

Yukon Arctic Ultra

Feb 2009

100 mile race – Whitehorse to Braeburn

Race Report

This race is billed 'the world's coldest and toughest ultra-distance race' – and they are right. IMUK was hard, the IM World Championships in Hawaii in +39 degrees was very, very hard but this demanded physical fitness, control and all reserves of mental strength.

The first hurdle on arrival in Whitehorse was the training course – a classroom based afternoon of advice and a run-through of the possible injuries (particularly frostbite) and then a practical evening session. We had to load up our sleds and walk out for an hour or so (fast so we got sweaty) then build a fire, light our stoves, make a hot drink or meal and bivvy down in our sleeping bags. Sounds simple – but not at -29 when you can only take your outer gloves off for a minute (the inner ones never come off) before you risk frostbite. Jez got the prize for the best and biggest fire, and I was fastest into my sleeping bag (female priorities!).

The days before the race were filled with shopping for food, handwarmers, extra kit and more food. At these temperatures everything with any liquid content freezes, so food is difficult. We had trail mix we made up ourselves (dried fruit, nuts, M & Ms (lots), peanut butter M & Ms, kitkat bites and jelly worms). Also twiglets, pretzels, instant porridge and some dehydrated meals, and cereal bars with a low water content, cheese and pepperoni.

Sunday morning finally arrived and the start was at a sensible 1030. My sled felt really heavy, and 100 miles didn't seem possible. We had a bad start when Jez's water bladder leaked, and then he got the runs and had to stop twice in the first hour (not fun at -20). The first leg was along the Yukon River, then the Takhini River for 26 miles. A good flat surface, reasonable temperatures and sunny.

It was a bit worrying to find we were last into the first checkpoint, Rivendell. Not exactly luxurious, just an open fire with a single small bench to sit on, and soup and a sandwich served by volunteers from a hut. We didn't stop long because temperatures were dropping as night fell.

Then on to the middle leg – 34 miles to Dog Grave Lake. Marianne Heading joined us. A clear cold night with beautiful stars. All went well as we walked along the river then we turned off and started climbing and climbing and descendingand climbing Imagine climbing a long ski-slope, complete with moguls, towing a sled weighing 15-20kg which slams into you everytime you go downhill then you have to pull hard to start it moving again. I got to really hate that sled! There were 3 big climbs on that leg, and endless more minor 'switchbacks' through the woods. You'd stagger to the top of a slope hoping and praying it was the last uphill then over the brow was yet another climb. Absolutely soul destroying. By this time it was dark, very cold (-40 in the woods we learned later) and we were all struggling in different ways. Jez was getting cold everytime we stopped – he was ok when moving, but his sleeping bag and down jacket weren't really adequate. I was struggling to breathe, particularly on the hills – on the steep ones I was having to stop every 10-20 metres to get my breath. I sounded like an out of condition steam-train, and discovered later it was cold-

induced asthma. But between me having to stop, and Jez not being able to stop we were not doing well!

It was a very long, hard, cold night – too cold to sleep. We all felt a bit better with the dawn but Jez and Marianne were able to move much faster than I could, and Jez just had to keep moving or he could have been in serious trouble, so reluctantly he and Marianne agreed to go on ahead to the next checkpoint.

Dog Grave Lake was a very welcome sight on the Monday afternoon. It might only be a wall-tent but it had a stove (heat – heaven!) and hot water (even more heaven) and a couple of deckchairs (bliss!). We ate dehydrated food and I drank loads of hot chocolate and finally started to feel vaguely human again. There was even an outhouse – Yukon-style – just a loo-seat over a large hole with no door but a wonderful view! Jez and Marianne got a few hours sleep bivvying on the straw the Quest mushers had used for their dogs, then we set off once more on the last, and longest, leg.

It was soon obvious that I wasn't going to be able to keep up and breathe at the same time, so we agreed that Jez and Marianne would go on ahead. I had one of the most amazing nights of my life – out in the Yukon wilderness, completely on my own (I saw only 5 other athletes in passing the entire 17 hours), responsible only for myself but aware that any mistakes were potentially life-threatening. No houses, roads, people or any signs of human habitation. Just snow, trees, animal tracks and the trail ahead and behind. I loved the silence, the stars, the wildness and the unforgiving cold. And I got to hate my buffalo mitts (fantastic at keeping the hands warm, but impossible to do anything with them on), that sled and the never-ending switchbacks on the trail. My sled broke twice but was fairly easily fixed (although nothing that requires manual dexterity is easy at those temperatures). At about 10pm I found I was walking with my eyes closed so decided to bivvy at the side of the trail (avoiding areas with large animal tracks – I didn't want to be walked over by animals with feet that size!) I had just got into my bag when I saw a pet dog on the trail – a large light coloured dog wearing a red collar. Couldn't work out what such an animal could be doing there but it sniffed round me and my sled, then lay down on the trail nearby. Then another athlete came along and when he talked to the dog it went with him. When I woke up a couple of hours later I thought I must be hallucinating – it was so bizarre – but actually it was true and the dog ended up at the finish Braeburn being cared for by the cafe owner!

After yet more climbing – not as steep but went on for mile after mile, I got to the trail through the woods down into Braeburn, This took hours and hours and, of course, it wasn't just down. I was having to talk severely to my feet to keep them moving, and even more severely to my head. I had drunk all my water and had to decide between keeping going and risking dehydration, or stopping to melt snow and taking even longer to finish.

A skidoo driver (one of the support team) came along – the first human face I'd seen for nearly 12 hours and told me I had only 11k to go – 11k – only an hour and a bit to run – but another 3+ hours to walk at my current pace – it felt like the end of the world.

Eventually I came out of the woods and onto the lake heading for Braeburn. Crossing the lake was bliss – flat, fast and beautiful. Then the sting in the tail – another series of switchbacks through the trees. One slope was so steep I couldn't work out how to get up. With my ankle I couldn't go up forwards, even kicking steps into the bank. Backwards wasn't on because of the sled. Thought I was

doomed to be stuck at the bottom for ever – unable to go backwards or forwards. Eventually I made it sideways like a crab, putting all the weight on my poles. And then, at long last I saw Jez and Marianne come out to meet me. Round the corner of a roadhouse (the first building I'd seen in days) and there was the finish. After 50 hours and 30 minutes I could finally stop.

Some stats:

- 100 miles
- 50 hours and 30 minutes (Jez and Marianne finished in 48 hours)
- Average speed just under 2mph including all stops
- 2 hours 30 mins sleep
- Temperatures between -15 and -40
- 6 litres of water, 2 mugs of coffee, 4 mugs of hot chocolate
- Soup, dehydrated venison stew, frozen cheese and pepperoni, 3 cereal bars, loads of trail mix and jelly worms

Loves:

- Silence
- Snow
- Scenery
- Kindness and generosity of the other athletes
- Wonderful volunteers

Hates:

- That sled
- Asthma – very scary
- Buffalo mitts
- Switchbacks

Worse than I thought – the hills

Easier than I thought – going to the loo (you just have to be quick and count layers up and down!)

And a note for my Christian friends – God was there every painful, exhilarating step of the way. I could not have predicted what he had to teach me during this race, but I am so grateful for his grace and tenderness. I'll gladly share more with those who want to know. When God created the Yukon he put the icing on the cake. To Him be the glory.

Many, many thanks to all of you for your love, concern, interest and prayers, and to Jez, for his friendship and company. Most of all, to Mike and my children for their never-ending love and support.

Would I do it again – you bet!

Pat Cooke-Rogers Feb 2009