

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild & precious life?” Mary Oliver

“If you weren’t a little bit anxious about it, it means you’re not biting off enough, I think.”

Lachlan Morton

The Arrowhead 135 is a human-powered winter ultra where participants travel by bike, foot, or ski. The race course follows a point-to-point route on the Arrowhead state snowmobile trail from International Falls to Tower, MN. It's generally held in late January during the coldest time of the year. Those interested in taking on the challenge must have completed previous qualifying events and submit an application to the race director, who limits the race to 150 participants. Participants must prepare for brutally cold conditions, abide by race rules, and compile a list of required gear if allowed in. Preference is given to returning race vets and a certain number of rookies are allowed in. A film, "40 Below" was made about the race. I have been personally tracking friends at this race for the last ten years and my intrigue has shifted from "Wow, that is impressive" to "Yes, I want to do that." 2 years ago, I decided I definitely wanted to do the race, got a reluctant green light from Carissa, and the planning and preparation began. Fast forward to last week, January 29, 2024, my dream finally became reality and I lined up for the 20th edition of the Arrowhead 135.

My brother Craig and I drove to International Falls the morning before the race. I completed the check-in and mandatory gear check process; we met up with some friends, went out for lunch, checked into our hotel, relaxed for a bit before heading to the pre-race meeting, and then out for dinner for some final pre-race pizza carbs. And what would be an adventure like this without Fireball shooters? At the pre-race meeting, they reviewed the trail conditions and discussed the warm temperatures and effects on the trail. We'd be in for some rather challenging conditions. We were anticipating soft snow, much less than usual, minimal snowmobile grooming if any, rough and bumpy sections, open water, you name it. Not the typical 12-24" of hard-packed, groomed surface. I'd been hearing this for the last few weeks, and although I was initially disappointed, I reminded myself that it was all 100% out of my control and I needed to embrace it. It'd all be part of the adventure. My name was drawn for the top raffle prize at the meeting (a custom Onyx Racing hub set!) which I was rather stoked about. My brother said he thought it was a good omen.

The following day, my alarm went off at 4:30 am. The final night's sleep was characteristically sub-par and I was tired but excited. I got ready and left the hotel in a train with 8 others and we rode the 2 miles to the start at Kerry Park Arena. I checked in with the volunteers, chatted with friends, and made my way to the start. The energy and excitement were electric. I lined up at the front and my brother was there snapping photos. I should have turned on my Garmin sooner and it took longer than usual to locate satellites and load the route. The fireworks went off at 7:00 sharp and I was still fiddling with it. Everyone began rolling and I decided it was go time and I stopped messing with it. The race was underway and it was an exhilarating feeling. The opening miles were completely flat and straight. The unspoken consensus was that this was the start of a long, unknown adventure (referring to the level of anticipation and uncertainty around the trail conditions), but everyone was smiling ear to ear. This was it. I was rolling in the front group of 5 for those

opening miles. Trenton Raygor rocketed off the front at the launching of the fireworks and I joined him along with friend Nick Nygaard of Duluth, MN, Ryan Haug of Fargo, ND, and Jill Martindale of Grand Rapids, MI. I had decided to run my Garmin inside one of my pogies. Even though the temps were forecasted to remain in the 20's throughout the race rather than sub-zero, I figured running it in battery save mode entirely out of the cold would serve me well in prolonging the battery life for the duration of what may be a very long ride. Thus, I relied 100% on non-computer navigation which was atypical.

After an undetermined number of miles (10?), the trail changed from a rolled, crusty, semi-fast surface to a very soft slog. Soon, that was also accompanied by bushwhacking brush popping up out of the snow. Alder, dogwood, and cattails were everywhere and one of them later snagged my rear derailleur and I was lucky it didn't get ripped off. Everyone around me was given a hefty dose of bike handling skills and balance tests, ultimately leaving us pushing on foot. Taking a minute to let out air and decrease tire pressure pays dividends in handling ability and traction, but half a dozen people passed me the first time I did so. Shit! No worries, I instantly felt a difference. However, within a minute or so, my front tire was completely flat. No air. Shit! I wasn't sure if I hadn't fully tightened my valve when I paused to let some air out, but I needed to re-inflate it quickly. Ten or more people passed me in the time it took me to do so. SHIT! I was flustered at the moment but reminded myself of a few things. No one wins or loses the race before the first checkpoint (mile 35; in fact, most say the race begins after the second checkpoint, mile 70); there was a ton of race yet ahead, and to chill out, but that's the inevitably competitive side of me feeling stress over what could only be called a minor mechanical. I was fortunate I was merely re-inflating my tire and wasn't dealing with a puncture or any worse tire-related issues. This began a long stretch of on-and-off the bike, walking and pushing. The snow was deeper than anyone anticipated and had little traffic, so riders were breaking the trail. It was a soft, slow slog. Managing sweat and layers was essential and it was during this section I first wondered, "How long am I going to be out here?" The trail eventually improved enough that it became rideable. I kept thinking, "These conditions are terrible, but I'm so glad to be riding my bike." Gratitude and adaptability were vital. After seeing his name for years on Heck of the North results, I met Andy Weinzierl from Duluth & chatted for a mile or so as we kept moving forward. Checkpoint 1 was Gateway General Store and I arrived at 1:13 pm - it had taken over 6 hours to ride 35 (or 37?) miles. I saw my brother, chatted briefly with Nick and his father, Dave, ducked inside to refill water, and bought two extra strength 5-hour energy shots I planned to carry until the night riding. I wanted to be efficient with the stop and was back on the bike in <10 minutes.

The following section was approximately 35 miles and a few hills started. The trail conditions, as expected, continued to be variable: soft, sticky snow, parts that were somewhat decent, swampy sections with plenty of bushwhacking, lumpy grassy areas, sections of repetitive miniature rollers that resembled moguls, low wet and icy areas, and even open water (new for Arrowhead). I mainly rode solo and at times with other riders - Kate Coward, Jay Millas, Ryan Haug, Todd Rasmussen, Joe Clark, and Jill Martindale. I

came upon the water crossing discussed at the pre-race meeting, which prompted me to carry a pair of trash bags if I decided to concoct a set of waders to avoid getting my feet wet. Thankfully, I was able to get through dry and unscathed. Daylight was waning and I eventually turned on my headlight. The miles continued to tick off slowly. I was behind Jill when we finally dropped onto Elephant Lake (said to have 12" of ice), and I knew that meant checkpoint 2 was near. Crossing the lake was a highlight of the course for me. It felt vast and remote in the dark, although the second we got on the lake, the wind was whipping us hard head-on. After a few minutes, Jill pulled off a bit to the left and I asked if she was alright, "yeah...this wind is brutal!" she yelled. I shouted to get behind me and we rode on to Melgeorge's, which was a welcomed sight with volunteers, my bro, and Nick and his dad, Dave. It was 6:52 pm and it took 5.5 hours to ride the last 35 miles. I grabbed my water bottles and climbed the stairs up to the cabin and was treated to exactly what I'd always heard of Melgeorge's. Imagine a cozy, rustic cabin lodge with a wood-burning stove and some of the absolute kindest volunteers on the planet serving you grilled cheese sandwiches, soup, baked goods, coffee, and refilling your bottles. I sat down just long enough to change socks. I thanked everyone multiple times, noticed another rider getting ready to mobilize, and asked if he wanted to head out together, knowing we had a tough stretch ahead, the hilliest section. It was night now, and a heavy mist would later turn to snow. I bid my brother farewell and told him to head on to the finish at Fortune Bay to get a decent night's sleep.

I rolled out with Mike Running from Ely and we shared several miles. I later saw a familiar rider from earlier in the day, Jesse Wilcox from Stillwater. The trail was soft and slow, but at least it was rideable. After an undetermined number of miles, I was somewhere ahead and solo and the trail turned unrideable. It appeared to be completely untouched except for the handful of people ahead of me. The snow was 4-6" deep in some areas with a tire track on the right and boot prints on the left. This went on for what felt like forever. I saw no one ahead or behind me for a very long time - at least 5 miles of hike-a-biking. Walking, typically, is not a challenging endeavor - add to this a loaded bike, exhausted body, delirious mind, complete darkness, and a series of climbs and descents all in thick, soft snow, and it was the one time in the race in which I hit a low. I hummed and sang songs in an attempt to wake up my brain, took my 2nd and final 5-hour energy shot, and continued snacking and drinking, all to keep out of a total state of delirium, which I couldn't manage to do. I rode my bike for three 10-foot stretches and walked for 2 to 3 hours. It was brutally slow. I knew I needed to keep moving forward and I'd eventually reach the next checkpoint. The only way out is through, right? The trail was undeniably beautiful in the quiet, peaceful, moonlit night. I could smell the scent of pine in my nose. I was so tired that every tree started to take on the shape and form of objects that weren't trees - a boat propped up vertically, a small cabin, other things - none of which were real. There were a few hopeful-looking spots where the boot tracks disappeared and there was a single tire track - people were riding! Those sections were fleeting and lasted 10 feet before I'd see snow angel, snow angel, snow angel! Riders were only on their bikes riding for a short time. The riding was impossible. Finally, the trail surface improved and was rideable once again and I began seeing the signs

along the trail for the upcoming 3rd checkpoint, Embark, which was introduced with a series of tiki torches lining the trail, and the checkpoint itself included a pair of heated tents in the woods, a bonfire, and a group of amazing volunteers. I arrived at 4:48 am and it had taken me approximately 10 hours to travel 40 miles. I chatted with Eric from Embark and Joe from Bone Saw as I filled my bottles. I learned the leaders had arrived just 25 minutes previously, there were 15 or so riders ahead of me, and they were almost 10 hours behind from the previous year. I have a hard time switching off the competitive switch. That motivated me to keep moving efficiently and head back out on the final stretch.

The trail leading to and away from checkpoint 3 was in decent shape and I was moving well. I knew a couple of miles after the checkpoint was the most prominent hill of the race, Wakemup. It has a notoriously steep, almost straight-up gradient, but at least it's relatively short. I climbed the hill pushing my bike, and the descent down the backside was more gradual. I was energized knowing the hills were behind me. There were some swampy sections ahead, but overall flat, I'd be finishing in the daylight, and I would reel in as many people as I could. I knew I had several hours to go and needed to manage my effort, but that said, I put in a steady, sustainable, and controlled effort, figuring I could make decent time in this section. After 1.5-2 hours, I saw 1, then two riders ahead. I began passing folks and continued doing so for the next hour or so, moving up at least a half dozen places. Daylight had since arrived. I kept on the gas (relatively speaking - the trail deteriorated and was so rough and slow). I didn't know how far back the last rider I passed was, how far up the next one was, or how near/far I was to the finish, so I put my head down and put in a hard effort for what felt like a neverending stretch. I never saw a single snowmobile or trail groomer the entire race. At the end, I'd heard there is a turn, followed by a snow fence lining the trail and a slight uphill to the finish. It all matched the description and I was happy to finally see the finish line, my brother, and the volunteers. The last section, approximately 25 miles, took me 3.5 hours.

I finished at 8:35 am Tuesday, 25 hours 35 minutes, 8th overall. Most importantly, I finished in a year that'll likely go down as one of the toughest in the 20-year race history. This year took a lot of grit, determination, patience, fortitude, and flexibility. My Garmin even persevered & had a whopping 74% battery remaining. Friend Risa Hustad congratulated me at the finish and commented that I looked fresh, even though I didn't feel fresh. I left it all out there in the last section. Despite the brutal trail conditions and slow going, it was awesome: the experience, the people, the adventure. I'm very grateful and wouldn't trade any of it. A volunteer escorted me inside the building along with my brother and my bike. We were brought to the hospitality room where I met up with Nick (who took first place), Dave, and the other riders, and was treated to a bowl of soup and a roll, given my finisher trophy, a hat, and the warmest congratulations I've ever received. It was an unparalleled feeling and a moment I'll never forget. Thanks to my family, my brother for his cheer support, all the volunteers, fellow racers, the winter ultra community, and the trail. It was a truly epic life moment.

I'm looking forward to Arrowhead 2025.

