

## Arrowhead 135 2020 edition full report

I suck at facebook and "did it wrong" the first time...

...5:30 am Sunday morning... and this year's edition of the Arrowhead 135 is off to a rocky start, since I needed to be up an hour ago in order to make my rendezvous with Woody Preacher in Tower. So first of all, a huge thanks to Thomas Thomas W. Hardy, who lives in International Falls and graciously provided transport from the finish line at Fortune Bay Casino in Tower to the start in International Falls, and for helping me get my stuff to gear check. I enjoy meeting him and chatting about the history and industry around International Falls. When I ask Thomas if he is taking part in the race this year, he laughs and describes himself as "more of a race fan" There is some mention of having made eye contact with the race director, Ken Kruger at the just the wrong time, and being involved in the race ever since. Thomas' story is just the sort of thing that fuels my love of this race and the community that takes part in it, and getting a ride from him is just what I need, both as a matter of practicality, and to help me get into the mindset of being at the Arrowhead... to "set the table", so to speak, for the annual feast of good friends, bikes, and cold weather high adventure that lies ahead.

For whatever reason, my excitement level for this year's race took longer than usual to reach a full boil. I'm not sure if it was the temperatures of the last few years or what, but I just was not feeling it until final preparations were being made on Saturday. Once the sewing machine came out for a few last-minute gear modifications, food was prepared, and my bike loaded, the "stoke level" was back where it needed to be, and now I can't wait to get started.

I've decided to try for an unsupported race again this year, after a disappointing DNF last year. Something about unfinished tasks eating away at me... The weather this year is predicted to be a balmy single digits to 15 or so above zero for the entire race... literally 40 to 50 degrees warmer than last year. The other big difference for me personally is that I actually get the best sleep I have ever had before any race, especially this one. I cannot say enough good things about what 9 hours of perfect, restorative sleep did for me. Getting to the hotel on Sunday with enough time before the prerace meeting to hang out with James Kiffmeyer, get bikes loaded up with gear and all squared away was absolutely huge. To come back from dinner and go to bed at 8:30, all clothes laid out and ready for the 5:30 am firedrill was the best race prep I have ever had. So, bright and early Monday morning it's a quick ride into town and the now familiar scene of controlled chaos...Bikers rolling their loaded steeds to the line, runners towing sleds and skiers with huge packs doing the same. 150 of us in the starting area on the Arrowhead

State Trail ... our backs awash with the headlights of those behind, a confused sea of red blinking lights everywhere... a sea who's current starts pushing towards Tower as the fireworks streak skyward, building speed even as they are starting to burst overhead.

The trail has been groomed and is very well set up. Almost like riding on a sidewalk with just the right amount of snow frozen to it. Slightly torn up from snowmobiles, but about a 3 foot wide strip of near perfection on both the left and right sides of the trail, and we all slip into an easy rolling paceline. The weather being cold enough for a nice solid trail, but not the dangerously cold temperatures that is normal in this region, is going to make for a great day, I can tell already. This year is going to be all about applying lessons learned from the past – the school of hard knocks, as it were. Every year I'm changing what I eat, how I'm loading my bike, managing moisture, dealing with boredom, etc. It all takes time to figure out.

I'm feeling great when I arrive at the Gateway Store. This year I can't go inside to get warm / dry or eat any of the warm prepared food inside, so I just check in / out, and pirouette around the orange traffic cone in the parking lot that marks the turn around for the short out and back spur trail to the aid station (just a timing checkpoint for the unsupported racers). The trail to this point is mostly flat and the rolling hills are just starting to build. The rest of the way to Melgeorges Resort is an uneventful but beautiful romp through the rolling hills leading up to the Elephant Lake crossing. There is light snow occasionally and almost no wind. It looks like it has been that way for at least a few days, because the snow is stuck to absolutely everything and the woods are so beautiful. The trail is hard enough that the downhill are pretty fast. Have to be careful not to get carried away because there is the occasional soft spot, but with the lighter front end my bike is handling well. Even with really high tire pressure I hardly ever break through. In contrast to last year, I'm feeling better, going faster, and staying warmer / drier. Reasonable temperatures and a good night sleep are making all the difference. There is a short section of deep, ungroomed snow right before the Cedar Cabin at Melgeorges, which serves as a reminder that we take whatever the trail gives us. I'm grateful that this particular brand of fun is short lived as I push my bike up to the cabin.

Again unable to stay inside, and now pretty envious of the folks eating grilled cheese sandwiches and cajoling in the warm cabin, I stand outside in the driveway and munch on a few pieces of frozen chicken before getting into the real fun – the section between Melgeorges and the Surly Teepee is where it all happens. At this point last year, I was already looking for a place to get in my bivy sack and rest. I was absolutely exhausted and it was already dark. This time, it's something like 4:30 pm and the miles feel like they are stacking up, but it's a huge comfort to be feeling so much better than last year, and also to have a full understanding of what is ahead, unlike two years ago. My goal was to knock out as many of these hills as possible before dark, and they are getting checked off one by one. This is where loading of the bike is so important, and I can really feel a difference. I'm able to ride hills that I was walking

up last year, and end up riding all except the ones that (I assume) no one rides up. Taking a lot of brief rests at the tops of some of these hills... stopping to grab a bite to eat or change batteries in my headlamp. I seem to be managing my water supply just the way that I intended. I wear two 1.5L water bladders on my back (so around 7 pounds) and carry another 1L in an insulated bottle strapped to one of my fork legs (almost 3 pounds including the container). With around 1/3 of the race to go, I still have my 1L reserve and my second water bladder is almost empty. In these hills, I am definitely not missing the extra weight, and that seems as good a way as any to measure my progress. This is the major thing with going unsupported – carrying enough water and food, and finding a way to keep it all from freezing, or else stopping to melt snow along the way, which is a time consuming and hypothermic affair best avoided. The colder it is, the harder all of that stuff is to manage.

I make it to mile 90 by about 8:00 pm... again, sharp contrast to last year, as this is the point that I was dropping last year at about 4:00 am. Another 24 miles to the Surly Teepee, and much more importantly, the end of the hills... although I have to say I'm feeling relatively good. Definitely redline heart rate at the top of each hill, but with the trail in this condition, you can really let it rip down the backside of these hills and sometimes carry enough momentum to make it halfway up the next, and at least that keeps things interesting. From here on out my frame of reference is my 2018 race. At this point in 2018 my GPS had died and I had no idea how far it was to Surly. My bike was overloaded with extra gear and I had my gearing set up too high because I had not paid any mind to the course's vertical profile. The temperature that year was 40 below at this point in the race, and my moisture management had completely gone out the window. I was soaking wet and covered in ice and arrived at Surly exhausted and had to bivvy. This year I arrive at Surly tired, but feeling great compared to two years ago. Again, I can't go inside but unsupported racers are allowed to sit by the fire outside, and use it to cook or dry gear. I'm afraid if I sit down I'll start to thaw and get wet, and then I will have to stay until I'm dry. My ice beard has been growing all day and now is a stalactite that almost reaches my chest. I resolve to get going... just as soon as I find my last bag of gummy bears. I managed to eat more "real food" this year until I got past Melgeorges, which I know is helping, but now I'm running on almost all sugar. Just a few more rolling hills past Surly and then the top of Wakemup Hill, basically the last hill of the course. 19 or so of the last 24 miles is flat flat flat, which is a welcome change, but demoralizing in its own way. For me, 24 miles at this point in the race is over 3 hours. I'm sort of in this constant state of shaking my head at myself that this is as fast as I can go. Like those dreams where everyone else is running fast and I am running in slow motion. Can't keep my eyes off the "distance to destination" ticking away, which gets even worse with less than 10 miles to go, because then it starts displaying the miles with 2 decimal places. Distance to destination: 8.98 miles.... Distance to destination: 8.97 miles.... (what seems like an hour later... Distance to destination: 8.95 miles). For those that think you cannot fall asleep while riding a bike... believe me, it's a thing. I take some small comfort in the fact that some of the tracks I am following have the telltale signs too... the course is in good condition, so there isn't really any other explanation for the weaving back and forth of the tire tracks, sometimes with a sharp correction where they must have woken up... maybe even a few footprints trying to shake things off... then back to nice and straight again for a few hundred feet until the weaving starts again. I keep having to get off and walk in an attempt to stay

awake. It's so frustrating because I've got more in my legs, but the tiredness is filling every part of my soul. No amount of loud music, sugar intake, or proximity to the finish is doing the trick to spur me on to the finish line any faster. Cycling through my mind anything that might typically give me insomnia... taxes, uncompleted work tasks, unpaid bills... nothing is working. With 5 miles to go I'm dry heaving over the handlebars, but I'm running on empty and don't have the energy to even be productive in that effort. I try to take that as a good sign that everything I've been eating all day has actually been going somewhere. With three miles to go I got passed by the first place skier... turns out he smashed the course record by over an hour! About the time I'm about to slip into complete despair the orange snowfence comes into view... the first indication that the finish line is yards away. Around the corner is the finish line tent, volunteers peering hopefully down the trail into the darkness, clipboards in hand, ringing cowbells and cheering from the top of the hill that seems so huge right now and will seem so insignificant tomorrow in the light of day. One last burst up the hill, heart racing... this time from both the effort and the anticipation of the now-familiar flood of emotions that I know will overtake me as I roll to the line... and here it comes... that physical boundary where all the preparation, lessons learned, past successes, and especially past failures get left on THAT side of the line, and for just a few minutes, there is nothing but the moment on THIS side of the line. Why do we do these things?... rebirth, man.

For those interested in numbers, looks like there were 78 bikers this year. 72 finishers (which is a very high finisher rate for this race). I finished 22nd in category, 9th of 14 unsupported finishers. 21 hours, 7 minutes.