, but we put her on some antibiotics to see if it would help. I was crossing my fingers – I was low on dogs, and Muddy was my go-to leader when the trail got tough.

By now it was downright warm, well above zero, and I had shed most of my layers. The cold snap was over! I took each dog for a quick walk to stretch and play. They loved the attention. I stripped off their blankets, dog coats, and harnesses so I could get a good look and make sure there weren't any scrapes or rubs I might have overlooked. All the dogs looked great and had even kept plenty of weight on through the cold snap. Oreo, with his thin hair and pointer bloodlines, tends to lose weight more quickly than the other dogs even when it's not bitterly cold. But this time he barely looked like he'd been racing. That heavy duty parka he'd been wearing had really made a difference, and I filed this idea away for the future; keeping him warmer may be the key to keeping Oreo from dropping too much weight.

After playing with the dogs for an hour or so, I got back to the last chores. Everything was packed up and ready to go, and it was still mid-morning. I wasn't scheduled to leave until after midnight, so I headed back inside. The rest of the day was spent alternating between napping, eating, and visiting with the dogs.

I also took time to Super Glue my fingers back together. In cold temperatures skin becomes incredibly fragile and can split from just a tiny impact. Fingers take the worst of the damage, being often uncovered and exposed to the cold. I had deep gashes in both thumbs and one finger. Every time I put booties on, the sharp spines of the Velcro sliced deeper into my thumbs. It was like the world's biggest papercut, and I was re-slicing it with every bootie – 48 times per run. I hoped the glue would help, because we still had a long way to go.

Our time was up at 1:45 a.m. It's a tough time of night to get moving, but we were all feeling fresh. Temps were cool, maybe -10, just right for running. Not so hot like earlier in the day. Not so cold like it had been the whole race so far. We headed out on new trail, bound for Huslia. Our

path dodged through trees and over frozen lakes and around low ridges. The dogs were bouncing with energy.

During the run Whack A Mole had a tiny head-bob, a sign of a front leg injury. It came and it went, but it was a real concern. He's one of my best leaders and a really strong dog - I needed him in the team. I also noticed that McCaffrey wasn't pulling. She wasn't limping, but her tug was not tight. To add to that, every so often Sabin would limp dramatically, then recover and trot smoothly. Harp had been dealing with a hind leg injury off and on all season. She wasn't limping or skipping, but her leg quivered whenever we stopped and I wasn't sure exactly what that meant. Muddy was looking fine, and the swelling was gone, but of course she wasn't out of the woods yet. Five iffy dogs on a long run!

I planned to break the 84 mile run in half. The sun was just coming up, a little more than five hours after leaving Galena, when I pulled the dogs over. We took a nice four hour break as the sun rose. I checked my five worrisome dogs carefully, but I couldn't locate the source of the problem with any of them. I hoped they would bounce back with rest, or at least hang in there until Huslia. I was already low on dogs and I was a bit nervous with so many dogs on the blink. I sure couldn't haul that many dogs in my sled. I had to remind myself that worrying wouldn't change a thing. Whatever would be, would be. Onward.

We got on the trail again at 11 a.m. It was a lovely, sunny morning, starting to warm up but not too hot. The team was moving out nicely. Often a good run when the dogs feel strong is followed by a run when the dogs are less focused. But we had made one strong, determined push since Tanana, five runs back. The dogs were getting stronger as we went along – my patience and conservative schedule was paying off! I was carefully watching those five dogs with issues. All were pulling hard and happy, except McCaffrey who wasn't pulling hard but certainly seemed happy. Even with my worries, it was a good start to the run.

About an hour into our run, we rounded a corner, dropped off a wooded ridge, and headed through some willow scrub onto a lake. Over the tops of the bushes I could see two beautiful, enormous, silver wolves nosing around just by the trail. The dog's view and scent was shrouded by the vegetation, so they had no idea why I suddenly jumped on the brake to stop. I was hoping to spy on the stunning animals a while. The two wolves heard the sound of the brake, startled, and dashed off. They bounded across the lake, zigging and zagging, with their thick fur rippling as they ran. They were very healthy, very large, absolutely beautiful animals.

I could see their tracks where they had crossed the lake, then stopped to investigate the scents on the trail. They had milled around in the trail for quite some time, probably cleaning up some snacks left by another team. The dogs always react to tracks from foxes, hares, moose, and other critters, but they completely ignored any sight, scent, or trace of the wolves. When it came to the wolves it seemed to be a case of 'see no evil' and 'let's get the heck out of here'. I said goodbye to the wolves, who were now invisible but no doubt peering from the edge of the forest, and off we went.

We continued over lakes and forest patches for a few more hours. The team was happily trotting, even with the occasional worrisome limp from Whack A Mole or Sabin. It seemed a very short

time before I began to smell wood smoke. The last few miles into Huslia were along wide roads that rolled through open birch forest. The local kids had put up dozens of welcoming signs lining the roadway into town, and dogs just glided into the village feeling great.

We pulled into Huslia around 4:30 in the afternoon. There was plenty of warm sun to rest in; it was a good time to stop. While I took care of the dogs, the vets checked everyone carefully. They couldn't diagnose a problem with any of the dogs. Sabin, Whack-A-Mole, Muddy, and Harp were still working hard, so I knew whatever their issues, they were wanting to keep going.

McCaffrey had a wonderful attitude and didn't show any signs of pain or injury. But since she hadn't really been pulling since Ruby I knew I couldn't ask her to keep on. I had to send her home. I thanked her for her hard work and for keeping up; even when she wasn't up to pulling, she never held us back or had to be carried. Down to 11 dogs, and four of those had issues. I reminded myself that small teams can travel a long, long way.

I also took a close look at Elway's feet. They were bugging him, and I knew why. Dog's feet swell up a bit on long races, and his feet were too big for the booties I had. I was using a different brand of booties this year, and the sizes were a little different than I was used to. Anyway, the top of his foot was getting rubbed. I needed to find some bigger booties, but no one around had anything like the size my giant boy was going to need. I would need to figure something out, but for now big El was doing OK and happy.

Huslia is not usually on the race route, but they had pulled out all the stops to welcome us. There was a crew of locals shooting the breeze around a bonfire that just happened to be keeping a barrel of water steaming hot for the dogs. The second time this race I didn't have to unpack the cooker! The community center was loaded with food; shepherd's pie with moose meat, salmon, berry deserts. I had to sample a little bit of everything. There was a quiet, dark, warm church set up with cots for us to sleep in. It was so restful I wished I could stay longer, but we were only scheduled for a five hour break.

We had another long run coming up; 86 miles to Koyukuk. I had the sled loaded up for another camp. We took off at 9:30 at night, just as the sun went down. My timing the entire race had just worked out really well; resting in the sun, running in the cooler hours.

This trail was similar to the run into Huslia – wooded knolls and open swamps or lakes. It was really beautiful country. The trail here was not as well traveled as the one between Galena and Huslia, and it was a bit slower going. Once again, I didn't worry when our speed dropped down. I knew when the trail was firmer these dogs would pick it up again. They were feeling good.

As we traveled along I scanned the trail for booties big enough to fit Elway. I was lucky to scavenge six or seven extra-large boots off the trail. I hung them over my handlebar to dry in the sun and breeze. If I made sure to hang on to them and dry them at each break I ought to have enough to protect his feet all the way to the finish. Problem solved.

About an hour before I planned to stop, I noticed my headlamp battery was getting really low. I had just charged it in Galena, so it should have lasted until Unalakleet or farther, but for some

reason we were running out of juice. I had a spare battery all charged up in the sled, but it would be hard to dig out underneath the straw and extra food I was packing. I realized I didn't need it anyway. We were running under a bright, full moon. I turned my lamp off, and we glided through the silvery-blue night. The dogs, who had been cheerfully moving along at reasonable, but somewhat slow pace, picked up speed. Their ears and noses were perked up, scanning our surroundings. Our speed increased about 1 mile per hour, which is actually a lot when you are looking at 7-9 mph speeds. I filed this thought away for future; even when they are working well the dogs may be bored, and even little things can increase their interest. No matter how long I run dogs, I am always learning.

We ran just over six hours and pulled over. Same routine of booties, cooker, straw, feeding, and try to nap. It wasn't nearly as cold, maybe -20. I actually slept for over an hour before I cooled down too much to stay asleep.

Back on the trail again. Same routine of trees, swamps, and lakes. At least it wasn't river! Whack A Mole and Sabin continued to limp intermittently. Harp continued to quiver. They weren't getting worse, which was a relief. They weren't getting better, which wasn't.

The sun was up and the day grew warm. I shed a few layers. I watched the dogs to see if they were getting too hot. It takes a good 10 minutes to get coats off everyone and packed away, plus, you then have to take another 10-15 minutes to put coats back on once you stop. So I don't usually pull coats unless it's needed. The dogs were running with open mouths, but their tongues weren't hanging out too much. Their respiration was up, but not too much. They were fine. On the other hand, the dogs weren't making any speed records. They were marching along willingly, attitudes were great, but it was a bit slow and sticky.

I thought about how good it felt to take my parka off after being bundled up for so many days and I figured it might perk the dogs up too, even if they weren't overheating. I stopped and pulled coats off. There was an immediate change in attitude. As the breeze ruffled their hair, the dogs went from willing to energetic, from focused to excited. Once again, I watched as our speed picked up. Once again I filed an idea away for the future – those little changes that keep them interested really make a difference! We dropped onto the Koyukuk River for the last couple of hours, and even then the dogs stayed motivated.

We hit Koyukuk just before 4 in the afternoon. Once again I asked the vets to look over Whack A Mole, Harp, and Sabin carefully. We always want to know the location of the injury so we can do massage, wrapping, stretching, and other therapies to try to resolve the problem. The vets here also couldn't determine why they were limping, but suggested I find vet Kim, who was supposed to be really good on ortho issues.

Wow, was she ever. She gave me a twenty minute tutorial on techniques to diagnose and manage various injuries. I was so sleepy that I was fading out and having a hard time focusing, but this was knowledge I really wanted. Kim immediately found that Whack A Mole's injury was in his pecs (chest area). With a little light massage the problem cleared up, never to return. For Sabin she noticed his shoulder blade was tight, but traced the source of the problem back to the hind leg. I worked on that area the rest of the race, and while the problem did not go away completely,

it kept Sabin happy in harness and he continued to run with the team. Without Kim's help I am sure both those boys would have ended up going home. I also learned that she will be doing a seminar in Alaska next fall; hopefully I will retain the information better if I'm not in the middle of a race!

I walked over to the musher building in Koyukuk. By now I was desperately sleepy. I went behind the tarped off area to lay down. Another hard plywood floor, but it was a relatively warm place, and I was so groggy I thought I'd fall asleep immediately. Except there was a noisy drunk man in the building. Except I was thirsty. Except I needed to tend to my infected, cut thumbs. Except I had to go grab my forgotten headlamp from my sled before it got dark. Except I just couldn't quite drop off. I made myself lay there and rest, even if it wasn't sleep.

It was painful to get back up and get moving again. We left a little after 9 p.m., dark coming on, and great, cool, calm weather for traveling more miles on the river. We had a bit of a long run to make – 52 miles to Kaltag. I decided to put Pine Top back up in lead. He never had the focus to lead late in a race in the past, but he seemed up for the task right then. I paired him with Elway, whose strength and confidence in lead always help whomever he is partnered with. The dogs got up and moved out well, and we just rambled down the river. Pine Top was proving himself and seemed to be enjoying his time up front.

One thing that was really different this year was absolutely no snow machine traffic. This section is a virtual highway between villages, and it's common to see dozens of high speed machines. They have always put me on high alert, swinging my headlamp side to side and flashing my light to make sure they see us. Not this year – there was no one. I wondered if people were staying off the trail during Iditarod as a result of the snow machine attacks last year, or if there was some other explanation. Either way, it was peaceful and quiet on the moonlit river. Of course, now that I needed to drive the team I just couldn't stay awake. Luckily the river trail didn't demand too much of my attention so I was catching some cat-naps.

We checked through Nulato, the dogs barking and lunging to go. It got colder and breezier as we went. I pulled my neck fleece way up and my ruff down. The neck fleece frosted over and froze up, so I knew the temperature was dropping hard. After the earlier cold we had dealt with in the first days of the race, this seemed just fine – we were used to it. We finished our run in the wee hours, 4 a.m., but there were checkers, vets, and volunteers standing by to welcome us to the little village of Kaltag. And we were off the river! Finally, after a combined total of something like 350 miles of sheer boredom!

A few of the dogs were still having issues with diarrhea. It's a very common problem during races and we are used to treating it while watching for problems. It seemed to run through them for a few days, taking their energy down and making them less interested in food, but they seemed to bounce back quickly. So far everyone had very mild cases, but Whack A Mole was really showing its effects. He hadn't eaten in about 24 hours, and wouldn't even touch salmon, one of his favorite foods. On the plus side, he was no longer limping and he was pulling willingly. He just looked less energetic than normal, and I really wanted to see him eat and drink

soon. He passed up the meal I offered, but I left a small pile of various snacks and meats in the hopes he might have a nibble or two.

In the past, Kaltag has been a cold, bare bones checkpoint. It's been getting more and more inviting and comfortable, with cots (heavenly after so many hard floors!), hot drinking water for mushers, and this year some great food. I was looking forward to some real sleep! But even though it felt wonderful to stretch out on something besides plywood or linoleum, sleep wouldn't come. Again. And I really needed to recharge myself. Again, I lay still and at least let my muscles warm and relax.

I went out to give the dogs a warm, soaked meal a few hours before I planned to leave. This feeding schedule meant I got less time to lay down, but the dogs were doing a better job eating once they had napped. Whack A Mole still wasn't interested in food, and he hadn't touched the treats I'd left near him. I went back inside and got a small bowl of moose stew from the musher table. His nose twitched at the smell. I sat with my big goofy leader and petted him and fed him tiny pieces of warm moose meat. Soon he was wolfing down the rest of the bowl full, even the carrots and noodles. Once he started eating, it must have felt pretty good because he got to work on some kibble and beef next. I was so happy to see him on the mend!

While I was tending the dogs, Alan Moore showed me the new dog leggings he was using. Over the years I have run a lot of miles with Alan, and he is always wonderful to spend time with. He just has this calm, level headed humor that sets me right when I start to doubt myself. He is also a great source of information, and those leggings of his were really interesting. We all struggle to find the best design to protect the dog's lower legs. The wrong shape and they don't go on easily, or come off too easily and get lost during runs. The wrong material and they clump up with snow or freeze into stiff casts. Most of us make due with lightweight fleece, but it tends to get wet and stay wet, which is its own problem. Alan was really happy with his new material and new design, and I took note. Looks like I will be sewing new leggings this summer.

The weather had made a big change. It was really starting to feel like spring – cool nights below zero, and sunny days that were just a little too warm for the team. The trail up out of Kaltag, at 9:30 in the morning, was slow and sticky. The dogs were unfocused and slow. There is something strange about Kaltag for me – the run out of there is never a good one for us. We always seem to crawl and falter on the way to Old Woman cabin.

I didn't let this bobble bother me. We had just had an unprecedented string of nine strong, energetic runs, all the way from Tanana. I could hardly complain. And outside of the virus that was going around, everyone seemed back to 100%. So we just cruised along, Harp and Tilty in lead, making the best of a warm and sunny run along a familiar trail.

We got to the cabin in just about six hours, just about the same amount of time as usual – not that much of an 'off' run after all. Our last 'camp' of the race outside a checkpoint, although at least there is a small cabin to shelter in. But it was last time to haul straw and extra food and fuel and booties. Last time to melt snow for the dogs. This was our seventh camp, and I was happy to have an end to loading up the sled with extra supplied and straw.

In many ways, Old Woman is better than a checkpoint. It's quieter, with only a few other teams parked nearby. The cabin heats up quickly once the wood stove is going. And you are so close to your team that you get more down-time to rest – no trudging back and forth. While I waited for snow to melt, Alan Moore and I chatted about racing, expeditions, and (what else?) dogs.

I tried for a short nap, but once more couldn't drop off to sleep. It had been since Huslia, four runs and a couple of days back, since I had truly slept. I lay still for a few moments, and then it was time to go. It took only minutes to boot up while the sun set, and then we headed down the trail. It's only 36 miles to Unalakleet, and it's always a good, fast, fun run for my team. Hitting the coast makes you feel like the end is in sight. The end may be just a tiny figure, far in the distance, but you can sense its presence.

We were really moving out and most of the team looked revved up and excited. Even Whack A Mole was screaming to go. But now Pine Top and Shanahan were looking a little draggly. I moved them farther back in the team where they could just cruise along on auto pilot, and put Whack A Mole up front with Tilt A Whirl. We took off! Whacky was feeling great and was happy to be back in front. It seemed like this bug was going to run through the whole team, a few dogs at a time. All I could do was keep them as comfortable as possible, keep an eye on their hydration and energy levels, and wait it out. Meanwhile, the rest of the team was strong and happy, pulling through the frosty night. Even with a few short breaks to switch dogs around, this run took only 4 ½ hours.

It was 1:30 in the morning, when I arrived, and not even 2:30 when I was done heating water and caring for the dogs. I was too sleepy to eat much, and the soft beds in the checkpoint were calling my name. I seriously wanted to sleep! And for once I did. For about an hour. You take what you can get.

5:30 in the morning came up quicker than I hoped. A short four hour rest was all the dogs needed before we were once again back on the trail. I had Elway and Muddy tearing it up in lead. The leg from Unalakleet to Shaktoolik includes a long series of brutal hill climbs which should be quite discouraging. But for us, it's just not. Certain sections of the trail have their own flavor. Just as my run out of Kaltag never quite feels right, my run from Unalakleet always feels victorious.

This time was something special. The dogs were so strong I couldn't run up the hills with them. The best I could do was pedal, and even then we were moving so fast I couldn't push all that hard as the ground was moving too quickly under my feet. Elway was like a crazy dog, pulling and lunging up the hills as if he would carry the sled and all its load to the top single handedly. His enthusiasm was infectious, and the dogs were just wild, whining and straining if we moved too slowly.

We crested the peaks as the sun rose, filling the sky with light. We could see far over the hills and out across the waters past Besboro Island. The day was beautiful, and the team was full of great energy. Shanahan and Pine Top were hanging in there, keeping up with the fast pace even though they didn't have their normal vigor. I hoped the virus would pass through them quickly and their spirits would rise along with the rest of the dogs.

After the brutal hill climbs, the trail drops down, down, down, out of the Blueberry Hills and onto the lagoon for the last 12 miles into Shak. This part of the trail is open to the elements and usually windswept, so I had already wormed my way into the big white windbreaker that would protect me against the ferocious winds. Except there were no winds. None at all. It was just a brisk, bright day and we trotted into the checkpoint after less than six hours on the trail.

We settled into a sunny spot, and took what felt like a lazy break from 11 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. Leaving Shaktoolik can be a challenge if the weather doesn't cooperate. I have spent 24 hours there waiting for winds to die. I've spent 36 hours there waiting for winds to die. I've waited for winds to die, given up and gone anyway, and regretted it. It's not a good place to wait – it's just a small, cramped building and small, cramped dog lot. It's not a good place to leave. Even when the weather is 'good', it is always windy and white-out going over.

But this year there wasn't even a breath of breeze. This should have been a good thing, but it made me nervous. Things were a little too quiet. I was wondering when the winds would roar back to life, and if they would do it while we were half way across.

Usually the wind lifts the snow off the ground and brews it into a haze that blocks visibility in every direction. So, usually, this run is just a blank white canvas for hours and hours. This time I could see the distant shore, I could look back to the Blueberry Hills, I could see the mountains to the east. I'd never seen any of that before. Even being able to see where we were going, it was still a straight ahead dull run, sea ice being no better than the river in terms of boredom for me and for the dogs.

Even so, the dogs ate up the miles; Seth Barnes and I traded leads several times, but were essentially traveling at the same speed. The Berrington twins, who left 15 minutes behind me, never got any closer and never dropped out of sight. I could look back and still see Shaktoolik, which didn't seem to be receding. I could look ahead and see the far side of the ice, which didn't seem to be getting any closer. It felt like being on a treadmill where the scenery never changes.

Meanwhile, after days of picking at her food, Shanahan had finally decided that ground beaver was something she was interested in. I gave her several pieces, and then some salmon too. I could almost see her energy level increase as she ate. Pine Top, too, seemed to be bouncing back from the stomach bug. It seemed like the whole team was back at full strength for the moment.

Gradually, slowly, finally, Koyuk drew near. Then, just as we approached the shore, with maybe seven or eight miles left to go, we got plastered by a sharp quartering wind. The fierce gusts drove grains of ice into my face and eyes. I shrugged my hood up and cinched it tight to protect my skin. The wind kept finding ways in, but the shore was too close to bother with wrestling into my wind gear. I held the ruff close to my face with one hand and drove on. The dogs were getting shoved sideways. They kept right on trotting, eyes squinted against the blast. It was cold, abrasive, and not much fun. The only thing that made it easy was the fact that the town was in sight, and we all knew we were close to shelter.

Just as the wind hit, Sabin seemed to falter. He wasn't limping, he was certainly happy (this dog has an infectious and perpetual good mood). But he wasn't pulling. I watched closely, but not much changed. He kept trotting along, but he wasn't quite keeping up. Sometimes a dog will take a bad step and then shake it off, kind of like twisting an ankle. I was hoping that was case here. Sabin had unexpectedly impressed me, and I was enjoying having his goofy energy on the team.

Getting to Koyuk is always a relief. Off the sea ice, out of the wind, and always good food and a warm rest. We arrived in the dark at 9:30, and there was no one around. There were a few mushers tending their teams, but no checkers appeared to sign us in. I was wondering if I ought to park the team myself (which would be a challenge as they were bouncing and barking) and go look for a checker. Then the door opened and they came tumbling out of the community building. Apparently my tracker showed us still in Shaktoolik and they had no idea we were coming across the ice. Once they realized a team had arrived everyone scrambled out the door to get us parked.

I had the vets really check over Shanahan and Pine Top carefully for dehydration, but they got a clean bill and looked like they were on the mend. Sabin was resting well and we didn't find any injury or soreness, so we decided he might just be a little tired or thrown off by the wind (the first real wind he had probably ever encountered).

But when I came back out at 2 a.m. to leave, Sabin's front leg was puffy and warm. I couldn't ask him to keep going, although he was as cheerful as always. It took me a few extra minutes to find a vet, fill out paperwork, and get him ready to go home, and then we were ready to go.

I was down to 10 dogs. But 10 strong, experienced, motivated dogs. And we were closing in; just a few more runs. My previous dread and reluctance had been replaced by determination and anticipation. Of course we were going all the way, and we were almost there!

We pulled back on to the sea ice and started the leg to Elim. There was no one in front of us. Seth had taken a shorter rest and left almost two hours earlier. There was a pair of headlamps far behind us which I figured was the twins. But mostly it was just me and the dogs, booming across the coastal plains. As usual, I was having a hard time staying awake during the wee morning hours, but the dogs were all business and we were moving with purpose. It was another good, strong run that me burst with pride for my dogs.

We rolled into Elim just after 8 in the morning. Now that the sun was up, I was waking up (as usual). After heating water and taking care of the dogs, I took time to shorten up my gangline by one section and repack everything, ready to go.

Inside, volunteers had tarped off an area for us to sleep. But the building was cold, and even chillier on the floor. I wasn't going to be down long enough to bother getting my sleeping bag, so I pulled my parka over me and shivered. I dozed uncomfortably, waking often and debating getting that sleeping bag. But there wasn't much time before I needed to get moving, so it didn't seem worth the hassle.

After a miserable hour, it was time to go. But when I crawled to my feet, my hamstrings, calves, and low back locked up into one massive charlie-horse. I toppled to the ground like a tree falling. It was excruciating. Cramps rippled through my muscles and wouldn't let go. Every time I tried to move they seized up tighter. My friend Kathy, who was running the checkpoint, talked to me calmly but there wasn't much anyone could do while my muscles revolted. I usually mix an electrolyte formula into my big water jug. For some reason I had only sent out half of what I normally do, so I was drinking the mixture at half-strength. It still tasted fine, but it was obviously a big mistake. I couldn't do anything but try to breathe and wait for my muscles to let go.

After 15 long, painful minutes, the cramps eased up. I carefully tried to get moving again. It would be a disaster if cramps like that hit out on the trail, but sitting around wasn't going to get us closer to Nome. Kathy gave me a potassium pill, which we hoped would stave off any more problems. I got the team up and moving just a little later than I had planned, and we traveled down to the sea ice, just off the coastal cliffs. The dogs were moving happily, but not quickly. This is another place where the team always seems to start off slow, so I didn't worry too much. Once again, there was no one nearby, either in front or behind. I didn't expect to see any other teams on this run.

Soon we climbed up off the ocean and started grinding up the long, steep hills. I still had Elway and Muddy in lead. Elway was still charging the hills like he was out to conquer an enemy. Muddy was head down, just churning along. She excels when the going gets tough, but so far this race the toughest thing had been boredom and cold – nothing to challenge her. The hills, at least gave her something to tackle, so between her and Elway, the focused energy picked up as we climbed the mountains and rounded Little McKinley. I was glad that the team was pulling strong – I didn't dare try to run or pedal and risk triggering any more cramps. I rode that sled to the top of every hill, and the dogs just powered up the climbs without looking for help.

Then it was back down to more sea ice and the trail up the middle of the bay towards Golovin. We cruised through the little town on the spit and out the other side to continue up the bay towards the Fish River. On the wide flat trail we lost our focus a bit. Glow quit pulling. Muddy started messing around and leading the team off the marked trail. Elway's ears were flopped out to either side. He wasn't excited about being out front anymore. I wasn't worried about the team quitting; any one of my 10 dogs could lead us the next 18 miles to White Mountain. But it would be nice to keep moving at a decent pace and quit wandering around.

I moved Muddy and Elway back and put up Pine Top and Whack A Mole. Pine Top, the dog who had never led during races, was showing me that he could and he would, and it sure made me proud. He and Whacky were definitely back to full energy, and they moved the team forward smartly.

About one dreary, featureless hour past Golovin I saw a shape appear ahead of us. I couldn't figure out what it was. We had been making fairly decent progress, but I knew we hadn't made up several hours on the teams in front of us. I thought it might be a biker – there are quite a few folks making the journey by bike or foot. But as we approached I saw it was Jodi Bailey, team

parked to the side of the trail. My heart sank. She had left Elim before we even got there, which meant she had been out on the ice here for five hours or more.

I slowed the team to see if she wanted to try to follow me in to White Mountain, but she said she wasn't quite ready. I told her the twins and Alan Moore were not too far behind, and hoped she could tag along with them. Having a team stop on you is a miserable experience, but Jodi seemed very upbeat and confident that her team would get moving in time. I still felt very guilty that I carried on by without stopping.

We finished up the run to White Mountain, pulling in around 7 p.m. after a fairly speedy six hour run. I was really pleased with how strong and focused the team had become. Even when one leader grew weary, I had several others ready to step up. Our speeds had been consistently good, and I hadn't ever felt like the team needed extra rest to keep together.

I was really looking forward to a nice long break to pump up the team for the final push. We hadn't rested much more than four or five hours at a time since Galena, over 400 miles back. IN White Mountain we have to take a mandatory 8 hour break, so we were going to have plenty of time to snooze.

Just like at the last 20 stops, I heated water, handed out meat and kibble, took off booties, made soup and dished it up, made each dog a straw bed, and tucked the dogs in for a good rest. Then I changed runner plastic, reorganized my sled, and prepared for the next run. Except this was the last time, the last run. After days and days of sleepless toil, we were almost there. I couldn't wait to get to Nome!

Up at the checkpoint I had to take my pee-test. Both mushers and dogs are tested for various banned substances before, during, and after the race. No performance enhancing drugs for anyone, no medications that could mask pain and keep dogs going when they should be sent home for the dogs.

The drug testers were a lively group this year, chatting and joking. They are up around the clock, ready to catch mushers as they come in the door, but they seemed full of energy anyway. Jess laughed and said my hair was fantastic. I cracked up – it hadn't been brushed in over a week. It had been crammed under a hat, ground into dirty floors, and abused by weather. I was definitely not having a "good hair day". Because she didn't know my name, Jess started calling me "Becky with the good hair", which just made me silly with laughter. I was tired and everything was striking me as funny. I took my messy mop and laid it down on the linoleum for a long four hour nap. It's impossible to sleep that long when you are used to one or two hours, but I managed to make the most of it, and got in a couple of short but deep sleeps.

It was just before 3 a.m. when we finally headed out. Even though I got them up off the straw and lined out ahead of time, the dogs meandered and wobbled for the first 100 yards. It's hard to leave a warm cozy bed in the middle of the night! Sometimes I think it is harder to get going after a long break – your body starts to realize just how fatigued it is. Eventually Muddy and Whack A Mole got down to business, and we cruised up the river and around the corner, our pace increasing with every mile.

It felt a little cool to me. I checked the thermometer, expecting to see about 5 below. It was 30 below! I had gotten so used to the cold I had no sense of perspective anymore. After a short run up the river we climbed up onto the wind swept, rolling tundra. The temperature dropped even further, down to 40 below. Coupled with the wind, it was definitely feeling a little chilly. Just about the time I cooled down enough to get uncomfortable, we hit the hills. For the next few hours we churned up one hill and down the next. I ran and pedaled to help the team, and it helped me warm up to the point where I didn't need my hood or neck fleece anymore.

Elway was once again hammering his harness, barking, and breaking the sled loose any time we paused to rest on a hill. I worried that he would hurt himself! Glow was once again not pulling. Instead of being irritated with her laziness, I thought back to her cheerful hard work the entire race, and realized she was probably coming down with the same bug that had hit almost everyone else in the team.

It was beautiful night and we just kept trotting away the miles and charging up and down the hills. We ran out of the Topkok Hills and onto the beach just after sunrise. And then we just ran and ran and ran up the long road to Safety. It is a long and boring run, although you never know when the wind will blow up and knock you off the trail through here. I've been barrel rolled by side-winds in this stretch, and I never take it for granted that this part of the trail will be straightforward. This time it was a just a little breezy, but nothing to slow us down – we cruised through the Solomon Blowhole with no problems.

It seems to take forever to get to Safety, and we are often slower than other nearby teams. But eventually we managed to get there. We have to sign in and get a vet signature in Safety. I try to make it a quick stop, because it is a logical place for the dogs to want to take a break. It looks like a checkpoint, it smells like a checkpoint (well, it is, technically, a checkpoint). Anyway, I want them to stay in go-mode. By now we had been running seven hours, our longest run of the race. Every dog in the team except Oreo had finished this race at least once, and eight of the ten had finished with me last year. So they knew the trail, they knew we had a few more hours to go.

But the way the chute was set up, there were drop bags and straw and a bunch of people taking pictures – irresistible. The team swung left and tried to head towards the straw. I straightened them out and we made it a good 10 feet before they swung towards the tourists again. I hopped off the sled, grabbed my leaders, pulled them straight, and we made it another 10 feet. It was almost funny. I knew we were going to keep going. The dogs knew we were going to keep going. I just had to play their little game for 50 yards, and then we were trotting down the road again, tails wagging.

I was impatient to finish. It's only 22 miles from Safety to the finish line, but it seems to take FOREVER. I just wanted to be done. A hot shower and some food were on my mind. But we still had to climb over Cape Nome and do the final, interminable miles into town.

The wind was rising as we rounded the foot of the Cape and started our climb. Elway, my hill-climbing maniac, was fading. He had clearly caught the virus that was going around, and he and

Glow had to take frequent potty breaks. We still made good progress up the long hill and down the steep drop back to sea level.

For the last two hours coming in to Nome, the trail passes by fishing cabins and roads. There are lots of snow machiners zipping around. There are distracting side trails. There are people and exciting things to look at. Muddy started losing focus. She wanted to take different trails. She wanted to look around. She was bored. She kept wanting to haul the dogs through deep snow over to nearby trails that she was sure were better. Whack A Mole was trying to behave and was pulling nearly sideways to override her, but despite being twice her size, he couldn't outweigh her determination to cause problems. Pine Top, just behind in swing, was focused down the trail and working hard to help keep the team where it belonged.

We were almost there, just a few more miles. But Muddy was making things difficult. My 'super star' leader was just plain cranky. Finally I decided Muddy was too much trouble. I stopped and put Pine Top up front in her place – he was basically leading from swing anyway. He charged down the trail, tail up, smile on his face. There was no doubt now that he was a genuine, bad-ass, count-on-me kind of leader now.

There were more and more people about, more cars, more photographers, more fans the closer we got. It was just after noon, and everyone seemed to be up and watching teams come in. The team picked up pace and enjoyed looking around at all the sights.

Finally we climbed up off the beach and onto Front Street. The dogs all knew exactly where we were headed, and made their way straight to the arch, where my mom was waiting with a hamburger and fries.