**`Michelle Smith - Race report – Montane Yukon Arctic Ultra 100 mile 2018**

On 29th January I found myself at Heathrow airport wrestling with my pulk (sledge) bag and a holdall on the way to check in for my flight to Whitehorse via Vancouver. To say I felt nervous is an understatement. I had been into work that morning to try to take my mind off the race but failed miserably as that is all I talked about!

But why did I feel so afraid? Perhaps because I am very familiar with a classroom and an office based job. I work extremely long hours and know my way around the A2 and M2 with my eyes shut! I had trained hard but was it enough? Should I have done just one more long tyre pull? I know how to deal with the cold but will I manage the extreme cold for so long alone? What if, what if, what if…?

I suppose it is fair to say, as an International Mountain Leader, I am well versed in looking after myself and clients in some pretty remote and dangerous places. I am no stranger to the cold or to high altitude mountaineering but, it isn’t my full time job. However, the Yukon Arctic Ultra was the unknown and quite a scary prospect for me!

I decided to enter the Yukon Arctic Ultra for a number of reasons. First of all, mountains had to take a back seat due to a shoulder injury. I found out I required surgery back in 2015 and as a result, climbing and scrambling couldn’t happen for a while. As I enjoy the bigger challenges, I decided to sign up for the Marathon Des Sables or MDS for short (seven day ultra marathon roughly the equivalent of 6 marathons across the Sahara desert (the Discovery Channel label it the ‘Toughest Footrace on Earth’). I had always wanted to do this as a child and as one of the only things I could do was run, now was the time. Training went well and the race was upon me. But, in short, I had a nightmare. I finished! But, I developed a chest infection and my feet became shredded due to a tear in my gaiters. It was tough and so hot! +52 degrees at times. On the plus side, my tent mates were awesome and we still keep in touch!

Six weeks previous to the MDS, my husband (Scott) had just completed the Yukon Arctic Ultra 430 mile race. He completed the 100 mile race in 2016 before volunteering as support crew for the longer races. This race is called the ‘the world’s coldest and toughest ultra’. It hadn’t appealed but Scott persuaded me that I should give it a go. I didn’t want to go straight into the big distances of 300 miles or 430 miles without seeing how I fared at 100 miles!

As I already had most of the kit from winter mountaineering it wasn’t going to work out too expensive. A lovely group of clients I lead on Mount Kilimanjaro bought me my boots as a ‘thank you’ after seeking advice from Scott.

So, flights booked, race entered and the training began! I became very familiar with dragging a tyre for hours on end to and from Canterbury. I know every inch of the route by heart now!

**Pre race**

I stayed in the Coast High Country Inn in Whitehorse. The race organisers operate out of here so a safe bet. I arrived and stayed for 3 nights before the race started. That gave me time to acclimatise to the cold, buy any food, snacks and equipment I needed and try to relax a bit. Robert and Diane were on hand and answered any questions I had. They were a great help and very professional.

The pre-race brief is thorough and by the end you are under no illusion that this is a tough race in extreme temperatures with very little option to get immediate support. In short, you really have to be able to fend for yourself in extreme winter conditions. Our sleeping bags and roll mats were checked and we were observed lighting our stoves.

I met up with Gav Clark as he raced with my husband the year before. It is good to have someone to meet up with when you get there if only to ease the nerves (thanks Gav).

**Stage 1 – Whitehorse to Muktuk (22 miles approx.)**

The race started at 10.35 am on 1st February. Over 40 athletes started the various disciplines from 17 different countries. My face was already well frosted just by walking to the start from the hotel. There was a fair amount of local media attention. Marathon runners and ultra runners all start at the same time. I found this one of the hardest parts as natural instinct is to shoot out of the blocks and be at the front of the pack. I spent time with my head down and getting my ego in check. I had a plan and needed to stick to it. The temperature hovered around -30 degrees all day and there was a high level of humidity which caused problems for racers.

The course was on the frozen river all the way to Muktuk. This seemed to make everything a little bit colder. However, it was a glorious sunny day, the ground was solid and no need for anything other than your boots to cover the distance. Stopping for a longer break wasn’t really an option. It was just way too cold. Therefore, well-timed rest breaks for a drink and a bite to eat were key.

Early on, I made my first mistake. I needed the toilet and there were still a fair few racers around. I went off track, into deep snow and took off my gloves for too long trying to be inconspicuous. It took me a very long time to get vaguely warm again and a mistake I wouldn’t make again! I should have known better! The cold in my hands was like nothing I had ever experienced before, not even on Denali mid snowstorm! It was awful and I thought I was in trouble. However, a slightly faster pace and my big mitts did the job, fortunately!

The halfway (ish) checkpoint is great! It’s hidden just under the vehicle bridge and a friendly face and a warm cup of tea were a welcome break! It did wonders to lift my morale!

At this point, I left my hydration system. Although I had insulated it and wore it under my jacket, it was fast becoming a block of ice. There was no way I would be able to melt it and I didn’t need the extra weight. I still had the capacity to carry 3 litres and I had my stove.

After the tea stop, you change direction and end up coming off the river into Muktuk. There was an oil drum fire outside for warming athletes and kit. There were lots of dogs which was my idea of heaven! I wanted to stay there!

Inside Muktuk, I hung my coat up, took my boots off and aired some of my kit. You get to wear slippers which was a real treat. Racers were given a meal of stew and a dessert as well as hot drinks and water. It was delicious and very welcomed! I stopped here for just around an hour to hydrate and top up flasks with hot water and tea. Unfortunately, due to the humidity, everything begins to thaw and get wet when inside. Obviously, this can be disastrous on re-entering the cold. I made the decision to leave my smaller down jacket that I had been wearing here. As it was wet through, it would have quickly turned to ice and been useless to me. I had 2 other (better) jackets and decided to cut my losses. One athlete was convinced someone had replaced his shoes with an identical wet pair! This was due to the thawing of his shoes but at the time, a real worry for him!

**Stage 2 – Muktuk to Dog Grave Lake (33 miles)**

Heading out into the night was daunting. The temperature had plummeted further to around -40 degrees and there was still some distance to cover on the river. I did not want to bivvy on the river under any circumstances as it is colder than higher up. I pushed on for what seemed like endless hours. It became quite lonely and I began to doubt myself. I began to doubt my ability and question why I thought I could do this. The mind gremlins took hold and it is fair to say I had a really miserable few hours in my own head. The lovely Erik Scharpé passed me and it was a welcome break to talk to him and his racing companion. I had been moving at a similar pace to them all day and therefore we had spoken a few times. Later on that night I came across a racer who was in pain and quite cold. He was adamant he wanted a rescue but not until the morning. I encouraged him to keep moving and get off the river so that the conditions would be slightly less harsh. He assured me he would and that he did.

Eventually and to my relief, the path came off the river and you gain height along the overland trail. My aim was to get to a small carpark and put the tent up for the night. I got to the carpark and saw some other tents. There was plenty of room and the ground was flat.

After wrestling with the tent in the cold, I got in my bag pretty much fully clothed and enjoyed some well-earned sleep!

**Day 2** – I started well. I rested well, was warm enough and felt strong. Getting up in the morning was a shock to the system! So, so cold! I put my boots in a bag over night and as they are quite soft (Hoka One One Tor Ultra) they were super easy to get on, but that cold!!!! I packed up quick and set off by 8am as I needed to warm up and quick. I wore both my PHD down jacket and trousers initially as it was so unbearably cold. It took about 30 minutes to get my feet and hands to a comfortable warmth again. Mistake number 2 was then made… I didn’t eat or drink enough before setting off. One of my flasks I had used to put a dehydrated meal in with hot water. The idea was that I would eat it after I put my tent up and before going to sleep but that didn’t happen. I should have eaten! Amateur mistake made I then had to fix it. I was running low on water and had a flask of food I didn’t want. So, at 11 am, I forced myself to eat a third of the contents (Asian chicken noodles) and it took everything in me to eat it. I drank a fair amount but knew I would soon need to melt snow and ice to get through the day safely and hydrated.

Between 8am and midday, I passed a large number of racers still in their tents. I gave a shout out to them all but it didn’t occur to me at the time that they were awaiting rescue. It seemed like the night had claimed a number of victims to frostbite and cold related injuries.

The terrain was undulating throughout the day. A fair amount of uphill before the end, which tests the resolve somewhat! The pulk hit me in the back of the legs twice and sent me flying, the language that came out of my mouth is not fit for this write up! It hurt! If I had not have needed the pulk I think it would have been buried there and then!

I stopped to melt some water. Mistake number 3 – gas, even winter gas, does not work properly at temperatures that low! So, more time wasted trying to light a stove I got cold again and needed to move on. I could feel the childhood tantrums brewing inside! I put the gas and the stove inside my jacket whilst I moved for a good 30 minutes and gave myself a good talking too (again). Then I stopped and made water! It was great to warm the hands but also to have the reassurance of water readily available. Poor hydration and a lack of food = increased chances of frostbite as well as, of course, exhaustion.

I saw one of the ski-doo guides 10km out just as it was getting dark. I swear that 10km turned into a 50 miler! It was never ending and the head gremlins came back in force. At this point, I had had enough! However, no choice but to push on! What else was there to do!

I wasted a lot of time today, I didn’t eat enough, I didn’t drink enough and made silly errors throughout. I was lucky! Fortunately, my younger sister had prepared me some music for emergencies on an ipod. That helped no end! I became cross with myself for making mistakes that I wouldn’t usually make. I convinced myself I wasn’t good enough which didn’t help at all. I used my stubbornness to control my thoughts and work through it, I thought about my family and close friends a lot and knew they were right behind me! What a day!

A steep incline took me into Dog Grave Lake and my morale rose instantly. My plan was to stop for an hour and then head out for 2 more hours before setting up the tent again. However, on arrival I found out that the race had been put on hold due to extreme temperature in Braeburn of -50 degrees. The guides were unable to start the ski-doos rendering the race unsafe at this stage. Some athletes had been held here for most of the day.

There was a tent where the staff and volunteers slept and prepared hot water and then some warming tents for the athletes. As we were held there, athletes used the warming tents to sleep in. Unfortunately, the fires had to be extinguished as the straw around one of them caught fire and the tent had to be evacuated.

The staff and volunteers at Dog Grave Lake were great. We had a welcomed hot meal, the opportunity to dry clothes and replenish our flasks. They went out of their way to monitor athletes and make sure we were all warm and well

**Stage 3 – Dog Grave Lake to Braeburn (35miles)**

We were not permitted to leave until midday. The time we were still was credited back to us. Racers were in good spirits and keen to push on.

One 300 mile racer, Roberto Zanda, had mislaid his gloves. As there is no possible way he could carry on safely without a decent pair, I lent him my spare mountaineering gloves. I had been wearing my Black Diamond mitts as well as a liner glove thus far and therefore was happy to help. Unfortunately, later in his race Roberto had to be rescued and taken to hospital with suspected hypothermia as well as frostbite in his hands and feet. I wish Roberto well.

Today seemed to be a series of endless rows of trees. I employed a new tactic on this leg, to stop for a quick break every 5km and drink and eat something. This worked a treat. I felt strong. The temperature remained relentlessly cold not allowing even the tiniest bit of downtime. As the sun went down, the PHD down jacket went on. I grew to love this jacket so much! The hand warmers were activated and I continued. The PHD down trousers went on shortly afterwards. These helped retain heat as well as supported the feet staying warm.

I had hoped to finish that evening, but due to the very late start it seemed like an impossible task. 10km out from the finish at 1.30am, I conceded and put the tent up. The last thing I wanted was another night out in those conditions but I was over tired and was slowing. An audio book on the I phone helped this evening as I hadn’t seen anyone for most of the day. Little did I know I had already passed two athletes who decided to bivvy in a trailer! I pressed ‘I am ok’ and ‘I am bivvying’ on my tracker and got into my bag. I put my down jacket between the sleeping bag and the roll mat as I couldn’t risk it freezing solid! Fortunately, that worked! The night was cold but manageable.

At 7am, I was up and packing up when I heard the ski-doos coming out. It was such a great feeling to speak to someone. They carried on to check on others behind me and I headed out towards Braeburn. More endless rows of trees and eventually you come to a very steep slope down to the lake. I knew this was the final push! On the other side of the lake, the lovely Julie and Tom had walked out. I was so happy to see them. That last little bit goes on forever! Eventually, you see the finish line! Such an awesome feeling to get the medal and finally realise that I can do this and the gremlins were wrong!

I felt strong when I finished. The world’s biggest burger at Braeburn certainly helped!

I soon found out that I was the only British person to finish the 100 mile race this year which is such a shame. The cold is horrid when it gets you!

The staff and volunteers are a credit to the race. They go above and beyond to look out for you.

**Tips**

* Be choosy with what advice you listen to from others before the race. Everyone is nervous and everyone has a different game plan.
* Maintain discipline throughout. Regularly do a mental check of feet, toes, hands, fingers and face. If they’re too cold, deal with it immediately.
* Drink and eat regularly, at least every hour.
* Make sure you really need the toilet before you go! It’s so cold!
* Shot blocks were awesome bursts of energy! I kept one packet in my pocket per day.
* As soon as the sun starts to go, get another layer on.
* Consider down trousers. I wouldn’t go without them.
* Put your next snack in your jacket in advance to defrost it ready for eating.
* Warm your gas before you need to use it (if you’re using gas).
* Be prepared to make a fire (and know how to!). Matches alone will not work so create yourself a small fire starting kit).
* Keep your ipod etc very close to the skin. Otherwise, say goodbye to your battery very quickly.
* Put your down jacket between your sleeping bag and roll mat to keep it warmer and stop it freezing up.
* Be kind to yourself. It’s hard! Don’t let the gremlins beat you!
* Hand warmers – take 2 per day. I used all mine and they really helped. I kept them between my inner and mid gloves.
* Use a fresh buff every day (dry them when you can) to protect your face. Also, consider frost tape.

**Pre race**

* There was lots of information shared on the website as well as on the Facebook page. It’s Important to keep up to speed with all that so that you don’t miss anything.
* Rest and eat well. Hydrate well. Remember to relax.

**Hardest parts**

* Going at a pace you know you can work at. Ignoring everyone else’s plan.
* Maintaining discipline when you’re tired. Eat, drink, check extremities, rest and repeat.
* Strange things jumping out at you in the dark! The mind plays trick when all you can see is endless snow and trees. The rational mind should tell you that there is no elephant in the tree and that octopus is not there and neither is it wearing your glasses!
* Breathing – I often found it hard to catch my breath in my sleeping bag due to the relentless cold air being breathed in for hours. I felt quite panicked at times and had to have a chat with myself!
* Knowing there is no immediate rescue. You’ve got to get it right.

**Best parts**

* Head space!
* The stars – wow!
* The staff and volunteers.
* Camaraderie amongst racers.
* The burger at Braeburn!