

Iditarod Trail Invitational 2010

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I'm back in Anchorage now, having flown in from the finish in McGrath earlier today. I'm relieved to have finished the Iditarod Trail Invitational 350 mile race yesterday. The ITI 350 is truly is a fantastic race and may be the high point for me in the sport of ultrarunning.

To summarize, I got off to an early lead only to get off course on the Little Susitna River several hours later. After wading through up to calf-deep snow and slush in the warm 35 F temperatures for hours, I turned around with the intent of backtracking to the nearest town and dropping from the race. I was tired, soaking wet and feeling like I was in over my head in this race.

Not long after turning around, however, I noticed a side trail off the river leading south and took a chance this would lead me back on course. After about a mile, it did indeed join the Iditarod Trail and I continued on. I was now in last place.

You'd think the Iditarod Trail would be well marked and well worn, but this isn't always the case. Snow drifts and blizzard conditions can obscure the trail. The exact course changes from year to year based on river ice conditions and the path isn't always marked. There are sometimes side trails through the snow or there'll be a fork in a river and you just have to decide which to take.

Additionally, much of the time spent on the trail is at night and there are few visual cues out on the snow. At the pre-race meeting, there was no course briefing and no gear check. We basically just signed-in, got a t-shirt and an introduction by the race director and went on our way. The race philosophy is one of self reliance.

So, it took me the rest of the night to catch back with the race leaders and by then I was spent, both physically and mentally. I left the Yentna Station checkpoint (mile 57) with two ITI veteran runners, Tom Jarding and Eric Johnson, and the three of us stayed together making very good time over the next two days. On day three, I began to have sharp pain in my left ankle and lower shin and fell slightly behind.

I later got off course on a fork of the Kuskokwim River in a blizzard at 3:00 AM while approaching the Rohn checkpoint (mile 210). In the darkness with my headlamp on in the blowing snow, I could only see for about 50 feet around me. I found myself out on river ice that was cracking below my feet. The whole thing was disconcerting and, perhaps only through the grace of God, did I see a brief reflection of a trail marker over the river bank and through the forest.





I slept for several hours in Rohn and departed with the Tom and Eric for the long 80 mile section to Nicolai (mile 300). The condition of my shin and ankle worsened and I found myself alone and hobbling through the night over sections of bare ground and tussocks. I was now in the Alaskan “interior” which gets less snowfall but is much colder. I made a walking stick out of a branch of alder which helped steady me over this rough section.

I had been on the trail for 20 hours when around 5 AM I bivouacked near Sullivan Creek (~ mile 280) with the intent of getting an hour’s rest before sunrise. It was -10 F and I quickly set camp. I awoke 5 hours later in full daylight feeling refreshed and limped into Nikolai.

It seems I met the entire 101 residents of Nicolai when I walked into town. I was feeling euphoric and full of energy when I arrived at the home of a local family which served as the aid station. My good mood suddenly turned somber when I removed my left shoe and saw that my left ankle was swollen to the size of a misshapen grapefruit. Additionally, my left big toenail has come dislodged at the base and caused a large blister to form under and behind the toenail. After taking care of my toenail, I wrapped and elevated my ankle. I then ate three bowls of moose stew and fell asleep for several hours.



I should mention that the native Alaskan family in who opened their home as an aid station were the most hospitable and caring people to be found anywhere. It’s the warmth, kindness, and hospitality of people like these that make this event so special and so personal.

Even though I had only 50 miles to the finish, it was obvious I was in no shape to continue. When I awoke, I inquired about being evacuated from Nicolai, which is accessible only by air or snowmobile. While contemplating my injury, I was watching on TV the start of the Iditarod sled dog race in Anchorage. The announcers were talking about the grit and determination of the old Iditarod mushers and that gave me the spark to squeeze back into my running shoes and continue. It was about noon on day 5 of the race.

The 50 mile walk to McGrath in -35 F temperatures can only be described as a “death march.” If it weren’t for the very faint tracks of a snow mobile and from a cyclist in the race who’d traveled the route earlier, I would probably have gotten off course. I knew the slightest snowfall or wind gusts would have concealed the course. By morning I finally made it into McGrath at the home of a gracious and hospitable local family who hosted the finish.

It’s just been a day since I finished and I’m still making sense of what this race means and why I wanted to be a part of it. To run 350 miles in the Alaskan wilderness in the middle of winter is an obvious challenge and is why I entered. But the race itself only seemed a backdrop to other experiences during the event like meeting people of different cultures and dealing with the unexpected.

So many times events led me to the point of dropping out of the race or thinking I’d made a devastating error, only to find at the last moment, something changed which allowed me to continue on.

I was told that I had the fastest “rookie” time on the course as a runner. At the ITI, they don’t call you a “first timer” like other ultramarathons. Course experience plays as vital a role in success at ITI as does athleticism. I don’t think I’ll be back as a veteran runner, but I’d like to come back as a tourist with my family and revisit these remote cabins, villages and people with whom I now feel a certain connection.

