

The initial registration period for the 2010 Arrowhead 135 came and went, and I neglected to sign up. In a way, it was a relief. There'd be no pre-race worries about food, equipment, and clothing choices. No frostbite, sore muscles, or nausea to contend with during and after the race. I'd sleep in my own warm bed, while confused timberwolves watched men and women walking, skiing, or biking 135 miles from International Falls, MN to Tower, MN via the Arrowhead trail, which is predominantly used by snowmobiles in the winter months.

Then everything changed. I received an e-mail informing me that the Department of Natural Resources had increased the amount of permits for the race, and registration had reopened. After a few minutes of contemplation, I gave in to some sick desire to suffer again on the trail I've ridden each year since my first Arrowhead race in 2006.

Last year's ride didn't go as I'd hoped and planned. I had a stomach bug that started before the race and ended days after. I managed to make it to the midway checkpoint at Melgeorge's Resort before I dropped out of the race. Throwing in the towel was the smart thing to do, but I was disappointed that I couldn't finish what I had started. I guess that probably had something to do with my decision to sign up again. It was a chance for redemption.

I typically ride my Pugsleys (I'm lucky to have a few, in different configurations, to choose from) when I go camping or when I want to play off the beaten path. My Big Dummy gets ridden most of the time for commuting and running errands. It's my station wagon...my SUV...Old Reliable. But I made a decision, this year, to commute exclusively on the Pug, to and from work (about 51km round trip) for a few weeks before the race, to bump up my fitness level a notch and get the body more attuned to the riding position. Plus, I tend to think of modifications and improvements to the bike and bag/rack systems if I'm consistently using them. It turned out to be a good decision, regardless of the race. We've had a snowy, icy winter, and the Pug has been the perfect tool, for the daily commute, more often than not.



I started riding my prototype Pug frame (dropped top tube), prototype welded Large Marge rims, and prototype Larrys in the summer months, and they all worked well in warm temps. But our winter conditions tend to tax frames and components at a higher, more appropriate level. And tires perform differently when the temperature dives. Needless to say, race prep has been good real-world product testing.

Preparation for the race gets easier each year, because I have a good idea of what I'm going to wear, what I'm going to eat, and a notion of what I'm going to pack and where I'm going to pack it on the bike. There will always be variables, of course, dependant on temperature predictions and my indecisiveness as the event approaches. But there are items that I rely on each year: -40 North Face boots, 12-pack of Esbit tabs, Isotherm insulated water bottles, reflective triangles, Cateye 3-led red blinky lights (2), Warm Skin barrier cream, lip balm, lanolin, gaiters, vapor barrier socks, Granite Gear Lutsen Mitts, sealed jar of peanut butter, lighter, whistle, and compass. They go in a Rubbermaid tote and usually don't come out until Arrowhead time each year. If they do come out for occasional use, they go right back in the tote when I'm done with them. I have exact duplicates, of many of these items that I use on a regular basis. That way, I can keep my race gear in top condition.

My sleeping pad, -20F sleeping bag, bivy sack, Esbit stove, titanium pot, Princeton Tec Epic Pro headlamp, and most of my clothing items are durable enough that I can use them regularly without worrying about wear and tear...or they are just too expensive to justify the purchase of duplicates solely for the purpose of having everything in pristine condition for Arrowhead race use. I'm not going to buy another -20F bag, so one can remain unused 363 days of the year.

I keep an Arrowhead-specific drivetrain...chain, cassette, chainrings, and chainring guard...stashed away until I need it for the event. The Mr. Whirly crankset allows me to easily change out the chainrings and chainring guard (Salsa Ring Dinger) as one unit, due to the removable spider. I've used the same cassette (14-34t), chain, and granny ring for the last few years. My "big" chainring, a 34t, was changed from a 36t at one point.

My race diet was similar to that of years past: smashed up Lays potato chips...barbeque and plain, Gummi bears, dried cherries, chocolate-covered raisins, Honey Stingers with Ginseng, peanut butter cups, cashews, and meat sticks. I added some Kind energy bars (strawberry), Larabar energy bars (cherry pie), macadamia nuts, and a few of those 5-hour energy bombs in the little bottles...instead of trying to keep my Redbull from freezing. I also made some salami and cheddar cheese wraps, hoping that "real food" would be easier to choke down than all the overly-processed crap that's on my menu.

No front rack or front panniers this year. A first. Most of my gear was packed in my Epic Designs bags and Epic handlebar harness. My old faithful Headland seatpost rack held my North Face Tundra sleeping bag and some spare clothes. My goal, for next year...if I do this again next year, is to go completely rackless or, at least, use a lighter rear rack. I'm not a weight weenie, but saving a few grams here and there can add up over the long haul.

Despite starting my gear prep weeks earlier, I was up until 4am Sunday morning...second-guessing, modifying, double-checking my gear. My dad, Jerry, arrived at my house, in Minneapolis, just before 6am Sunday morning. I had all my gear packed in Rubbermaid totes, and the Pug was ready to go. We were on the road in less than 15 minutes.

After 5-1/2 hours on the road, including our usual stop at a breakfast joint along the way, we arrived at the hall where Don, The Gear Nazi, was waiting to make sure I had all the required items for the romp through the northern woods. Here's the list copied from the Arrowhead site...

- Minus-20F degrees sleeping bag or colder rating
- Insulated sleeping pad
- Bivy sack or tent (space blankets do not count)
- Firestarter (matches or lighter)
- Stove to heat water (tip: Don't eat snow! It burns too many calories.)
- 8 fl. oz. fuel at ALL times (either white gas, alcohol or 2 canisters of propane/butane 100 g. each or 12 Esbit tablets)
- Pot (min. volume is 1 pint)
- 2-qt (64 fl. oz.) or just under 2 liters, insulated water container (the weight of water is not counted in the minimum weight)
- Headlamp or flashlight
- Flashing red LED lights, both on front and back of sled or bike (or on backpack if skier). Also, the DNR requires that everyone have at least 10 square inches of reflective material on front and back of the person for this

race. Clarification: Two lights total are required, one on the front of the bike, sled or racer (runner or skier with backpack), one on the back of the bike, sled or racer (runner or skier with backpack). Each light must have a minimum of three flashing red LEDs.

- Whistle on string around neck to call for help.
- 1-day of food at ALL times (3000 calories) (tip: a pound of butter or jar of peanut bar is about 3200 calories)
- 15 lbs of gear at ALL times

Having done this 4 times in the past, I had all my required items together in one spot. I was done in a few minutes.

We went back to our motel. I packed my gear onto my bike while Dad took a little nap before the pre-race meeting. Packing is one of my favorite parts of the whole ordeal. It's a puzzle. One must prioritize the usefulness of each piece of gear and place it appropriately on the bike. Food, water, and additional/alternate clothes have to be easily accessible. Tubes and tools will, hopefully, never be touched. I bring lots of stuff sacks, straps, Velcro, rope, tape (duct, electrical, hockey), safety pins, zip ties, rubber bands, plastic bags, and a sewing kit each year, so I can make packing changes as needed. I have a general idea of where everything is going to go, but the final assembly always presents itself in International Falls the night before the race.

We walked over to the pre-race meeting, held at the VFW hall, located across the street from our motel. It was great have a beer, catch up with the people I see once a year, and settle in for an always-entertaining presentation by Pierre and Cheryl Ostor, the race directors. After the Ostors went over the rules and showed some slides from races past, two DNR officers spoke about safety issues on the trail. Then the mayor spoke and recognized all the international race participants. It was nice to see all the support from the city government and DNR. This race is becoming a bigger event each year. I wouldn't be surprised if there are 200 participants in the next year or two. Finally, there were drawings for 3 frames: a Surly, a 9:zero:7, and a Fatback. Fast guy Dan Dittmer (placed 5th) won the Surly. Congratulations, Dan. I won the Fatback. And Tim Hurly won the 9:zero:7. Not a bad way to begin an event.

After dinner with Terry Brannick, last year's winner, and his friend John, Dad and I went back to the motel, so I could finish packing my bike and laying out my gear for the ride. The effects of the long day were wearing on us, and we were both asleep by 8:30pm.

We got up at 5am, took a quick shower, and headed to the McDonalds drive-thru to pick up breakfast. Breakfast choices are pretty limited at 5:30am in IF. After downing some pancakes, I started the long process of layering my clothes for the ride. Feet: polypro liner socks, Golite vapor barrier socks, plastic produce bags, ragg wool socks, -40 North Face boots, Boot Glove neoprene boot covers, Liberty Mountain gaiters. Legs: Mt. Borah Lycra shorts, Craft winter tights, Hypnotic Designs knickers. Torso: Ibex short-sleeve woolie, Patagonia Capalene long-sleeve, thrift store wool sweater, REI fleece jacket. Head: Craft balaclava, Pearl Izumi cap, Gator neoprene face guard. Hands:

Stephenson vapor barrier gloves under polypro gloves, Granite Gear Lutsen Mitts. Chemical heater packs in mittens and boots.

I rode a few blocks, to the Kerry Park Arena, for the 7:00am race start. Bikes, sleds, and skis stayed outside, but we were allowed inside the heated arena for the sign-in. We milled about, chatted, took photos, hydrated, tried not to overheat, and patiently waited for the inevitable challenge.

Shortly after 7:00, we were moving down the trail. Bikers started first, then skiers, then runners/walkers. Within minutes, riders were fixing bikes and bags, peeling off/adjusting layers, and lowering air pressure as needed. Those who don't adjust accordingly are in for a long, torturous ride and/or ultimate failure. Going out too fast or riding with too much tire pressure leads to overexertion and excessive sweating, which tend to bring on dehydration, fatigue, clothing failure, hypothermia, and frostbite. It was -28C (-19F). Some were doomed from the start.

The animals were out in front. I was riding my own race far behind them, occasionally passing another rider or being passed as we all settled into our rhythms for the long haul. There isn't much chit-chat on the course, because there's usually one good line...the line that the leaders found or made. Everyone rides single-file. And most of us were muffled with face masks until the sun brought the temperature up to a point where lips could be exposed with freezing.

I started off with 18 PSI in my Larrys. It seemed a bit firm, but I needed to ride a few kilometers before confirming that my pressure was too high for the trail conditions. At 10km, I let out some air. I'd continue to do so throughout the race, eventually ending up at 14 PSI.

As I approached the first shelter on the trail, I heard the sound of a small single-engine plane. It was my dad. He'd rented a plane from the local airport to take some aerial shots of the riders on the course. He's done this before, but I think this was the first year he actually found me on the trail. Dad said it was a bit chilly shooting out of the open plane window at -26C (-15F). I believe him. I haven't seen the photos yet. Hopefully, he got some keepers.

I had a chance to ride with Lindsay Gauld for a spell. Lindsay is 61 and tough as nails. We talked for a while...mostly about just riding one's own race and enjoying the journey instead of worrying about the destination. Eventually, I had to pull ahead to get back on the ribbon of smooov, but fortunately I had other opportunities to hang out a bit with Lindsay at the next two checkpoints.

Trail conditions were pretty good to the Gateway Store checkpoint. The temperature was rising, the sun was out, and I was moving along at comfortable speed. I wasn't passing or being passed much. Many others were moving at the same pace. Within minutes of

entering the store to get water and take in some calories, half a dozen of my playmates were there to do the same. I tried not to loiter, but sitting in a chair in a warm building feels good after riding 4-1/2 hours in the cold. Waiting outside was a -19C (-2F) air temp with little wind. Not great, but not bad compared to historic alternatives. I filled my bottles with hot water, downed the rest of my Gatorade, and hit the trail.

Another crew was on the same wavelength. I played leapfrog with a few people on the path to the halfway checkpoint at Melgeorges, but most of the time I was by myself. I stopped once to talk to Matt Evingson (Winner of Arrowhead 135 Numero Uno), who was acting as a patrolling medic on a snowmobile and checking on Charlie Tri, who was having some breathing difficulties. Then my dad walked over the hill. Party on the trail! It was a nice chat break, but I needed to keep on keepin' on...so I did. Jason Novak was rolling up just as I was taking off.

I rambled on. Dennis Grell caught me and passed me. He'd flatted earlier in the course and had made up lost time. I got to know Dennis by his mukluk prints in the snow last year. I'd see those prints again this year. I chased him for a bit, but settled back into a groove that was a little slower than Dennis's. We were pretty close to Elephant Lake.

It had been 4 years since I'd seen the Elephant Lake crossing in the daylight. It's much more cheerful that way. In 2006, I crossed with John Evingson, who, along with Pierre, coaxed me to try the race. John, BTW, was a big contributor to our product introductions in the adventure bike category. He gave us toys to play on...Evingson fatbikes, took us riding, made product design suggestions, and helped school us on the long history of this cycling niche. I thank him. Surly thanks him. You should thank him if you ride adventure bikes. He's one of many people and companies that we drew inspiration from: Pat Irwin, Mike Curiak, Pierre Ostor, Ray Molina, Mark Gronewald, Karl Schlemowitz, Mike DeSalvo...and many more who will never be properly heralded for their contributions. I extend my personal thanks to any pioneering freak who welded rims together, built fat frames, sewed tires together, and made stuff, or had stuff made, so he or she could ride across snow or sand. They did it because it's fun. That's what this is all about. It's not about racing...though that's an aspect you can obviously explore if you want to. It's about riding on the otherwise unrideable. It's about seeing more of the world from the seat of a bicycle and having the ability to take your camp with you as you move forward.

My dad was there to greet me when I came off the lake. It's always good to see him on the trail. I made my way to the checkpoint cabin. When I entered, Dennis looked happy to be warm and seated, awaiting some hot food. I was looking forward to some of the same. The kind folks at the Melgeorge checkpoint cabin treat us like kings and queens, and I had food in front of me before my boots were off. Grilled cheese sandwiches and hot soup typically work well for me at this point in the ride. Butter, salt, fat...bring it on.

An hour and a half easily slipped by as we...Jason, Don, Josh, Lindsay, Dennis, Chris, and Janice...dried clothing, ate, drank, and inventoried our gear and food resupplies for the next part of the dance. All at once, it seemed, 5 of us began the preparation

dance...donning clothes and headlamps, and filling water bottles.. Dennis was first to get out the door and start the 2nd half of his ride. Don, Chris, and Jason waited for me to get my slow ass out the door. We left the cabin around 6:15pm.

Ride a short distance down the road, turn right onto the trail, climb, sweat, descend, freeze, climb, sweat, descend freeze... That's how this chapter begins. We rode together until the notorious "T" in the trail that has historically sent lost, unlucky riders down a trail that returns, the long way, back to the checkpoint cabin. After that point, I started to get into my new grilled-cheese-fueled groove. Don's headlight slowly faded behind me as I pulled ahead down the trail. I wouldn't see him again until the next morning.

The hills stopped, and I rode fast flat trail for a while. All day, we dodged snow-laden hanging branches from trees that lurked at the trails edge. Doing the same at night was a bit more challenging. Sometimes, the branches extended over a good portion of the trail. The shoulders of the trail were fast, because the snowmobilers wisely stayed away from the branches. That's where we rode unless the branches threatened a certain beating or entanglement. Sometimes, it was possible to duck under them. Often it meant a stinging slap in the face. Lance Andre rode a good portion of this in the dark, without a working headlight. He said his red blinky light often saved him at the last second. Lance finished fourth using his finely-honed Floridian Jedi skills.

More hills. Seemingly never-ending hills. Most of them were rideable this year, and many of them promised fast descents as repayment for long tedious climbs. Branches always threatened from the sidelines, but the thrill of speed often trumped my sense of self-preservation. There were sections of big rollers that allowed me to keep momentum if I was willing to put in the effort. Gotta pay to play.

Before I reached Wakemup Hill, the last sizeable climb and descent on the trail, the snowmobile patrol approached and stopped briefly to make sure I was ok and inform me that I was about 6 or 7 km from the last checkpoint. That was encouraging...even though the actual distance turned out to longer than what had been quoted. False hope is better than no hope. 20 minutes later, I caught up to Dennis stopped on the trail. He was frosty and cold and really hoping we'd get the Crescent Bar and Grill (where the checkpoint tipi was located) before it shut down for the night...at 1am. I pulled ahead of Dennis, just wanting to keep moving, and pushed my bike to the top of the big hill. The descent is fast and a bit scary...even during the day, so I dragged my rear brake – my only brake – a bit on the way down. All seemed well when suddenly all was not well, and my bike and I were a tangled mess in the middle of the trail at the bottom of the hill. Dennis had just started his descent, and I knew we'd both be in tough shape if I didn't get up and out of the path of the Dennis Express. So I jumped up, made a quick assessment of bike and body, got back on the Pug, and continued down the trail while brushing off the evidence of my not-so-graceful dismount.

The OPEN sign was still on when we approached the Crescent. After checking in, Dennis made a dash for food and warmth inside the bar. I stood next the hot fire outside the tipi and talked to my dad who had been patiently waiting for my arrival. I got the

rundown from Dad... Jeff Oatley, Pete Basinger, and Dave Pramann had finished 1,2,3 within seconds of each other. And Charlie had recently left the tipi. I knew, from Charlie's footprints, that he was hurting. His feet were frozen, so he was walking to warm them up. There was a chance I could catch him, so I left the seductive fire and pushed on toward the finish line, at the Fortune Bay Resort Casino, 35 km down the trail.

More footprints, more frequently, for longer distances. Surely, I was going to see Charlie's blinking red light in the distance. That kept me going at a good pace, despite the oppressive boredom of the flat trail. After 2 hours of spinning, I was elated to see the spur leading to the finish line. Still no Charlie. Didn't matter. I was just happy to be close to done.

Finally, the glow of the casino, over the horizon, gave away the finish line location. And I shifted up a gear to finish strong, despite the lack of spectators to appreciate my extra effort. Don stepped out on the patio, took a photo, and asked for my race number. "Furty fi", I said. My mouth was frozen. "What was that?" I strained to enunciate "thirty five", again, through cold lips.

I rode my bike to the back of the hotel. Don let me in, and I rolled the Pug down the stairs to our storage area in the stairwell. I could tell, by the frost still clinging to Charlie's bike, that he hadn't been there very long.

I walked to the hospitality suite, our home base in the Casino, and pulled ice chunks off the purposely-cultivated facial hair that had served me well as an insulating layer during the ride. Charlie and Jason Buffington were in the room with some of the volunteers. Charlie had arrived 15 minutes prior. Jason arrived 15 minutes before Charlie.

I'd finished at 3:20am. Twenty hours and twenty minutes from start to finish. That's only 20 minutes slower than my best time in 2006. Good enough for a 9th place finish. I was shooting for top-10. Mission accomplished.

For a while, I sat on a chair. Then I sat some more. I ate some cold pizza while continuing to sit. It was difficult to give up the not-riding-just-sitting bliss that I'd found on that chair, but I had to make a move toward the shower and soft bed in the hotel room my dad had procured and occupied. I found the room, woke up my dad, gave him the Cliff's Notes version of my ride while flinging my wet riding clothes into a heap on the floor, took a heavenly long hot shower, and crashed into a dead sleep minutes after hitting the pillow.

I woke sooner than expected. Dad did, too. It was 8:30am, and I couldn't fall back to sleep. So we got up, packed up our stuff, had breakfast, chatted with some of race finishers in the lobby, and headed for the hospitality room to see who had arrived.

The room was abuzz with recent and not-so-recent finishers and their friends and families. I patched together stories, from many riders, to paint a bigger picture of the race in my mind. Everybody has their own struggles and triumphs on the trail. Each

racer has a different account and varied perceptions of the race. Most are happy with their accomplishments. Equipment successes and failures, food and water choices, and physical conditioning...or lack thereof...are prominent post-race topics. We discuss what we'll do next year to better prepare for the Arrowhead. I will forget most of my great ideas for improvement in 11 months. Luckily, I've written this exceedingly long Arrowhead blog to remind me of the clothing and food choices I made.

The bike/bag set-up worked great...no flats, good shifting and braking performance, nothing lost or damaged. This year, before the race, I replaced some of the stock grease, in the pedals and bottom bracket, with some low-temp stuff. That might have helped reduce some bearing resistance in the coldest temps, but I can't be certain. If nothing else it's a nice placebo. Larrys worked great, but not much better than Endomorphs would have. Tire choice probably wasn't much of a factor this year.

The body worked fine. I wasn't as hungry this year, and I had to work a bit harder than usual to take in calories. But I did ok in that regard. No frozen fingers or toes...but I did freeze my right earlobe. The tip turned black on Wednesday morning, following the race. I'm sure it froze at night, while I was wearing my headlamp over my hat. The elastic of the headlamp band probably scrunched up the hat a bit and pulled it up over the vulnerable lobe. It's healing fine, and I don't expect any loss of said lobe. I just have to be more careful in the future.

Another great Arrowhead race. It is noticeably more refined each year. I offer my sincere thanks to Pierre and Cheryl, all the volunteers, my dad, fellow racers and their support crews, the DNR, and all the people who make this event what it is. See you again soon.

Dave

