

My First Arrowhead 135

(aka, 54 Hours in the Same Chamois):

Everyone has something to overcome in approaching and completing an event like this. Mine was to continue to accept what is; that's where gratitude dwells.

Before my novel begins, some thank yous. To my supporting shop and friends at Farmstead Bike Shop, especially Cayley Baird. Cayley kept my bike ride ready, crafted and reworked the bags, and spearheaded snack experimentation. Moreover, she had the unlucky job of being my non-supporting support person for six days. Running around pre-race to find supplies for last minute fixes. Watching my dot, and scurrying between checkpoints. Sure, we had a bro party some of the time, but I'm really an irritable introvert and you tolerated me well. Thank you The Fix Studio, especially Coach Adam Gorski, for getting and keeping my body and psyche Arrowhead ready. Thank you Arrowhead 135 race directors, Ken and Jackie Krueger, for creating this amazing opportunity for us racers. Thank you Arrowhead volunteers, but especially Todd Gabrielson for keeping a watchful eye, standing ready to rescue, and providing encouragement. Thank you AH135 Sponsors:

<http://www.arrowheadultra.com/index.php/news/sponsors>. Last but not least, thanks to everyone, including dozens of strangers, who followed my dot!

Okay, here goes. Rewind just a little bit to late September 2016. Worsening anemia in the preceding two months, and on the verge of burning out on the bike. Hemoglobin wouldn't budge above 11, and kept dwindling below 9. That's fine for couch-sitting, not so much for an endurance athlete. Come to find that the surgery that could fix it would leave me highly unlikely to recover in time for Arrowhead. So, surgery that may fix the problem but ruin my race plan, or just do what I could at a (relatively) known deficit. "F**k it", I thought, "I'll ride with what my damn body's got". Adam thus kept making adjustments through late Fall to accommodate my prolonged recovery needs - I could manage intensity, just no longer the training volume. I bounced back a bit, not quite to previous fitness level, but at least have been thankfully maintaining.

A few comments on preparation. That outdoor birthday slumber party I had in December at -20, where I slept in just bag and bivy, was a critical contributor to my Arrowhead safety and ultimate success. Prone to frostbite from previous injury, and now with ulnar neuropathy, my hands are my weak spot. (Well, and my lungs, and my bone marrow, but whatever). Add to that my proven vulnerability to hypothermia, and it was clear that I would need to know what to do - quickly, and know where everything is.

Onto race highlights. On race day, lined up at the back of the back of the pack, with Back of the Pack Racing. Definitely good energy for keeping things chill. The first 37 miles to Checkpoint 1 were a relative breeze. The trail was in fabulous shape. It was relaxing and had my hydration and snacking dialed. I felt great rolling in to Gateway. Took a bathroom break, filled the hydration bladder, suited up and was off.

I knew from stories and the elevation profile that the flatfest was over, but had no idea how over. I've done some major climbs - on pavement (eg, Col de la Madeleine, Mont Ventoux). None of that compared to the spikes on the Arrowhead trail, traversed by bike plus gear totaling about 50 pounds (nearly 40% of my bodyweight), on now less well-packed trails being actively coated with new falling snow. The kicker – the climby section between Gateway and Melgeorge's isn't even the "hard" stuff. I found it hurty enough, although still bikeable. That segment was much slower, completed in about 7 hours. I was surprised to be so tired. When I walked up to the cabin porch at Melgeorge's, I was greeted by Rachel Burroughs and then Brian Burroughs. What a welcome sight. Knew I was still strong, but unlike at Gateway, needed more of a break. I downed a couple of grilled cheeses, pocketing a third for later, and a Coke. Why didn't I take a nap at Melgeorge's? One, it felt wimpy to me. Two, if I slept in an actual bed, it would be hard to convince my brain that pressing on for another 65 miles was a great idea. So, tended to my feet and baselayers, exchanged Bugles for BBQ potato chips, geared up and was off again.

I tend to both under and overestimate my ability. Heading out from Melgeorge's I was guilty of the latter. While zooming descents were appreciated, and still fun, there was not enough recovery from climbing. No longer able to pedal and "hump the football" up the hills, it was all hike-a-bike time. The movement for this is sort of a single leg press/clean-and-jerk/overhead press a la Cirque de Soleil (Farmstead crew has renamed this Cirque de Jerk; yeah, we went there). At times I would stop midway up a hill thinking, "I don't know that I can make it this time", immediately followed by, "What the hell else are you going to do, genius?" After about 10 miles, my turkey jerky legs found this...tiring. Pressed on to mile 92, six miles shy of next shelter, now after 1:00 am. By then, was yawning incessantly, which for me either means I'm cold (I wasn't) or need to lie down. Thoughts were already getting stupid, so knew I had to bivy up before forgetting where my stuff was or how to use it. "You're going to have to lie down, short round". Finally relented, and picked a spot just off trail. The setup was easy, with the exception of... I'll spare you what I stepped in when stomping out my first sleeping quarters.

Woke up around six, starving. I remembered the squished grilled cheese in my jersey pocket. While dining, a couple of skiers breezed by, asked if I was okay. "Duuude, I'm sitting up in my puffy sleeping bag eating grilled cheese. Life is beautiful." And it was, with that sunrise over the trail.

As I packed the bike up, noticed my rear tire was "low". Thought nothing of it and pumped it up. Pedal on, everything's great. No, no it wasn't. After about a mile and a half, the tire was coming down again. F----k. It wasn't too cold to change it, my exhausted brain just didn't want to deal with it. I pumped the tire about every 1-1.5 miles, that was the plan. Besides, the stops provided reminders to keep hydrating. About 5 miles in, snowmobile sweeper/rescuer extraordinaire, Todd began zooming up and checking in. "Fifteen miles to the checkpoint...4 miles now...you'll start seeing Surly signs 3 miles out". The final sign did make me laugh out loud (see photo).

Pedaled in to Surly checkpoint around 3:00 pm, where I saw Joel Swenson among the friendly faces. Sat by the fire, had a cup of coffee and a Coke. Refilled the hydration bladder. Stared at that damn rear wheel. I could, but just couldn't do it. I had just put my hydration vest on upside down. That brain, and my sensory damaged fingers were going to brick my wheel. I wasn't biking so much anymore, and the bike had become a cart, a cart that worked. I would do

nothing to threaten that. Decision made. "I'll just keep pumping that f--ker every mile until the finish". Off I trudged.

Soon came Mount Whatdaf--k (Wakemup). For unknown reason, began laughing and singing to myself. From Yelle's Ici & Maintenant:

"J'aime les miens, tout l'monde est gentil, tout va bien
Si ça n'finit pas aujourd'hui, ce sera demain"

Now thought, "Well, if I'm walking anyway, may as well put earbuds in; 14 hours of music should last me to the finish". (I do not apologize for my playlist.) First track, Rhythm is a Dancer. Not bad, as I did my best Roxbury Guys impression up the hill. Next came Esa Mierda (Sara Hebe). Great song, but pulled my mind to "civilization" and current events which pissed me off. "This sucks, music is stupid, I'd rather hallucinate". Was glad to be back to the wind and cracking trees.

The illusions, they were many. Part way up Wakemup, the footprints were all of a sudden Stormtroopers. Upon illuminating the trail further up the hill in front of me, now there were hundreds of them. Brains are funny.

Shouldn't have been surprised, yet was when 1:00 am again rolled around and I was t-i-r-e-d. My Garmin fizzled out hours ago, adding to my time warp. Todd zoomed up again, "about 5 miles to the next shelter". I can't make it another five miles, and it was a little cooler the second night. Bivied up as if I'd been doing this forever (just needed a damn nap). Todd cruised up as I awoke on Wednesday morning, "Which racer are you?" "43...Gonzalez". "Oh YOU're the one's been pumping the damn tire. You're a hard ass!" He retreated to the snowmobile briefly, returning to inform me, "You're exactly 9.4 miles from the finish. You're going to make it".

Had hoped to pedal to the finish, but the pump finally froze about 7 miles out. Runners were passing me. One even apologized (about my tire), to which I said, "For what? We're finishing the Arrowhead!"

Never thought of quitting, not once. Said aloud to myself, "They're going to have to drag me off this damn course". Multiple times I did say, "I'm never doing this