

# **The Spirit of the Arrowhead**

## **Arrowhead135|2015|Joy Parker**

In gratitude to the Arrowhead staff, volunteers and athletes, past and present for making this event what it is today, to Todd Gabrielson for masterfully walking the line between guarding for safety and pushing the limits, and to Lisa Paulos for embodying the Spirit of the Arrowhead, I'd like to offer my Arrowhead story.

2015 was the 4<sup>th</sup> year I'd been involved with the Arrowhead135. I volunteered as medical and general support in 2010 and 2011, eager to support these amazing athletes and to learn about the event in hopes of competing myself. In 2012, I entered on foot and made it about 80 miles before succumbing to an asthma attack. (I do not have asthma or allergies, and was caught completely off guard by the first asthma attack of my life). In 2013, I was too inexperienced to make it past MelGeorge's with the several fresh inches of snow to trek through the previous night. This year was my third attempt as an athlete, training had gone well, I had learned loads from my first two attempts, and had humble hopes for a strong finish.

The first half of the race was straightforward and quite delightful. At one point, we found ourselves in a group of 5 women on the trail, which was cause for celebration! Lisa and I expressed delight at seeing so many women athletes sharing in the Arrowhead experience. MelGeorge's came about 7:30 in the morning, I completed my 'chores' in about 20 minutes, grabbed the grilled cheese sandwich Mary had made for me, snuck a few kisses from my man, and was happily on my way a little after 8am.

A couple of hours after leaving MelGeorge's, I started to hear wheezing, and soon after felt the dreaded constriction in my bronchials. 'Oh no...not again...'. Quickly, I gathered my composure, took my inhaler (which I never need or use..except at Arrowhead evidently), put on my balaclava and made a plan to get to the next shelter and rest a bit in an attempt to get past it. After coughing out all matter of nastiness at the next shelter, napping for about ½ an hour, and taking more medicine, I felt optimistic that I had gotten past this incident, and was eager to keep moving. I found that only minor constriction remained, and if I kept my respiratory rate somewhat low, I could trek along without much trouble. The second Arrowhead night is magic. Where else can you find adults squealing and sliding down giant wilderness hills in the middle of the night? Pure foolery! The uphill were slower than anticipated, as I had to keep the breathing under a certain level to avoid constriction, but was happy to arrive at SkiPulk a little after 3am. After hot chocolate, 'chores', and a lecture from Greg to keep eating, I left a little after 4am, enjoying the anticipation of a lunchtime finish!

Within an hour, I experienced my second asthma attack-this time severe enough to drop me to my knees gasping for breath. Another mental check. It's ok. Take more medicine. Breathe in...breathe out...slowly... At that point, I knew I had plenty of time to make the last stretch, and only had to dig a little for the resolve to slow down and keep trying. It is here that my memories start to blur. I remember every breath being effort, and every step increasing the

discomfort of breathing. Mantras to relax. Prayers of gratitude. The soothing sound of my feet crunching in the snow. I found that during times of greater constriction, if I leaned forward with my trekking poles pushing my shoulders backwards, it would open up my chest and I could breathe easier. Occasionally, I would fall asleep this way. Despite my best efforts, agitation and stress increased in my body and by the time I saw Greg at the Hwy 115 crossing, I was expressing my distress at how difficult it was to breathe, and complaining of boredom. ?

At some point after the Hwy 115 crossing (10ish miles from the finish), the bottom fell out.

**Delirium** is most often caused by physical or mental illness, and is usually temporary and reversible. Many disorders cause delirium. Often, the conditions are ones that do not allow the brain to get oxygen or other substances.

Symptoms include: Changes in alertness, Changes in feeling (sensation) and perception, Changes in level of consciousness or awareness, Changes in movement (for example, may be slow moving or hyperactive), Changes in sleep patterns, drowsiness, Confusion (disorientation) about time or place, Decrease in short-term memory and recall, Disorganized thinking, such as talking in a way that doesn't make sense, Emotional or personality changes, such as anger, agitation, depression, irritability, overly happy, Incontinence, Movements triggered by changes in the nervous system, Problem concentrating'

--Medline Encyclopedia

I remember becoming very agitated, even swearing at the 'tree people' that I'd been seeing for the last 24 hours. I know that I was falling asleep on my poles more and more often trying to breathe, and I can only assume that one of these times, I slipped into complete delirium. Some memories include walking around in very deep snow looking for the casino parking lot so I could find Greg's truck and put my sled away, looking down and watching myself shiver, throwing my trekking poles, genuinely not knowing if I was dreaming or awake, and in either case not having a clue what to do. I have no idea how much time passed before Todd pulled up on his snowmobile. I told him that I had been to the casino, but I couldn't find Greg's truck so could he please give me a ride. And also that I didn't know where my sled was..did he know where my sled was? He made steady, calm eye contact and told me that I had not been to the casino yet, and that he had seen my sled down the road. I was so happy to have someone who knew what was going on! He told me to walk back towards my sled, and when I got there, I harnessed back up, and he pointed me in the direction of the finish and said just go that way. It's 4.5 miles. You can do it.

The next thing I remember, I was standing beside my sled in the middle of the trail (harness off), and telling the few who passed me that I was waiting for a ride. (I was still very confused). Then came Lisa. I told her the same thing, "I'm waiting for a ride". She simply and without hesitation replied, "Oh no you're not". When I responded that with every step came severe struggle to breathe, and that I couldn't conceive of how to move, she was already putting my harness on her shoulders. *My harness on her shoulders*. She told me I wasn't leaving without a finish and that I was to sit down on my sled, which I did. Again, I don't know how much time passed, but I think it was about an hour. How bizarre, to be slumped over, in and out of awareness, and to look up and see myself being pulled on my own sled by another person??

Todd was regularly checking on us, and I felt my mental acuity slowly returning. At one point, they encouraged me to my feet again, and I was unable to walk without staggering. Lisa expressed her concern, and Todd once again looked directly into my eyes and asked me what I thought. I told him I'd been struggling for air all day, that this was not new, and that I thought I could move slow as long as someone was with me in case of crisis. He agreed and reassured us that he would keep checking on us. Lisa agreed to stay with me and go sloooooow. And so we did. Inch by inch. Step by step. Cough cough cough. Wheeze wheeze wheeze. Stop and calm down.. repeat. Lisa was masterfully finding the balance between motivational chit chat and breaks to catch my breath.

Soon, I recognized that we were on the last stretch to the finish, and when Todd came back to tell us 'Welcome to the casino—you're here', I broke down in tears. Very screechy, gaspy tears due to said bronchial distress. Scary. Nonetheless, the magnitude of what just went down hit me, and I realized I had been given this finish by Todd and Lisa. They understand the Arrowhead—the preparation involved, the desire to finish, the perseverance required by everyone to make that happen, and the need to push the boundaries of what is possible while being mindful of safety. Lisa valued my finish as much as her own. Leaving me with 4 miles left to go was not an option for someone with a warrior's heart. She truly embodied the Spirit of the Arrowhead. Thank you.