

Freezing My Ice Off in Alaska

By
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Alaska. What is your first thought? Do you come up with visions of Eskimos, moose, polar bears, snow and cold? Likely responses of what we grew up with seeing pictures of it in encyclopedias, textbooks and TV. So did you ever think about running there? No? Well, us Texans usually don't.

Not surprisingly, this Texan did. As friends and family that know me, finding a new challenging adventure run is always on my mind. A few years ago, I found out about this 100 mile run that they have up there every year in February called the Susitna 100. This was not just a 100 mile footrace, but two other divisions as well, mountain bike division and a cross country ski division. We would all be traveling over the same course at the same time. It intrigued me not just because it is 100 miles, but 100 miles of running through snow covered trails, over frozen lakes and rivers, and seeing some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. All of this with pulling a snow sled full of gear and food! Yes...that is correct, a sled. A little 3 foot sled that would carry my mandatory gear for the run plus the 8,000 or so calories I would need to complete this journey.

The race was to be held on February 14th, 2004. Valentine's Day! Not the most optimal time to be away from my wife, Melanie, but she agreed to let me pursue my crazy aspiration.

The first thing I needed to do was buy a sled. Where does one buy a sled in sultry Houston? Well, the internet of course! I purchased two: one for training and one for the race.

Next was a harness belt to go around my waist. I purchased this at REI. It was a rock climbing harness. Since it has ready-made loops in it, it was perfect for what I needed. Next I had to construct the poles that ran from the sled to my waist harness. I threaded two ½ inch ropes through two ½ inch PVC pipes. The PVC pipe was needed to keep the slack out of the rope to make it a smoother pull. I gathered up an old duffel bag, put about 12 pounds of full water bottles in it, and put it in the sled. Now that all this preliminary stuff was done, it was time to train.

I began my training the morning of November 3rd, 2003 at Memorial Park. Pulling the sled out of the back of my SUV got a series of inquiries from fellow runners who are regularly there at 5:00 a.m. "Is this a new training technique?" "What are you training for now?" These were the questions of the morning. As I told them of my next adventure, puzzled looks developed across their faces. They all thought I was now going off the deep end, as they thought nothing could top my Sahara Desert adventures.

As I set off down the gravel loop of the Park, more puzzled faces were looking oddly at me. First, I had glued a piece of carpet under the sled to keep the noise down as it was going to be too loud and obnoxious with fiberglass grinding against gravel. Secondly, one doesn't see too many runners in Houston pulling a sled behind them.

As the days and weeks wore on, the other runners got used to seeing me pulling the sled. They would even ask me what happened if I chose not to pull it on a particular day. I added a 16 ounce water bottle a week until the sled weighed in at 20 pounds. I figured this was plenty of weight to pull to get me ready.

During my 3 months of training was also 3 months of planning. Planning took on how I was to approach this race, what gear I needed, and what I could buy, rent, and borrow for my gear. My mandatory gear was a 20 below zero sleeping bag, a sleeping pad, a stove, fuel for the stove, a small pot, a lighter, a headlamp, a bivy sack, at least 3,000 calories of food. Plus enough other gear and clothes to make it all weigh in at least 15 pounds. Luckily, I did purchase, borrow, or rent all the gear I needed. I spent endless hours on Ebay looking for the right clothes to purchase, knowing that the weather up in Alaska could get down to 30 or so below zero. I wanted to be prepared for anything Mother Nature threw at me.

Approaching of the race was different than anything I had come across since I had done numerous hot weather ultras, but none in cold weather conditions. This was going to be a new experience for me. Keeping warm and dry was the first priority, but not being too warm as to perspire and expose wet clothes to the elements. Layering would be the key as I could add or subtract clothing as the temperatures rose or fell. I wasn't sure I was going to react to being in continuous below freezing temperatures for more than a day.

Wednesday, February 11th came it was time to head north. I arrived in Anchorage late that night and checked in to the Sheraton. I got a good night's sleep and was ready for the day ahead. I still had to buy a few odds and ends of gear just to make sure I had everything. I drove out to REI and purchased some ice grippers for my shoes, a lighter, 8 ounces of fuel for my stove, and 10 PowerGels with double caffeine (to get me through the night).

Later that evening was the pre-race check-in at a local library auditorium. Runners, mountain bikers, and cross country skiers (and myself) all awkwardly carried in our gear and had it checked in. Since

I didn't know anyone, I looked for some of the veterans of the race to see if I could get any last minute tips and info of what this race was like. Later, in our pre-race meeting, the race director went over the course and talked about things that we should be alerted on throughout the event. The only thing that caught my attention was the spill about moose on the course. They were to be frequent and that they are territorial. So if we were to encounter one, just stay put and let it pass on, he said. Knowing that, I put a BIG mental note in my head.

Friday came and I slept in and mostly hung out at the hotel that morning and early afternoon. The next order of business was to purchase my food for the race. First off was the grocery store. Here I bought bread, peanut butter, Pop-Tarts, Gatorade powder, Ziplock bags, chocolate and powdered sugar donuts. After that, I took in a movie before I was off to get the "real food".

First stop was Taco Bell. Here I bought 3 soft tacos and a bean burrito. Across the street was Wendy's. I popped in there for 3 singles with cheese. Then it was off to the Sheraton Hotel's grill. Here they baked a mean pizza. I ordered a chicken supreme. Perfect for the remote Alaskan wilderness! All in all, with everything I had, I had about 10,000 calories. Exactly what I needed since I figured I needed a 100 calories per mile. Even though I probably won't consume all of this food, it is better to be safe then sorry. I also planned to eat handfuls of snow along the way to also get some water in me.

Saturday. Finally, the day I have been waiting for arrives. Race begins at 9:00 a.m., so I head out of the hotel at 6:00 a.m. as the race info says it will take two hours to get to the start at Big Lake. Well, it only takes one, so I am the first one there arriving at 7:00. The ironic thing was that the start was in the city limits of Houston. Houston, Alaska that is.

When I arrived, it was snowing and 23 degrees. Not your typical ideal starting weather, but like I said before, I was ready for anything Mother Nature threw at me. At 8:30, I got out of the car to get ready. We all took the obligatory starting line pictures and we were off sharply at 9:00 a.m.



Just before the start



My companion for the next 100 miles



Another pic before start



Just starting out on Big Lake



Another pic of the start. All white!!!

From the starting line, the course veers west on frozen plowed ice roads, crossing a chain of four lakes connected by short upland portages. The lakes are Big Lake, Mirror Lake, Flat Lake and Crooked Lake. Various summerhouses and businesses dot the shoreline throughout this first section. Snow is piled up on both sides of the road at least 4 feet deep. I quickly discover that running in the middle of this road is quite slippery. So I head over to the left side where there is some traction with snow. I finally get off these lakes at 6.5 miles feeling great, as pulling the sled across the ice is almost effortless. Next, I finally get on solid ground to run trails to the first checkpoint at Little Su. Running these trails is not as easy as it seems pulling a sled. Through the woods, the trail is about 6 feet wide, but the actual trail we run on is only about 2 ½ feet wide since this is where the snow machines have traveled. So this means that the other 1 ½ feet of trail on either side is not packed. Any variance off the center means that you are quickly sunk down to your knee or waist in snow! Plus, through the woods there are “rollers”, basically, 2-3 foot speed bumps every 8 to 10 feet. What this means is that when you’re running up a roller, the sled is coming down the previous one. When you’re going down a roller, the sled is coming up one or is right in between the two at a dead stop. So I was grabbing the rope pulls at my side and pulling the sled like a rickshaw, thus taking the burden of being jolted or whiplashed at the mid-section after each roller. I am guessing here, but I believe these rollers were put in to keep snowmobile speeds down or possibly to let them have more fun.



Trail after the lakes. Notice the rollers. These were small ones compared to what came later!

The course also uses seismic lines. A seismic line is a straight swath cut through the wilderness by a bulldozer following a compass course. Seismic refers to a method of exploration that induces vibratory waves into the ground in an effort to guess at the geology below.

Passing through the Little Su checkpoint on a seismic line at 12.5 miles, it is 12:00 p.m. I graciously turn down water and a cup of chicken broth from the ladies dressed in Hawaiian garb with hula skirts and coconuts over their parkas.



Little Su Aid Station

As I amble on figuring that I have enough water to last me to the first “real” checkpoint at Flat Horn Lake at 25 miles. 2 miles down the trail past Little Su, we take a hard left at the wooden sign that says “Nome 1049 miles”. “Luckily, I’m not headed there”, I thought to myself.



Nome Sign – 1049 miles

I then follow the trail for about 5 miles through frozen swampland. The trail is wide and there are many snowmobile tracks to follow and guess at which one has the hardest snow. I look for sled dragging prints to see where the other runners and skiers have gone before me. It was amazing on how much difference in snow-pack hardness there was between one track and the next. The snow through this section was not very hard-packed, so it made a lot of difference finding the right track to follow. Also through this section I kept leapfrogging with the cyclists as they would have to stop and clean out the snow from their chains, hubs and derailleurs through this soft snow section every mile or so. By this time, the weather is beginning to clear and the sun is peaking through the clouds. As this happens, it warms up to close to freezing, which makes the snow a little softer and harder to run on. After being on the swampland, I turn right onto a seismic line for 4 miles. As we get more into the woods, the “rollers” get bigger and bigger (upwards to 6 feet high) and it thus my arms become more into play of pulling the sled up and lessening the jerk of the sled when it stops.

By the time this 4 miles is over and I drop down a steep embankment into an arm of Flat Horn Lake. It is a clear blue sky. So blue that you cannot even imagine. It just strikes me on how blue and beautiful it is. I stop to take a picture and hope that the picture will do justice when I show everyone at home. It is also time for lunch, so I grab a bag of chocolate donettes and a peanut butter sandwich.



An arm of Flat Horn Lake

I stay on this arm of the lake for a mile. It is a pretty wide arm (about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile) and once again I try to find the path of least resistance on this section. Snowmobiles whiz by in both directions in this section going full throttle respectfully keeping their distance from the others and me. Cliffs on both sides of the lake with an occasional lake cottage dot the shoreline. After the mile on the arm, I come to the main body of the lake and take a right turn. I pass by two landing strips and I am quickly at the first checkpoint, Flat Horn Lake Lodge, mile 25. I arrive here at 2:46 p.m.

I unleash myself from the sled and look up 30 feet above me to see the Lodge. I must now go about 100 yards up a hill to check in inside the Lodge. Once I trudge up the hill and enter the Lodge, about 10 competitors are sitting around eating some homemade jambalaya cooked by the owner. I turn down the food and quickly refill my Camelbak and two water bottles. I check out of there at 2:50 and head back down to my sled.



Leaving Flat Horn Lake Lodge

Once I am back to my sled I apply Vaseline to my “sensitive area” as I am beginning to chaff down there. After I tend to myself, I get out and hook back up my sled, I look out over Flat Horn Lake. It is a huge vastness of white. About 20 miles away overseeing the lake is Mt. Susitna. A huge mountain covered in white standing tall and proud. It is 21 miles to the next checkpoint at Eagle Song Lake Lodge and I am off. I continue following the shoreline for about 2 miles until I am off the lake and I pass through a wooded area. The wooded area lasts only about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile until I come to Dismal Swamp.

Dismal Swamp is approximately 3 miles long and is straight as an arrow. There is nothing but snow and just a few straggly trees here and there show me that I am making progress. As I finally cross the Swamp, I back into the woods for $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Also, my rash isn't getting any better, but worse. I am perplexed. So I stop and put some more Vaseline on the “hot spot”.

After running through the woods, I come to another steep embankment of about 100 feet long. This embankment will take me down to the Susitna River. Running down these steep embankments is no fun with a sled trying to beat you down the hill or trying to run you over. I grab the sled poles each time and pray that I don't get tripped up and am found face first in the snow.

I get down to the $\frac{1}{4}$ mile wide river and cross it following the markers to the other side now going UP a steep embankment using feet, knees, and hands scrambling up it to get back into the woods. Once I am up the embankment, I am finally on a good ole-through the woods trail. It is very winding with small hills. It is similar to the Ho Chi Minh trail that I train on in Memorial Park in Houston, except that there is 4 feet of snow underneath me.

I am on the traditional Iditarod sled dog race trail. The Iditarod doesn't use this part of the course anymore. The Iditarod mushers complained loudly about hitting their sleds, legs, and elbows on overhanging trees at many of this segment's endless number of sharp turns. Consequently their course was diverted to the Yentna River. On this trail there are numerous signs that say "Watch for Moose". I see plenty of moose tracks, but no Bullwinkles. The sun is now dropping down in the sky, so I stop to get some food in my tummy and also to get out my headlamp.



Alaskan Sunset

Dinnertime consists of a Taco Bell soft taco and cake donuts for dessert. The taco is nearly frozen so I have to put it in my jacket to thaw it out. After about 10 minutes, it is ready to eat. Three bikers pass me as I am walking while eating and say, "Dinner time, eh?" I say, "Yup! And Taco Bell too!" Then one says, "Gee! Why didn't I think of that?"

After I eat, the headlight comes on and I am all alone. With the thick woods and an LED headlamp on, it is the snow version of the Blair Witch Project. This time though, it is moose eyes I don't want reflecting back at me readying for a standoff of, "This is my trail!"



Trail at Night



Ididarod Trail Sign

(This is all the pics. When I tried to take pics the next morning the batteries in the camera were already dead...so much for rechargeables!)

Going along at a fairly quick walking/running pace, my chaffing is increasingly becoming more of a problem and there is more walking than running. I tell myself to just get to Eagle Song and see if changing running shorts will help the matter.

During this segment, I come upon another runner (Jamshid is his name) from Seattle who's light has gone out and is not carrying any extra batteries. I come to the rescue and get out some Triple A's for him and he is the happiest man in the world and is forever in my debt. We hang on together for the rest of the 10 miles or so until we get to Eagle Song Lodge. Moose signs pop up every mile or two, but there are no moose in sight. I am kind of glad and disappointed at the same time.

We arrive at Eagle Song and mile 43 of the race at 8:58 p.m. I quickly grab a pair of running shorts and a Wendy's cheeseburger from my sled and scurry up the embankment to the heated lodge. The hamburger is frozen solid and luckily at the lodge is a microwave oven. While the hamburger is defrosting, I try to change. This is to no avail, as the buckles on my gaiters (gaiters are a shoe covers that go around the ankle and over the shoe to keep debris out.) are frozen solid with ice on them. A volunteer tries to unbuckle them, but to no luck. I just say, "Screw it! I'll just have to deal with it", as I am losing time sitting here fooling with this thing. I check out of Eagle Song with the burger in my hand at 9:23 p.m. Caffeinated Tangerine Power Gel is my dessert of choice this time around.

The next checkpoint is Luce's Lodge just 9 miles away. All I can do at this point is walk with the chaffing burning away at my skin. Of course, I had not planned to walk much of this. I suck up my pride and tell myself I am going to finish one way or another by walking or crawling with my legs as far apart as I can muster.

After leaving Eagle Song, I pull out another jacket to offset the heat I am not generating by walking instead of running. With it being a clear night, the temperature is beginning to drop rapidly. The course hits another seismic line for about 2 miles. Of course there are more rollers to contend with. Once I get past the seismic line, there is winding trail again. These trails go on for about 6 miles and the going is slow. Through the woods I turn off my headlight and it is pitch black.

Once I'm out of this section of trail, I see the confines of Luce's Lodge a ½ mile away across the Yentna River. The Yentna River is known as the "snowmobile superhighway". Luckily, at this time of night at 12:20, I don't have to look both ways before crossing.

I arrive at Luce's Lodge and mile 55 at 12:30 a.m. ready to eat a late night snack. I just covered 9 miles in 3 hours. Hardly a record breaking pace, but I am getting closer to the finish. I unbuckle myself from the sled and get out a Taco Bell bean burrito and Pop Tarts. I head up the steep embankment to the lodge at the top of the cliff. Inside it is nice and warm. Other racers are ordering spaghetti, hamburgers, and sandwiches. I ask Luce if I can use his microwave oven. He says, "Sure thing", and I pop my burrito in there. The burrito is frozen solid, so it takes a minute for it to thaw out. The aroma hits the air and everyone turns with envy as I chow down. The TV is on so I catch a few minutes of Saturday Night Live. I

then get my water and I am out the door. With Pop-Tarts in hand, I get out of there right at 12:40. Next stop is "Scary Tree" 9 miles away.

I head south on the Yentna River cold and frustrated that I cannot run. This section of the course is the coldest because we are on a river of ice covered in snow. The temperature dips lower and lower with the cloudless sky. After around 1 ½ hours of looking at nothing but snow and race markers, I look up to the sky to stop and see what looks like dancing clouds. They are the Northern Lights. It is an awesome sight to behold. I just stare in awe of what I am seeing. Different colors fluttering across the sky from north to south. It is just about the coolest thing I have ever seen. With this permanent picture in my head, I amble on with my body getting colder and colder.

I finally arrive at the Scary Tree aid station around 4:00 a.m. at the juncture of the Yentna and Susitna River. I've walked 9 miles in 3 hours. There is not much here, just a couple of canvas tents and a wood stove inside. I am hoping that the stove will warm me up, as I can not stop shivering. It is too cold for the stove to make any difference. I tell myself that I have to get warm, so I pull out my sleeping bag and lay in it to try to catch some ZZZZ's. With no such luck of trying to sleep for 45 minutes, I drag myself out of the bag, put on another long sleeve shirt, stuff my bag back in my stuff sack, roll back up my Therma-Rest, and fill back up my Camelbak and I'm ready to go. Unfortunately, with me staying stationary for a bit, my bowel is crying for a movement. So I hide behind the Scary Tree and do my thing. Let me tell you, it is no fun sticking your hiney out over the snow in -10 degrees below zero.

I look at my watch and it is 5:30 a.m. I am angry with myself because I stopped and had a "weenie moment". That hour and a half stop could have and should have been spent getting closer to the finish line. I continue angry with myself trying to run out of Scary Tree, but the severe stinging pain stops me.

I continue on the Susitna River for another 3 miles until I reach back where I crossed the River at 32 miles. I've just completed a huge loop and am now headed back the way I came with 32 miles to go.

Back up the steep embankment from the Susitna River, through the woods, and now back to Dismal Swamp. It is around 8:30 a.m. when I get there and it is going to be a beautiful day with not a cloud in the sky. Mt. Susitna is on my right just as clear as it could be.

In Dismal Swamp, 3 teams of sled dogs and their mushers pass me and ask me how I am doing. I give the Thumbs Up sign and they continue on with the dogs just a howling and barking as they are enjoying their Sunday morning training run.

I am back at Flat Horn Lake Lodge at 10:34 a.m. with just 25 miles to go and 25 ½ hours into it. It only takes me 3 minutes to get my water and defrost some pizza and I am out the door. If I were a betting man, I would have bet my life savings if someone said it would take me 12 hours to do the next 25 miles. Well, somehow and somehow it did.

I leave Flat Horn Lake feeling pretty good. I haven't changed shoes, socks or clothes the entire time. No blisters on the feet, my legs feel great, and my back feels fine. I'm just ready to get this thing done. It is now prime time snowmobile time with tens of snowmobiles whizzing past me every minute or so on the leg. It is a nice reprieve once I get off the lake and back into a seismic line in the woods at mile 78. It is peaceful now and I am enjoying this section before I head out into the open and back with the snowmobilers. Once I am in the open, snowmobiles are once again everywhere and I am desperately looking for that Nome sign and a left turn. It finally comes at 2:45 p.m. Now it is just 2 ½ more miles to the next checkpoint at Little Su. At the sign, I take a little break to tend to a potential blister on my heel. I put a Blister Block on it and I am back on my way.

About a ½ mile before Big Su, I actually catch up to another runner and walk with him into Little Su at 3:32 p.m. The aid station is not quite as ceremonial as before. There are only two people here now, the race director and a volunteer. I quickly down some chicken soup and I check out 3 minutes later leaving the other runner to fend for himself. I just did miles 75 to 87.5 in 5 hours. Once again, if I was a betting man and someone bet that it would take me almost 7 hours to do the last 12.5 miles, I would've taken that bet....and lost.

I start out feeling strong and rejuvenated knowing that I am on the home stretch, even though sleep deprivation is starting to settle in as I am beginning to hallucinate. Trees take on human and animal like shapes. Long afternoon shadows cast images some weird stuff that I don't even want to say.

Along a seismic line through some trails and I come to Papoose Twins Road. It is still barely light out and I have no excuse for it, but I was supposed to cross the road and continue on the trail. For some reason, other than not paying attention, I turn right on the road and continue on the road for about a ½ mile before realizing that I made a mistake. When I return to the point that I should have went straight, I couldn't believe I missed it with all the markers and fluorescent green ribbon. "What was I thinking?" I told myself. So I lost about 20 minutes or so and my enthusiasm took a plunge.

I finally get to the lake that I left 34 hours ago at around 7:30. Just 7 miles to go. It is dark and there are lights all around me. 8:30 comes and no finish line in sight. The anticipation is great as I keep looking ahead for the Big Lake Lodge signs. 9:30 comes and still no finish in sight. It is very disheartening. A few skiers pass me like horses to the barn. Then, finally I can see the finish at 10:15, but

it seems so far away. I try to put some pep into my step, but my legs are happy with the slow pace I am at. I finally cross the finish line at 10:22 p.m. 37 hours and 22 minutes. 15th place among the runners. There are about 4 people at the finish and all give me congratulatory handshakes. I slip into the RV next to the finish, call Melanie and tell her I am finally done.

With the problems I had, it obviously wasn't a good race. I will be back in 2 or 3 years to redeem myself and show these Alaskans that a Texan deserves to be here.

Until then, run long and prosper.