

James Kiffmeyer 2020 report

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 29 January 2020 15:34 - Last Updated Friday, 31 January 2020 10:17

2020 AH135 race report...

This winter season has been much different from the last two years, much less training, more beer drinking, skipped Tuscobia due to some medical concerns, pretty much dropped the ball as far as preparation for AH135, which I wouldn't have recommended but somehow it never sunk in how much it was going to affect me. The run up was pretty standard fair, I didn't change anything about my planning other than once again stepping back from unsupported, this year due to concerns about how my aortic stenosis would affect me. The gear I used was pretty much identical to last year, and I remember thinking during the first segment of the race that I probably wouldn't even write a race report other than to mention about how straightforward it was this year, with mild weather and a pretty ride, and my only regret was dropping from unsupported. I kept kicking myself that first 72 miles, thinking I should have stayed unsupported, and I still think that to some degree.

At Gateway I ate warm food, but otherwise didn't do much. My gear was dry, I felt fine, I just ate and moved on. Mel Georges is always great, though the foot path to get there was almost worse than riding the previous 72 miles. Pushing my bike through loose snow did bring me back to Actif Epica, though the distance was much less and thankfully the depth wasn't too bad. I can just imagine doing arrowhead with the course in that condition, I know others have. Anyway, Mel George was great and I enjoyed the grilled cheese and soup while sorting my gear for the rest of the race. My gear was still dry, which goes back to the unsupported regrets, the main need for the checkpoints is drying gear, but if you are good at moisture management the checkpoints become simply a place to eat and relax. I spent a couple hours which seemed like a long time. I never can sleep there and I didn't need to do much else, so I finally got restless and moved on.

The ride out of Mel Georges always feels like a fresh start. It begins with a long gradual climb, which warms you up for what's to come. You are alert for the turn a couple miles in. (not the 1 mile they mention at the meeting, each year I mean to ask Ken if he says 1 mile just to mess with people and make them think they missed the turn) I felt fine and figured it would be a long but relatively uneventful night of fighting my way through the hills to Surly. Unfortunately about 15 miles from Mel Georges I started to feel the bonk coming on. It was like what happened at DaMN last summer, I felt like I was being regulated down by a restrictor. First I couldn't keep my effort above a HR of 130, then 120, then 110, and then I just had nothing. Not sure what it was all about, other than a combination of lack of training and the aortic stenosis telling me I had reached the limit of what I could put out. By that point I was exactly half way between Mel George and Surly, and getting pretty depressed about my prospects. Those with more experience than me would have known instinctively what to do, and if someone had asked that

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question to me other than at that point I would have said the right answer, you just bivy down and recuperate. But just about that time I heard my phone ping with a text message and realized I had cell service, so I realized I could text Russ and mention I would drop if someone could get me, but I would keep going until they got to me.

While I mulled over that text, I finally came to the obvious realization that I should bivy, so I started looking for a spot. I knew I had passed a shelter a few miles back, so there wouldn't be another shelter for quite a while. But I came to a place a snowmobile had driven off the path, which formed a nice spot to bivy. I set my bike down in the deep snow which held it up, and set up my bivy in the path of the snowmobile. It was tricky getting in, but I was surprised how fast it was, and soon I was warm and comfortable, gazing up at the trees and wondering why I had been so frazzled a few minutes prior.

I slept about 3 hours before waking up, and decided I should really get back to biking. So I packed up and headed out, feeling both rested and confident, running my HR up to 140s. Unfortunately my body decided that wasn't allowed, and slowly drove me back, and within about 5 miles I was back down to bonk level. By then I had passed another shelter, so it was back to looking for a spot to bivy. I found another snowmobile track off the trail and made my second bivy of the night, this time a lot more confident, quickly getting to sleep. I woke up to Todd coming by in his snowmobile asking if I was ready for that ride I had texted for. I almost said yes, but he was headed to Mel Georges, and I just hated going in the "wrong" direction. I asked if he would be coming back this way, he said yes, so I said if I was still there when he got back I'd take the ride. I was comfortable in the bivy so why not either stay, or bike to Surly, I didn't need a ride at that point.

About 15 minutes later I realized I was done sleeping and ready to go. I packed up, and was much wiser about starting off at a reasonable pace, even though I felt like I could motor away. Keeping my HR under 130 was very tough on the hills, but I took my time and was rewarded by my heart not telling me I was going to die. The trees were absolutely gorgeous, dressed with frost that was drifting down all over. When I finally reached Surly I was still feeling solid, so I skipped the teepee, added some warm water to my bottles, skipped the whiskey shot I was offered, and headed out. Not sure that was the best idea (skipping the teepee not the whiskey), but I was worried that if I started sitting down in the warm teepee I might just not ever get back on my bike.

The final 24 miles was so typical, every year it is just the same brutal experience. I'm wasted and want it to end, but at the same time it's a relief to be on flat terrain and headed down the home stretch. But it just doesn't end, it's a relentless unending mile after mile of biking, trying to

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move quickly yet not bonk again. It felt so wrong biking at 130 HR at 6 mpg, when I knew the old me could have held a steady 10 mpg on those trails. But at that point I knew I was going to finish, and after assuming I wasn't that was a relief. I finished around 3pm, for a total time of 32 hours, a lot more than the 24 hours I was hoping at the start of the day. I learned a lot more than I expected this year. I learned Arrowhead is worse without training than it is at -40. I learned the bivy was nothing to fear, like my good friend Steve says "freedom lies within the bivy". And I learned I have grown a bit weak in my complacency. But I'm glad I once again lucked into a finish, this time by not being "rescued" when I foolishly tried to call for help, and instead gained experience I sorely needed. I still think back to going unsupported, realizing that if unsupported I would have bivied earlier and without hesitation. I would have gone even slower, and probably finished with much more satisfaction, or DNF knowing I tried. But I also can't fault the decision to go supported given my heart condition, so I'll just be satisfied and move on, hopefully finally conquering the unsupported version next year, though saying that is starting to get old...

So many people to thank! My wife [Jodi](#) for tolerating my crazy endeavors, [Ken](#) and Jackie for running such a great race, [Russell](#) for not saving me from a finish, [Chris](#) at [New Moon Ski and Bike](#) for getting my bike tuned up perfectly the week before the race, and [Travis](#) for being a wonderful friend and who crushed the unsupported version this year. I'll miss all my Arrowhead family until next year, and loved spending time with you the past few days.