

Arrowhead Ultra 135, 2016

I want to tell you about a brand new race I just took part in this past weekend, the Arrowhead 135. Oh yes, I've completed it 5 time on my trusty snowbike. However, when my friend Charlie Farrow and I decided to enter the "foot " division it became a whole new event for me, with all the new preparations and attendant anxieties that I never seem to get over even after 50 years of racing.

I decided that a kicksled was the way to go for me and approached my friend Pete McAdams to build it for me. He came up with a lightweight aluminum sled which we named Peterbuilt and I put in as much time as possible on it to fine tune my efforts and work out storage, handling etc.

I came down to IF about 2 ½ weeks before the race and Ken Krueger joined me to do the leg from the start to Gateway. It was a real slug with little snow and mild conditions and long stretches where no snowmobiles had been through. It was with some apprehension that I arrived for the race.

It's always great to arrive and see so many familiar faces back for yet another year on the trail. This event is one of the highlights of my year and it's as much about the people as the competition.

The race starts at 7 AM when they "release the hounds and the bikes scurry of down the trail. We started about 3 minutes later and I found that the smooth stretches of the Voyageur trail and the mild temperatures meant that my sled was sliding along very well. I was with Charlie but he was able to move along a little too quickly for me so I backed off at the hwy 53 crossing. I hooked up with Craig Brown for a while but alas, he also had more juice than this old body.

I made it to Gateway checkpoint in 9 ½ hours which was way better than I'd hoped for and took in the friendly atmosphere while I ate and took the opportunity to dry some of my clothes. I was there for about an hour. When I'm on the bike I usually just turn and head out but knowing that I was going to be at least a day longer made me opt for a good break.

I left gateway on my own and fully expected to spend most of my time that way. I did find myself near Jared some of the time. He was stronger than me and gained whenever we went up and I would come sliding back up to him on the easy sections. The trail was soft as the lack of snow meant that the groomer had not done much if any packing. It was manageable but gradually wore us all down.

For the last 3 hours to Melgeorges , I was caught by Matt Long. Matt is one of the longtime running stars of this event and it was great to hook up with him. Again, I had to rely on the fast parts to catch back up as he would pull away from me on any uphill. We arrived at Melgeorges at 6:30 after almost a day on the trail. I couldn't help but thinking that I was finished by that time last year.

Story by Lindsay Gauld

Written by Administrator

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Melgeorges is always very welcoming with friendly volunteers, great soups and grilled cheese sandwiches and the chance to dry clothes and have a break. I rammed in as much food as I could handle and then went to the Birch cabin for a 2-3 hour rest. I was on my way after 4 hours and although I don't think I really slept I felt quite refreshed.

The section from Melgeorges to the Surly checkpoint is the longest and hardest of the race. Again I was on my own. I actually prefer that as I don't get caught up and can truly find my own pace. I was taking a water and food break every ½ hour and watching the kilometers go by.

At one point I found a ski pole in the middle of the trail and loaded it on my sled. At about 5 in the afternoon I came up behind Carla Goulert and it was hers but it turns out that she had lost both poles. Carla is from Brazil and she had to take the lead in the communication as my Portuguese is a little rusty but we settled into a steady pace and arrived at the checkpoint shortly before 3 am after over 16 hours since we left Melgeorges.

We each got water and headed out with 24 somewhat easier miles to go with only the one last killer climb of Wakeumup hill after about 4 kms. After the last turn to the east we were heading towards the finish when Todd Gabrielson, came by to tell Carla that she had passed Helen Scotch who had been bivying at a shelter 7 miles back and she was in the lead with 12 miles to go.

We kept taking turns leading but as the sun was coming up we could see someone coming up behind us very quickly. I told Carla that it couldn't be Helen and Chris as nobody could walk that quickly. I thought it was the two bikes I'd seen at the checkpoint.

It turns out that it was Charlie and Craig on their kicksleds and they were just flying. They caught us with about 6 kms to go. They slowed down and Charlie and I swapped sleds. In those conditions his slid along much easier so Pete and I will be addressing that. Craig lent Carla his kicksled and Charlie got back on his sled and gave her some lessons and they all pulled away from me.

I was resigned to finishing on my own when another piece of Arrowhead magic popped up. With about 300 meters to go the three of them had stopped and waited for me so we could all finish together. A wonderful gesture for which I was truly thankful.

We finished in 52 hrs and 51 minutes. My memories of this will run to the time spent on the trail with Charlie, Craig, Matt, Jared and Carla and the great volunteers led by Ken and Jackie who help to make this annual pilgrimage so special. Thank you all. One final word of thanks to my friend and 'manservant' Al Dixon who took such good care of me before during and after the event.

Looking forward, I feel the need to point out that perhaps there is a need for a separate category for kicksledders as distinct from the normal foot category. It can clearly be an advantage on the flats or slight downhills and it isn't fair to the true walker/runners. Just a thought for the future. Perhaps we would then need an Arrowhead a Quatre.

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As for my future plans, I will be skiing it soon. I tried two years ago when it was in my mind -98 degrees. I'll be looking for another year like this one as I really want one of those trophies. Are you on for that Charlie?