2025 Arrowhead 135 Race Report

Last year's 20th edition of the Arrowhead 135 was my rookie, debut Arrowhead. Racers had very mild temps (upper 20s throughout) and minimal snow, which meant challenging trail conditions, and I was proud to pull off an 8th place finish. This year, I arrived in International Falls once again the day before the race with my brother, support person extraordinaire, full of excitement and gratitude, and a sharper yet quiet goal of another finish and this time in the top 3.

My 2025 got off to an exciting if not slightly unorthodox start from an endurance sports standpoint. In October, I was invited by a family member on an adventure to run the beautiful and challenging 22 mile Kalalau Trail in Kauai, Hawaii. I accepted and had 3 months to train for it, while balancing Arrowhead training. It was a successful adventure and incredibly memorable trip. I was feeling positive about my fitness and training simultaneously for two very different challenges that were spaced a week apart.

On race eve in International Falls, I successfully completed gear check and checked in with the race directors. It was great to see Ken and Jackie. My brother and I enjoyed a hearty reuben for lunch at a local eatery and checked into our hotel. I completed most of my final bike setup and prep in the room before heading over to the community center for the pre race meeting. I thoroughly enjoy this traditional meeting because I get to reconnect with like minded friends, listen intently to Ken's presentation and this year, several racers took took turns with the mic sharing some powerful personal stories that reinforced my deep level of gratitude: gratitude for my own health and the ability to take on a challenge like Arrowhead, for my wonderfully supportive wife and family, for all the fellow racers and volunteers that make up this special winter ultra community. I always leave with a sense of awe. This year, 175 racers were registered across the divisions of bike, foot, ski and kick sled. Following dinner, I was able to wrap up my race prep and get to bed for what's inevitably a so-so night's rest.

The next morning came early and following breakfast and coffee, I headed over to Kerry Park Arena and checked in and lined up on the starting line. At 7:00 AM, the fireworks were lit and they yelled, "Release the hounds!" and we were quickly off. In race mode, I led us out the first 10 miles on the Blue Ox Trail. Turning onto the David Dill Arrowhead State Trail, race vets Kate Coward and Ryan Haug joined and we worked together, rotating. The sunrise was beautiful, temperature was mild, and the trail was in great shape (this year was a pretty stark contrast to last year's trail conditions, at least for the opening miles). Patrick from Michigan and Jesse from Pennsylvania joined our train and we rolled onward.

Arriving first at checkpoint 1 at 10:49 AM, Gateway General Store, mile 37, I stepped inside to fill 2 bottles and was back on my bike moving in less than 2 minutes. I heard 5 racers were ahead of me as they checked in/out with the volunteer without putting a foot down or stopping. I caught up with them and moved back up to the lead. A few miles later, my front wheel washed out on a loose descent and I crashed (non-dramatic) and Patrick, the eventual winner, made his move and would lead the rest of the race. I linked up with my friend Trenton Raygor for a good number of miles. We saw some large wolf tracks on the trail and chatted about our families. We rode across frozen Elephant Lake (one of my favorite sections of the course) into an absolutely hellacious head/cross wind which was nearly blowing us over. We made it to checkpoint 2 at 4:20 PM, Melgeorge's Resort, mile 72.

I was in 2nd place at that point and aside from the windy lake crossing, making good time overall and feeling strong. I wolfed down 2 delicious grilled cheese sandwiches & a Coke, put on a warmer hat, filled my bottles and headed back out, just after Ryan who was racing in the unsupported division quickly checked in/out. I left checkpoint 2 in 3rd place and rolled solo for the next 20 miles. The sunset was beautiful and I was excited for the arrival of night. I often ride at home in the early morning and occasionally at night and I'm very comfortable riding in the dark. The stars were dazzling and really putting on a show. I thought I had a decent gap on 4th and with a lot of race remaining, I could feasibly race for 2nd or 3rd. Trail conditions were quite variable and overall soft and slow. I was hopeful the arrival of night and falling temps would make for a firmer trail.

Somewhere between mile 90-95, Trenton caught up with me and my legs were feeling spent. This section of the course between checkpoints 2 and 3 is chalk full of hills. We coasted down some hills and would then walk up the next one together. I hit a wall hard and felt like my power was zapped and I found myself exhausted, hallucinating, falling asleep and struggling to handle my bike, and got cold. I paused to pull on another layer. I kept rolling and ate some snacks to help warm up. I was pushing my bike up a steep climb when I whapped my knee hard on my pedal. I was in a good bit of pain and I thought I could use my left leg more and right leg less. I was spiraling and figured I could get to checkpoint 3, the Embark Oasis, mile 111, and rest in the heated tent, head back out and finish the last 22-some miles. I couldn't pedal without my knee throbbing and I did a hefty amount of alternating walking off/on for the next 10 miles. At that point I decided to make it my plan to get to the 3rd checkpoint and scratch. I finally arrived at 1:25 AM and was greeted with tiki torches, a raging fire, and applause. Some bold moves were made throughout the day but I've risked injury before and it hasn't always resulted in my favor. It was disappointing but I was confident it was the right call. I raced with gratitude and a smile all day, connected with old friends and made a few new, soaked in the utter beauty of the north woods and had a fantastic day (until it wasn't). That's bike racing and I reminded myself it's only a race. The adventure, challenge and experience are all far

more meaningful. I know the importance of putting my body first and hopefully keep inspiring others to challenge (and take care of) themselves.

Hearty congratulations to all who participated, regardless of outcome, you all inspire me and I appreciate you. Massive thanks to my wonderfully supportive wife and 3 beautiful children, to my brother Craig for being the best support and photo crew a guy could ask for, and to my mechanic and friend Troy Herlick at Gateway Cycle for keeping my rig running flawlessly. Experiences like this not only teach me lessons about the value of hard work, being tenacious and determined, having grit, putting myself in uncomfortable situations, but also the irreplaceable qualities of gratitude, positivity, fortitude, perspective, and health. My 2025 Arrowhead was a positive experience I'll carry forward with me. And I think I may have more Arrowhead chapters yet to be written.

Photo credit: Cary Johnson/caryjohnsonimages