

The Arrowhead 135 - Rookie Race Report

Moments after I finished checking in at the start line, the fireworks went off and about 150 of us were released onto the David Dill, Arrowhead State Trail. Charles Parsons and I were in the very back of the pack, right where we wanted to be, but trail conditions, as fast rolling as they were, had us moving up in the field immediately. Temperatures were hovering around -18 F. We knew it was gonna be a frosty one, so we found a good pace to manage sweat. Spirits were high and we were feeling good. The only issue we ran into was freezing goggles, making visibility a challenge and causing us to stop every 15 minutes or so for a quick wipe down.

We rolled into Gateway (CP1) together at mile 35, I said some (probably dumb) things into a camera, filled my hydration pack, inhaled a roller dog, and chugged a drink. The woman behind the counter kept taking pictures of me. I guess I had some ice on my face. Charles and I exited Gateway and began passing a few racers as the hills started coming. The climbing wasn't too bad, but we were doing some walking, talking and enjoying our day out there. We crested a particularly long climb out of a frozen marsh and even stopped to toast with some whiskey. Spirits are important on a race like this and so is tradition. We then joined up with Sveta Vold and pedaled into Melgeorge's (CP2) together at mile 70 after putting in a solid effort through the headwind across Elephant Lake.

It was getting dark and temps were slowly beginning their drop toward what would be a low of -30 F later than night. The food and hospitality at the cabin was outstanding and more racers began showing up, but no one wanted to leave. I proceeded to settle in, but filled my hydration pack and kept fueling with the intent of eventually hitting the trail. After much deliberation, Charles decided that his legs didn't have it in them and that he would do the responsible thing and call it a day. My left knee that I had injured three weeks earlier had begun stiffening up from all of our sitting around. I opted to take a quick spin around the cabin and the knee loosened up, so I made the choice to soldier on for a solo overnight into self-discovery and the unknown.

I hit the trail and began passing racers immediately as I worked the legs harder to warm everything back up. When the left knee would hurt, I would push harder with my right. There were a few big climbs, but the miles were flying by. I was feeling unstoppable..then I found the hills. I began pushing the bike up most every climb and then bombing down the other side in the dark. I was able to stomp a few of them harnessing my momentum, but had to be conservative with the speeds due to limited visibility, resulting in more walking than I would have liked. I didn't want to end my race by hitting a tree. I ended up having to be extra careful when my brakes

went out, dragging a foot on the descents to slow the bike down. The trail was bumpy and at one point I lost my big faux-fur hat off the back of the bike and had to backtrack on the trail to find it. I did a better job of strapping it down and moved on. That was a pain, but not as big of a pain as I was feeling in my knees. The left was bad and the right was starting to hurt as well. Dismounts and remounts were getting harder.

I stopped atop a hill after a hard push and stood there listening to the trees. It was quiet, but I knew life was all around me. Maybe that shadow, just feet off of the trail, was a den and a mama bear and her cubs were curled up hibernating. Maybe a great gray owl was perched in that tree after coming down from the north in search of warmer weather. Maybe a wolf was standing just beyond the light of my headlamp and had been running in the darkness through the trees all night, pacing me. People used to live here and walk these woods on cold winter nights hundreds of years ago. I looked at the crescent moon and the stars, breathed in a hit of some of the freshest air I've ever gotten high on and got back in the saddle. Finally, after hours of winding through the dark woods, I came upon a fire and a tee-pee.

The tee-pee was Surly (CP3) at mile 110. My dad, Mario, and Charles were all there cheering me on as I rolled in. It felt like quite the fanfare given what I had just emerged from. I went directly into the tent and began changing out of wet clothes into dry ones from my saddle trunk and filled my hydration pack. All of my digits were still toasty and now I just had to figure out the right combo of wet and dry clothes to get me 26 more miles in rapidly dropping temps. I shed a couple of wet layers and added a second pant, one of my "oh shit, I'm in trouble" jackets and that faux-fur hat I had briefly lost earlier. Then I hit the trails. Next stop, Fortune Bay.

There was one big climb and then flat to low grade climbing for the rest of the final segment. Somewhere about 10 miles in, I ran out of water. I had just filled it up, but knew I was dehydrated so had been drinking a lot. I had to keep eating to keep energy levels up, but it became more difficult as my mouth got dryer, so I began eating snow to supplement. I kept the cranks turning slowly and felt the temperature dropping which was now affecting my toes. I kept the self-talk positive and kept looking down at my spare bail out jacket and doing a mental inventory of what I was carrying. I didn't want to get out the stove and boil snow, but I would if I had to. WAIT! I have that spare water in my saddle trunk! I dismounted, struggled with the clips, opened the trunk, and emptied everything out onto the trail. I grabbed the insulated container and unzipped it, revealing a clear container filled with, yes, LIQUID! I grabbed the cap and twisted. It wouldn't budge. I twisted again...and again. Then it hit me. My hands were too weak to open it. There wasn't a soul in sight, but I could see the lights of Fortune Bay a long way off in the distance. I quickly packed up my gear, got on the bike, put my head down, and began to time trial for what felt like forever. I knew I was putting in a massive effort for having little to no strength left and the miles were crawling by as the lights of the casino continued to dance above the trees. I entered a dark tunnel of trees and spied two blinky red lights. I knew I had to catch

them so I picked up the pace. I caught up with my friends Leah Gruhn and Jere' Mohr of Duluth about two tenths of a mile before the finish line and boy, were they a sight for sore eyes! We rolled across the finish line together 18th, 19th, and 20th after a little over 20 hours in the saddle. Leah was the first female finisher! My dad and Mario were there to take my bike and limp my shattered body into the gear check room.

As I write this, there are racers still out on the course. Nothing official yet, but it appears that out of the 150 that started, just over 50 of us will get to finish this Arrowhead. I have to say how grateful that I am to Ken and his crew for putting this race together. I'm grateful for my dad Joel and friend Mario Muro for spending their weekend crewing for me in one of the coldest places on earth. I'm grateful for Charles' getting me to Melgeorge's and for that special moment with Leah Gruhn and Jere' at the finish line. I'm grateful for all of my friends who loaned me gear, gave me advice and to those who watched my tracker from the comfort of their warm office or couch at home. I'm grateful for my health. I'm in pain and on a road to recovery, knowing that this road might be a little bit longer than those passed. It might be because I'm getting older or maybe it's because The Arrowhead 135 is one of the toughest races on the planet. Either way, I'm already thinking about next year.