

Caveat: I write these reports from a poor memory and because I write them for my failing memory they do go on and on and on. You have been warned! Skip to the last bit for kit and nutritional information. Best read when struggling to sleep.

Montane Yukon Arctic Ultra – What is it?

The Montane Yukon Arctic Ultra is described as the Worlds longest and toughest ultra. It was certainly tough and I haven't done a colder one yet. The race is open to runners, skiers and mountain bikers (fat bikes) and there are varying distances to suit most athletes. A marathon, a 100 miler, a 200 miler, a 300 miler and a 430 mile race. All encompass the first sections of the Yukon Quest – a 1000 mile dog sled race from Whitehorse in Canada to Fairbanks in Alaska. We were due to start from the same start line as the dogs but a day later which gave us a nice opportunity to watch the sled race start and the mushers preparing their teams of dogs.



The preparations for the Yukon Quest Dog race

I had become interested in the MYAU back in 2013 when I started running ultramarathons and reading exciting books about extreme races. It quickly made it onto my bucket list. I can't remember when I entered or the thought process involved but I knew I wouldn't be accepted to do the 430 mile race without experience and didn't want to use my holiday time up on the compulsory week long survival course prior to the race so I plumped for the 300 mile race....for now. I had never been in even a similar environment so I was sure this race would be testing enough.

I arrived in Whitehorse a few days before the race following several flights and was immediately shocked by the cold. It was about minus 19 when I arrived, Jersey had been about plus 10. I had a couple of days to enjoy Whitehorse, soak up the atmosphere and had a couple of training sessions, briefings etc to attend. The training consisted of a few hours listening to previous competitors and medics describing the race, the conditions etc and gathering the newbies fears and concerns. I got the feeling from the start that this was very much a self-sufficient race with very little hand holding. Answers to questions and concerns were not really answered specifically, more like "if you fall into overflow, deal with it straight away. If your hydration pack freezes, deal with it". Tips were kept as closely guarded secrets which I quite liked. After an hour break we were to reconvene at the briefing hotel with our kit for a short drive to the snow where we would have a wander, try out the conditions whilst dragging a sled, prove that we could use our cooking equipment, use our sleeping system and make a fire. I had had a mad hour as my stove hadn't been ready for collection until after the theory briefing so I had to collect it, run to the store to collect fuel and then watch a 15-minute-long instructional video on youtube. Luckily, I had Wi-Fi in the hotel and my sled was packed, packed and packed again. I had a quick test of the stove in the hotel car park and then legged it down to the pick-up point. After a short journey we made our way onto the snowy river and harnessed up ready for our walk. I stayed at the front and chatted with a couple of fellow competitors from Poland and Serbia until and tested out how the pulk would move. It was interesting to see what strategies people had opted for. Different types of sled, some connected by poles, some by ropes. Both had their advantages and disadvantages. Once a place had been found for our kit test we were told to make a fire, light our stoves and bed down. This was exciting and all those hours watching Bear Grylls DVD's with my son was about to pay off. I was being filmed by the camera crew and observed by a couple of volunteers which made things slightly nerve wracking but my fire lit very quickly making me look rather proficient or very lucky. I lit my stove first time and managed to wriggle myself into my sleeping bag and enjoyed a well-earned cigarette whilst stoking my fire and feeling very confident I knew what to do to survive if the time came. We were reminded that the temperatures were rather toasty at minus 10 and things could be very different if we encounter the minus 40's. Nevertheless, I felt confident and happy and would return to my hotel for a well-earned Pint.







Some images from the training night and of Whitehorse and the Yukon River and a stunning bald Eagle

The next morning, we had a short debrief followed by breakfast and the main briefings from the event organiser, the head of the medical team and the skidoo team. After that we had a few hours off to sort kit, buy more kit and watch the start of the Yukon Quest before the pre-race dinner in the evening which was very nice and sociable.

Race day was a very sensible 10:30 race start so I had a lie in, packed my sled (again), made a few last-minute kit choices and put my left-over belongings into storage until the end of the race. Luckily just as I was leaving, Glen, one of the ski doo drivers went past with a truck

full of sleds and offered to take mine to the start for me. The start line was a usual mix of emotions, photos and film interviews with various media channels. Most competitors arranged themselves in speed order with the marathon runners at the front and the 430 milers at the rear. After a few pics and a few good luck wishes we had a count down and were off into the unknown. This what I'd been looking forward to.



See if you can spot me

Five minutes in I realised I couldn't feel my fingers and set about making fists with my hands to get circulation going. I was probably towards the front half of the field and moving well, taking in the environment, managing my layers and getting used to pulling the sled. I ran with a few guys on the way to the first checkpoint at Rivendell which was to be the marathon finish. It took around six hours and I had spent some good time with a few other 300 mile racers talking about their previous attempts at their race and previous accomplishments.



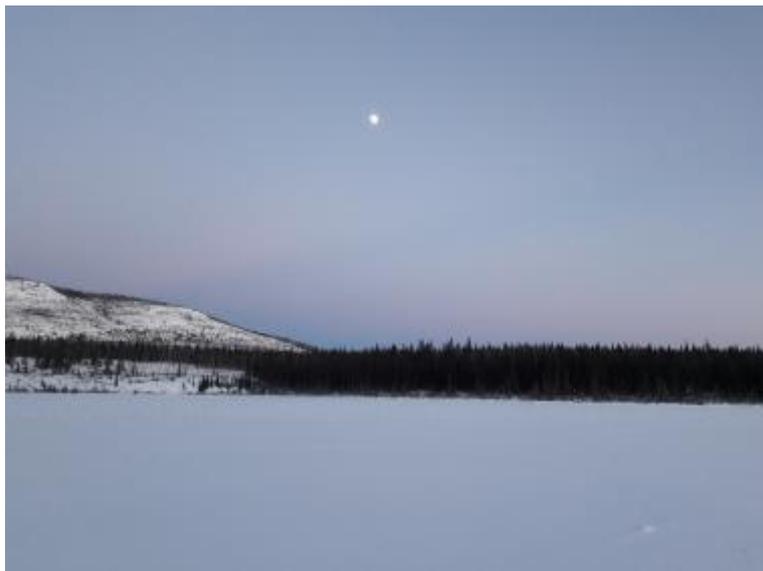
Some of the views on the way to Rivendell

At Rivendell I topped up my bladder, had a quick hot meal, one of my expedition meals, enjoyed a cigarette and headed out after a break of about fifteen minutes. I had needed to apply some “lube” as I was suffering with severe chaffing between my bum cheeks (called “chef’s arse” in the hospitality industry). Unfortunately, both Vaseline and Savlon freeze in such temperatures so they were useless but I had purchased an alternative in Whitehorse that I kept inside my jacket and hadn’t frozen. Thank god. I know of a Guernsey chap that had to drop out of last year’s race with chaffing so it is a very real problem and did concern me a lot at this early stage. I was only a 10th of the way into this race. Words from the chief medic kept going around in my head – if you have an issue no matter what is, STOP and deal with it. Easy to say but in race mode it’s always difficult to take time out, especially in these temperatures. It’s so much easier to think I will sort it at the checkpoint but as I was to find out, they never come as early as you want. It wasn’t long after I left before I was alone and kind of regretted leaving without company. The mindless chatter with a likeminded stranger certainly makes time go quicker. Against the recommendations of most people, event organisers, medics and previous competitors included, I opted to adopt my usual strategy of “winging it”. I don’t like to have much of a plan in mind, especially in such an alien environment that I’m not used to so I didn’t have an idea of how long it would take to get to each check point, how long I would rest or sleeping strategy but I did plan to get to the 100 mile point as quickly as possible without over exerting myself and leaving enough in the tank for the remaining 200 miles.



The trek towards Dog Grave lake seemed to take forever and included long stints on rivers and through woodland. It was starting to get dark as I left Rivendell so I was in for a long night alone with quite samey scenery. In the early hours of the morning when I was exhausted and starting to hallucinate I decided to check my GPS to see how far away from

the check point I was. Unfortunately, it seemed I was at least 10km away and it seemed I was on a different track and the checkpoint was a long way off to my right. I kept on plodding slowly and checking the GPS occasionally, but it was destroying my morale. A few hours later I came across a couple of Italian competitors sitting in the middle of the track. My hopes were lifted as I thought this was the checkpoint but they were just having a break and dashed off as soon as they saw me without much chat. They were dressed identically and seemed to be competing as a team and taking things rather seriously. Little did I know but these guys were massively experienced with the elder Enricho (63) having won the long 430 miles race several times, on foot, bike and skis. The younger Hanno had also completed the 430 and won the 300. They were both planning on doing the 430 and then carrying on another 570 miles unsupported to Fairbanks. Had I known this it would have been quite a morale boost to overtake them at this early stage but it probably would have rung alarm bells that I was pacing myself badly.



Lot's of selfies taken during the race and a lovely view from a lake

Eventually I fell into Dog Grave lake checkpoint which was two tents (which we weren't allowed inside unless seeking medical help) and a fire. I had a quick hot expedition meal, tried to warm myself by the fire but I was knackered and getting cold. I found a pile of hay

that the sled dogs would have slept on and put my roll mat on there and sleeping bag. I took my shoes off and put them at the bottom of my sleeping bag along with my food bag so the gels wouldn't freeze. I couldn't bear to take all my layers off to take my hydration bladder off so tried to wriggle into my sleeping bag but just couldn't do it. I had so many layers including my expedition down jacket and the shoes and food took so much room that I couldn't get my top half inside the bag. I called over to a volunteer who was stoking the fire and asked him to help. I fell to the floor and asked him to fasten me up and pull all draw cords tight around my shoulders and head. I put my gloved hands inside my pockets and tried to get some sleep but I had a lot of pain in my hips and my fingers were very cold. After what seemed like an hour of scrunching my hands into fists to keep circulation going I managed to get a couple of hours sleep before waking up cold and facing the challenge of getting out of my cocoon and then trying to get my shoes on. Thankfully my hydration bladder hadn't leaked in my sleeping bag – a very real race ending scenario that I had thought about a few hours before but didn't have the mindset to worry about, I just needed to get warm, get some feeling back in my fingers and sleep. A lucky escape this time. I popped to the medic tent to attend to my own chaffing in a semi warm environment, arranged my sled, had my bladder topped up, used the loo, had a chat with the support crew and headed off at the break of dawn. A few people had come and gone whilst I was resting, the Italians included and a couple of bikers.





Now onto the final push towards the 100-mile point. This was a long day and from memory, mostly through forests along the well ploughed track. A few hours in, I came across one of the chaps who I shared the medic tent with at the last checkpoint who was on a fat bike. He had been suffering with his chest and lungs I believe, as had I when I laid down to sleep. It was always such a relief to find some company on the trail but it was strange that this chap was in his sleeping bag in the middle of the trail. I asked how he was and he explained he has frostbite in his toes and fingers. I stayed with him for 15 minutes or so and on his request, I pressed his help button on his tracker to summon the snow mobile help who would come at some point and remove him to safety. His race would be over. To witness this DNF was tough and as a volunteer medic the previous year and someone with army experience in Norway it hit home how dangerous this environment was and how quickly your race could be over. After being reassured that he was happy and warm, on his insistence I left him and continued with my yomp. It wasn't long, maybe only a few hours before I saw skidoo guides racing past me in his direction. I had expected to see the racer on the back of the skidoo a couple of hours later but when it came past me and I gave them the thumbs up I realised it was a different racer on the back. So would begin the theme of the day as skidoo after skidoo came past me with a happy wave and returned hours later heading towards

Braeburn with more racers on the back of their skidoos. I would estimate that around 15-20 people must have dropped out of the race in the first 36 hours. I was starting to wonder what was going on behind me but I also gained a great deal of motivation with every DNF that I witnessed. I feel bad writing that but it's the truth. I came across one of the Italians, Hanno who had made a decent size fire at the side of the trail. He had pulled out due to a hip/groin injury and was waiting for the busy skidoos to work their way through the list of evacuees. I stopped and we had a chat for a while before I carried on. It seemed frostbite, exhaustion and injury were the main reasons for dropping out as the first day or so were down to minus 39 and colder with unusual levels of humidity. The skidoo drivers were often chatting on their way to pick up another racer but once they had them on board they usually drove past. I had made the mistake of asking how much further to the checkpoint and I never liked the answer. Sometimes it even got longer which was annoying. You could ask one and he would say 15km and a few hours later after making good progress it would be 17km. This could destroy your motivation so I stopped asking. We had been told not to ask but it's human nature to want to satisfy your curiosity. When I came to my first section of overflow I was grateful that I coincided with a skidoo driver approaching. As I stood contemplating whether to put on my waterproof over boots he drove straight across so I followed his route with the soft ice cracking beneath me. Thankfully my feet stayed dry. After a few more hours of monotonous night time walking through the woods I came across a photographer who told me the 100-mile check point of Braeburn was just 15 minutes away which was great news.





At the checkpoint, there was no one to greet me so I parked my sled alongside some others and went inside the café. The medics asked to see my fingers and toes and I ordered a burger from the counter which I could only eat half of. I stole five minutes on the media crew's laptop to Facebook the Mrs and caught up with a few of the volunteers before being shown to my room which was outside and shared with someone else who thankfully was waking so I didn't need to worry about disturbing him. I got in my sleeping bag and set my alarm for three or four hours later but didn't sleep well due to the throbbing in my legs and the temperature. These extreme sleeping bags are great outside and even when you first get in they feel really cold as they've been sitting on your sled all day in the cold but it's not long before you wake up sweating. When I woke, there was someone else sleeping in the room and someone else about to sleep on the floor so I sped up and got out to give him some space. I changed my clothes in the drying room, tended to my improving chaffing and went back in the café to sort my kit out. The temperature here was minus 39 according to the thermometer outside. After far too long faffing with kit, taping feet etc I departed, in the dark, alone for the longest leg of the 300-mile race, 45 miles. I wasn't looking forward to this.



I don't remember much about this section but I started at night and passed Pat (a veteran of the race who was competing in the 430 race on a bike) so we chatted a few times when we leapfrogged each other. She caught and overtook me when I was on the middle of a lake changing my head torch batteries. I helped her undo her frozen thermos flask and we went our separate ways. Well, the same way just with different modes of transport and at different

speeds. I realised after a not very long time that my hydration bladder had frozen and with the words of Diane, the medic ringing in my ears I decided to ignore them until daylight and continue on with my measly hourly cup of hot drink from my thermos. After a few lake crossings and once daylight had come and I really couldn't carry on without drinking and consuming the energy powders within my bladder I needed to stop and deal with the issue. I had kept an eye out for burnable wood and relative shelter so when I found a suitable area I quickly set to gathering kindling and larger branches to make a fire and faced the challenges of actually getting it lit without removing gloves. I also had the issue of needing a much needed "number 2" after several days of constipation. Feeling relieved I lit the fire and made a structure to suspend the bladder and hose a safe but effective distance over the fire to melt the ice which seemed to do the trick but I just couldn't get the bladder to work. After 30 minutes of melting the hose, sucking, blowing, bending it etc I just couldn't get any liquid out of it so I threw it in the sled and continued on with a plan to stop every hour for a drink from the bladder (not the hose). Hours later and after several long and monotonous lake crossings I was knackered and struggling. I was trying to consume as many calories as possible and was taking time out every hour to enjoy the scenery and have a cigarette but water was running out, I was slowing down, reaching a very low point and craved company. I knew I was in first place as I'd left the checkpoint before a South African competitor called Jethro but I had a feeling he would catch me as he had an incredibly quick walking pace on day 1 despite having little legs. Shortly before dark I was in need of water and wanted a break so in the slight shelter of a small wood separating some lakes I made the most of the dying sunlight and found an area that protected me from the wind, gave me some sun and had lots of dead wood to make a fire should I need it. I removed my harness, put my expedition jacket on along with one of the over boots to keep my feet warm (I couldn't fit the second on for some reason and gave up trying after a few minutes). I got my gas stove ready and primed and tried to light it with my expensive rental lighter but the lighter didn't work so I retrieved my other lighters which had also stopped working and eventually used my waterproof matches. Unfortunately, the expensive rental stove also failed to work so I made another fire and after three attempts, managed to light it. I filled the pan with snow and set to melting it on the fire but not before the plastic lid of the pan melted, tainting the water. This was a complete balls up and a steep learning curve. I now had a liter of contaminated plastic tasting water which would have to do but I was getting cold, the fire was going out quickly and unfortunately, despite sincerely hoping, I was not caught up by anyone and was now further away from the guy in front. I had been experiencing a lot of pain for a few hours in my left knee and at this point I decided to put on a sturdy knee support to limp my way to the checkpoint. Onwards I would continue with more lake crossings and more very short but very steep climbs separating the lakes. These were good fun, I would run up the hill with bravado until half way up when the sled would get on the slope and then the battle would commence. With the 20kg sled pulling me backwards from my hips and shoulders I just had to get as low as possible and use the walking poles to try and cling to the top and get the sled over the summit. God knows how a team of 14 dogs get up these things. Once my water had run out and the sun had gone down I resorted to eating chunks of ice from the floor. It's depressingly surprising how much ice you need to put in your mouth and let melt to get a miniscule amount of water but it kept me going.

I found a walking pole at some point in the middle of the lake and thinking it may be another racer I secured it to my sled to return it to its rightful owner at some point.



A high point, good mood moment



And a low point about 20 minutes later

As I was crossing yet another huge lake and slowing down a lot I looked behind and saw a head torch a couple of kilometers behind. After craving company for so long I was now speeding up to try and stay ahead and switching my head torch off so he couldn't see me and speed up in pursuit. That's what I would do if I saw a head torch a short distance ahead of me. Eventually I saw a small light ahead at a cabin which came closer. I was so excited that this may be the Ken Lake checkpoint. As I got very close and negotiated the short but very steep climb to the cabin I dumped my harness and sled and headed inside to be greeted by some lovely volunteers. I had a quick scout around to familiarize myself with my surroundings. Someone was asleep outside by the fire under a tarpaulin and Enricho was preparing to leave. I noticed outside that he had a matching walking pole to the one I had found. I gathered the missing one from my sled and presented it to him to receive a nice big grateful hug. I asked the volunteers who was behind me and was relieved to find out it was a 430 runner. I asked if they could find out how far away Jethro was, the most likely 300-mile racer behind me and the guy I had expected to catch up with me. I was gutted and overjoyed at the same time to discover he had dropped out at Braeburn (sorry Jethro). I retired to the tent next door for a hot meal, to dry out my kit and to check on my knee before bed. As I dropped my trousers I was horrified to see a massively swollen knee. It looked like a football was growing on the inside of my leg. Nervous of the medics seeing it I turned around, taped it up quickly and replaced my trousers. Catastrophe averted. After a while a couple of athletes arrived, Simon Reed and his mate Tom. Tom was concerned about his frost-bitten fingers due to picking up his tent poles without gloves on I believe. He seemed resigned to the fact that his race was over and had this confirmed by the medic. Simon seemed focused on staying in the race and after craving company I was relieved to know that I could spend at least the next few hours in his company. I retired to my sleeping bag in the cold about 3 feet too far away from the fire for a very poor, cold and uncomfortable sleep. On waking with throbbing in my hips I went back the tent to resume faffing, changing, filling flasks and bladders, eating and preparing to leave.



I left with Simon in the dark starting down a steep little descent and back onto the lake. It was good to have company for the day as making new acquaintances and talking rubbish really takes your mind off the mundane parts of the trail and the pain in your legs and feet but unfortunately there weren't too many opportunities to chat as the trail was too narrow. We stopped after a few hours at a lovely gap in the woods overlooking the frozen Yukon river. We decided to make the most of the photo opportunity and trudged through the soft snow for a couple of pics. I lit a cigarette and then we had a cigar each which Simon had thoughtfully brought along. This turned out to be the longest break Simon had had whilst on the trail. On the previous days, I had enjoyed the routine of stopping every 60 minutes for a little break and a seat on the sled but Simon, as an ex Royal Marine preferred relentless forward progress and rarely stopped for a break. We continued through a blurry bit that I can't remember until we had to cross the river and we saw signs of civilization – telegraph pylons and heard traffic on a road. As Simon had previously kayaked down the Yukon a couple of years ago he gave me the heads up that we were close but close was never close enough on this race. Eventually we saw buildings and a bridge etc as we neared the 200-mile checkpoint of Carmacks. When we were about 1km away a few volunteers and a photographer came out to greet us and walk us in which was lovely. We arrived in daylight

at about 16:00. Once inside the warm community center checkpoint we went our separate ways to tend to our own routines. My priority was to get my aching legs elevated and FaceTime the Mrs and kids. I'm not sure what Simon did. I suggested we leave at midnight but Simon talked me into a 23:00 ETD. I spoke to the family, had a hot meal and tried to get some sleep upstairs but this was broken due to lots of noise and pain. The community center was being set up by the medics and support crew and more racers were coming in. When I woke for the umpteenth time I checked Facebook to read that my good friend Tom Toye (a Belgian competitor who I had raced with in the Amazon) had dropped out due to foot issues and was at Carmacks. My immediate priority was to locate him and give him a hug. Once up, I had a wash, got changed, tried to sort my gas stove and lighter issues, chatted with the media crew and basically spent about two hours faffing around and repacking my sled for the next legs of the journey. As it neared 23:00 and I prepared to leave I saw Simon who was nowhere near ready so I had to wait for another hour for him. So started yet another hour of packing, sorting, faffing and chatting.





We left Carmacks together at midnight to my first glimpse of the Northern Lights, Aurora Borealis. It wasn't a spectacular display but I did see and watch them for an hour which was lovely. Once out of Carmacks we joined an iced over road for a hilly section of relentless ups and downs. I had hoped to save my legs on the downs and sit on my sled which was easier said than done. For those using ropes to haul their sleds they could just sit down. For those with poles, I would have to plan ahead. I'd need to remove my mitts, undo my harness, reverse my poles over the top of my sled, sit on it, put my mitts back on and then try to push myself down using my walking poles. After a few moments I would have to endure the pain of getting up from a lying down position, take my mitts off, put my harness on, put my mitts back on and start walking again. Was it really worth it? No, absolutely not but it was something different, may have paid off and was sometimes a bit of fun. I often couldn't see how long or steep the downhill was so you didn't know if all that messing around was worth it but sometimes it was worth a gamble. At one point, when I was ahead of Simon by about five minutes I had a go and got into full bobsled mode. I was lying flat, feet first in my most streamlined position as I gathered speed. I estimate I was doing about 30kph, gaining good air as I went over bumps. I tried to look forward to see where I was going and what I was heading towards but the snow was spraying in my face and eyes. After a few seconds I lost control and went flying. My walking poles, head torch, sled and myself all scattered in different directions as we flew down the hill. After a few minutes gathering everything up and composing myself I watched Simon flying down towards me at breakneck speed. We continued on together. As daylight came and we walked through some woodland the tables turned drastically. I had been on fire, doing really well and having to wait for Simon on occasions. I felt great and even jogged a few sections. It wasn't long before disaster struck and I had some severe pains in my left shin. I stopped and slowed and had a whine before carrying on behind Simon. I found it easier following someone at this point. After an hour the pain had been increasing at an alarming rate and I was becoming very concerned. All I focused on was keeping Simons sled right in front of me. I was limping badly but kept saying to myself "lose sight of his sled and you're out of this race". I thought I had a stress fracture in my shin. I asked Simon to stop a couple of times whilst I assessed my leg but I could tell he didn't want to. After a while when I resigned myself to the fact I couldn't keep

up I told him to crack on. I stopped, lit a fire to keep myself warm and made a plan. I knew my speed had slowed dramatically and I needed more layers. The early part of the day always surprised me as the coldest. I had expected it to be coldest between 01:00 and 06s:00 but it actually seemed to drop a few degrees at around 08:00 when the sun came up. I lit a fire, put on my down over trousers, my expedition jacket and spent ages trying to get my over boots on but could only fit one on my good foot. I tried for 20 minutes to get the over boot on my left leg but didn't have the strength to force my foot inside due to the pain. One would have to do. I had a ciggie, a hot drink and some pain killers and carried on limping. Progress was slow as I was walking with one massive over boot on my right foot and had to drag my left foot behind me. I had to stop and sit down every few minutes and contemplate my options. At times the pain was so bad I would just drop to my knees and crawl. I tried limping, hoping, pushing myself along with my left leg on the sled. I thought about a splint but couldn't see how it could work and I tried every option of limping and walking so as to ease the pain. I looked ridiculous, pushing off the inside of my foot, the outside etc I just had no movement in my foot/ankle at all due to the pain in my lower shin. I thought my race was over. All sorts of negative thoughts went through my head – would I reach the next check point, would the medics pull me from the race, not only was I not going to win but it now seemed as though I wouldn't even finish. I still had about 100 miles to go and I was probably down to less than one mile per hour. I looked at the SOS/HELP button on my tracker that I had taped over to prevent me from pushing it but nothing was going to make me cut the tape off and push it. I continued with one painful limp after another along the undulating Yukon river. The sun was up now and due to the effort of hobbling and my extra warm layers I realised I was soaked with sweat. Usually a bad sign but in this situation, I was happy just to be moving. I spoke to the skidoo guides who asked if I wanted a lift. I really did but I knew my race was over so we sat for a while and had a morale boosting chat and as they left I asked them to keep an eye on my tracker. If it didn't move for a few hours, come and get me. I wasn't going to press my help button. After a few more hours I saw Julie, a previous competitor of the 300 and 430 mile races and a volunteer on this years. Julie gets cabin fever and loves the Yukon so was outside as often as possible and couldn't turn down the opportunity for a walk out to greet an invalid. It was wonderful to see her and chatting rubbish really took my mind off the pain. We limped together chatting for a while, counting down the kilometers. She had written distances from the McCabe checkpoint in the snow to advise me and other runners how far we had left which was great although it was painful to see how slowly we could check off one measly kilometer.



Eventually we made it to the check point and I was so relieved. I didn't think I was going to make it here on foot a few hours back. McCabe was manned by the most awesome team of medics and volunteers, Sue, Lucy, Stu and Julie. Once I had arrived I decided then and there that coming first wasn't a priority, finishing the race was and I didn't care if I was overtaken, I just needed to fix my leg. I also discovered that there was no winner's trophy and couldn't be bothered nearly killing myself when the prize was the same if I came first or last. I had a great time at this checkpoint, sharing stories of the trail, jokes, shaving my leg so I could apply some tape to my shin splints, eating lots and generally just enjoying the company, the race and the experience. Enricho and Simon woke, or I should say I woke Enricho and Simon who got themselves ready and left. I went for a sleep without setting an alarm and woke 10 hours later. Surely by now I had given up my lead. Nope. Still no 300 mile racers close behind so after another couple of hours of eating, laughing and faffing I headed out just behind one 430 runner and alongside another. It wasn't long before I limped ahead on my still painful leg and bumped into the chap who was ahead. Typically, each time I really felt the need to listen to music I would have to stop, take off my mitts, take off my gloves, dig my phone out, put some music on, take off my balaclava, put the earphones in, pull the balaclava back down zip up coat, put gloves back on, put mitts back on and we're ready to go.....and then we bump into someone on the trail and have to do the reverse to exchange pleasantries. Very annoying. So this time when I bumped into Julian who had taken a wrong turn, the pleasantries were short and I limped ahead as fast as my leg could take me. I was moving quite well under the influence of anti-inflammatories and pain killers and making good progress towards Pelly crossing which was the next check point and would ultimately be the finish line for the 300 mile racers after a 32-mile trek to Pelly Farm and back. There were a few lake crossings and for a while a complete white out crossing one lake which gave me an opportunity to wear my ski goggles which provided a refreshing change of scenery with the goggles turning everything white into orange. I was constantly looking over my shoulder to ensure I was opening the gap between me and the guys behind which boosted my morale and made the hard work worth it even though I wasn't racing these guys. I stopped for a while and chatted to the skidoo drivers, had a hot drink and a smoke and carried on. Eventually Julie came out to see me prior to the checkpoint and walked me in. Again, this was greatly appreciated and spurred me on a bit, to know I was so close and to have some company from someone that had done the race before.



Me having to shave my legs to apply Kinesiology tape to my shin splints

At the checkpoint, I had a nice hot meal and retired to the main gym hall of the community center/school for a sleep but woke a few hours later as there was a lot of noise from next door. I'm not sure what it was but it was like I was sleeping in a squash court. When I woke, sweating heavily I had no reason to hang around so had another meal, sorted my kit out, repacked my sled with my new batch of food from my drop bag, changed my base layers and socks and left in the early hours of the morning heading for Pelly Farm along the 32-mile driveway that services just the farm. It's a dead end other than that.





Woohoo, finally got to wear my ski goggles

I left the town at about 01:00 and passed a few houses with lively dogs and a few people came out of their house to ask where I was going. I knew this section would be tough and hilly but had been told there would be opportunities for sledging and making up lost time from the relentless up hills. Unfortunately for me and other racers, it had started to snow which helped warm up the temperatures a bit but also made the going quite tough as I now had to drag the sled through a few inches of fresh powder and sledging was ruled out. I had become used to estimating my time of arrival and adding a couple of hours to give myself a worst-case scenario. This was much better than expecting 10 hours and it turning out to be 14. On this occasion, I had estimated an arrival at 18:00, just before dark. After about 11 hours I noticed a sign saying “you’ve made it” and the entrance to the farm but I still had a feeling that I could be hours away and a remote farm such as this could be hundreds of acres and could take a long time to get to the actual checkpoint. When I saw the bright turquoise trousers of Antje in the distance I almost cried. Antje was the wife of Boris, one of the 430 mile competitors and had been support crew for the race and was one of the only other people involved in the race who smoked so we spent lots of time together at the checkpoints and she was a fantastic supporter. I couldn’t believe I had managed 32 really hilly miles in

fresh snow with a very dodgy leg in eleven and a half hours. That meant I only had about the same to get back to the finish. Just 12 ish hours left of racing and I was done. Pelly Farm had been bigged up to us all from the very first race briefing that it was a lovely place with fabulous hosts and we should all make a point of spending some time there so I was very much looking forward to having a leisurely time there. The 430 mile racers had a compulsory 8 hour stop here but the 300 mile racers didn't have to stay at all. As I arrived and had a habitual cigarette with Antje, Sue, the farm owner came out with a can of beer which was amazing. Dale, her husband pulled up in his pickup truck accompanied by a German volunteer helping him on his farm. I introduced myself and asked what they were up to. My eyes lit up when he said he was going to check on his Wolf traps and I asked if I could go with them. Of course, the answer was yes and I jumped in. I was so excited to be moving at faster than 3 miles per hour for the first time in a week and excited to be enjoying this Yukon experience. I fired so many questions at Dale he was probably quite relieved when we got to the traps and could jump out for a walk and to investigate the traps. No Wolves today but I showed Dale a lot of pictures I had taken on the walk to the farm and he confirmed they were Wolf prints. I had seen hundreds of them all over the trail on the way to the farm and alarmingly lots in the tyre tracks of Pat's fat bike. She wasn't very far ahead of me so I knew the animals were very active and very close.

Once back at the farm I was treated to another beer and a giant portion of Moose Lasagna which was great and just what I needed. After a bit of chat with the 430 mile racers that were behind me and a bit of banter the Yann and Thilo, the media crew I retired to my room. Whilst the 430 mile racers had to sleep in another building a few hundred meters away, as I wasn't staying long I was allowed to kip on Sue and Dale's sons bed. Sue even put a pillow under my legs to elevate them. I set my alarm for 19:00 but was up and ready to leave at 18:00 excited to only have one leg of the journey left and knowing that I would be passing all of the remaining 430 mile racers on my way back so it should be easier than my trek here and should pass quicker. How wrong I was.



One of many Wolf tracks and me posing with a rifle and some Wolf pelts at Pelly Farm

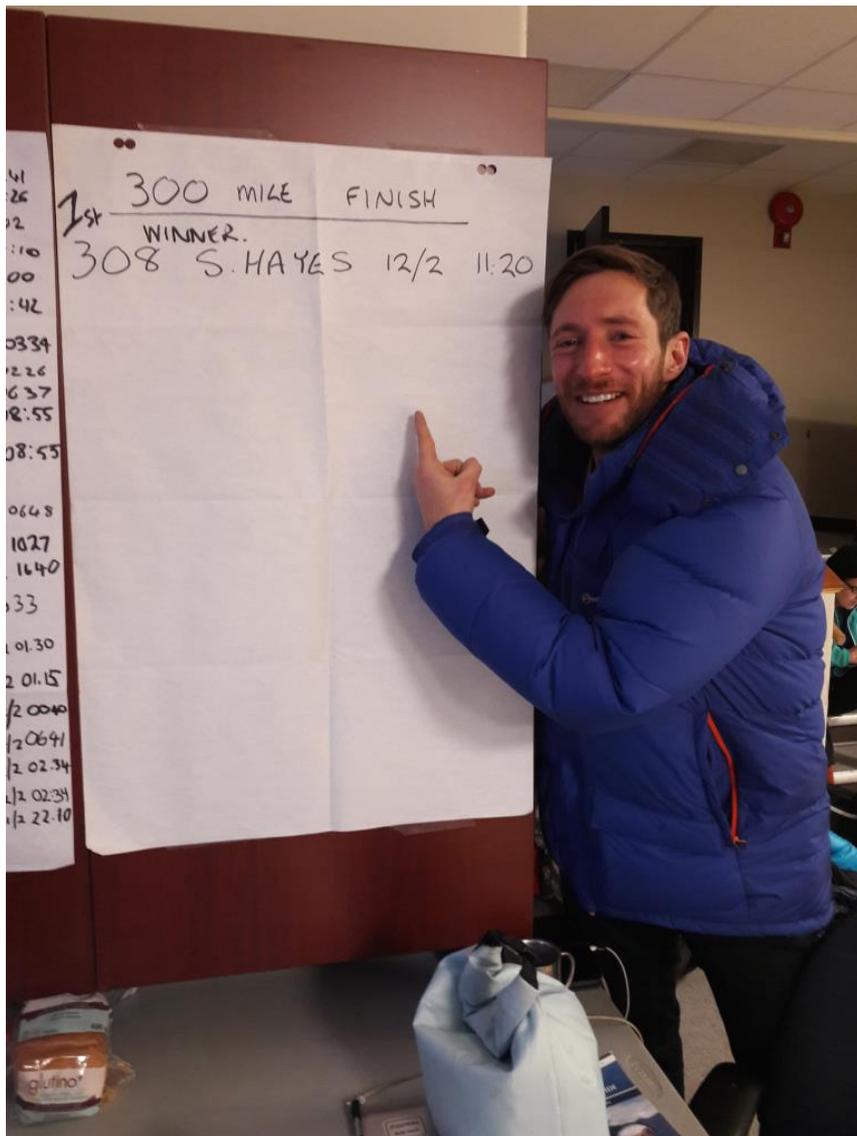
This leg was horrendous. I had left at night as Yann had asked me to finish in the dark because he didn't have much night time footage. I duly offered to start at 18:00 giving me an estimated finish time of between 06:00 and 08:00. It gets light at 08:00. I planned to get a good start, chat to a few of the racers I would immediately bump into in the first couple of hours and then put my tunes on and dance my way to the finish. After wishing the few people I saw the best of luck, I went through the palaver of putting my headphones in and pressed play only to find out that my seven-day free trial of music on my phone (because I'd left my iPod on the kitchen table in Jersey) had expired. This was a real blow for me and really annoyed me. I would now have a long, boring, night time walk along a 32-mile road I had already walked along with no company apart from the few racers I would pass and a very sore leg. Two now actually as my right leg had similar tendonitis issues from over compensating for my weak left leg. Still I plodded on through the still falling fresh snow and kind of wished I'd had snow shoes on. Dragging the sled through the deepening snow was getting tough and every foot step was hard work through the few inches of snow and my feet were getting wet and cold. The chances of a night time finish were long gone, this was going to be a 18 hour day and I didn't care. Sorry to let you down Yann. When I thought I had passed all other 430 racers coming in the opposite direction I got so bored of walking through the dense woods and started toying with the idea of stopping for a sleep. I wasn't particularly tired, just bored and I also wanted to keep the adventure going as long as possible whilst also winning. I found an area that looked suitable for a lie down and set to making camp. I cut several spruce branches down and lay them in the snow as an extra mattress under my roll mat. I found a standing dead tree that was about the right width for me to be able to saw through and I set to work. After a few minutes, I was almost done and gave the tree a tug. After hearing the crack and seeing the force at which the tree came crashing towards me I dived for cover into the soft snow. In my tired state I hadn't taken the effort of looking up to see how tall the tree was I just noticed how thick it was. It turned out to be about 20 feet long and landed across the road so I set to sawing it up into logs for my fire. Once I had a good stock of logs and skidoos could pass along the road without hitting the tree I set to gathering kindling and preparing my fire which didn't go so well. It took loads of attempts and I was onto my last fire lighters. Each time it seemed to light but didn't last long. Eventually after about 30 minutes I managed to get it to light so I got my sleeping bag and roll mat out and had a lie down. I didn't sleep long as I kept trying to put fresh logs on the fire to get some heat. After a while I must have fallen asleep and woke at around 07:30 when it was getting light, and cold. As I opened my sleeping bag a big pile of snow fell into my face. I sat up and couldn't find my sled or equipment anywhere, everything had been covered in a fresh blanket of snow and my fire had gone out. I was very cold and had to get moving quickly so put my trainers back on, found most of my kit and made my way towards the finish. The daylight always brings a more positive feeling and the views were incredible with the moon still up, a nice sunrise and a great view over the Pelly river and a huge forest so I made the most of it, trying to prolong the experience and taking in the environment and my achievement and stopped to take it all in on several occasions until I came across Julie a few km out from the finish so I knew I was quite close but it didn't stop me asking how much further every ten minutes which must have been annoying. I knew that once we came across the few houses at the end/beginning of the road, on the outskirts of town I wouldn't have long left and then we came across the media crew and I knew they wouldn't have walked far. I then saw Robert Pollhammer, the event organiser and was told to follow the markers up the last short hill where I nearly tripped and fell flat on my face

right in front of the camera. Yann asked me to wait whilst he got in position to cross the final bit of frozen river which I did and he didn't even use the footage and then I finished the final few minutes to the finish line outside the Pelly Crossing check point.





I was so pleased to have finished but also felt immediately deflated that the adventure was over and had it not been for flights and work and family commitments I would have been happy to continue, even with my dodgy legs. I went inside for a meal and to socialise with the volunteers, medics etc for a while and chilled out. I walked to the shop, walked to the nearby motel room Robert had rented for my first shower in a week (thanks for the toiletries Yann) and relaxed before going out to greet Stefan who finished in second place and present him with his medal. After a full day of chatting and catching up with family and friends on Facebook I had a few hours' sleep and left Pelly Crossing the next morning with all four of the 300 mile finishers and a few of the medics and volunteers for a four hour journey back to Whitehorse for an afternoon of souvenir shopping, kit packing and getting really drunk before a 4am flight to Vancouver the next morning.



All in all, this was a fantastic and well organised race, an unbelievable experience and one I will cherish forever. There are so many races available these days that I would very rarely contemplate going back to do the same race twice. This is an exception. Even before I had started the race I had a feeling this was something special and I would be returning. I can't wait to go back and tackle the 430 mile race in two years time.



My swollen legs three days after the finish of the race

What I did right?

Most things really. I would have liked some more cold weather experience before the race but it didn't hinder me much. My guess work at equipment choices pretty much worked and my non-existent strategy worked. I made the most of the daylight, only sleeping at night which helped and I had a blast.

What did I do wrong?

Nothing really. Had it not been for my injury, which couldn't be predicted or avoided, I think I executed the perfect race, especially as I had zero experience of cold weather racing and no fixed race plan, sleep or nutrition strategy. I did as I always do and completely "winged" it with a completely flexible attitude and an equal desire to win or do the best that I could and have as much fun as possible. I'm so pleased that I managed to win and enjoy the experience immensely at the same time.

What would I do differently next time?

I probably wouldn't bother with a hydration bladder but would consider soft flasks or similar that could fit inside my clothing. I would have more vacuum flasks with hot drinks and would stick to the routine of stopping every hour for a sit down and a hot drink.

I would probably trial using ropes to pull my sled rather than the heavy plastic poles to make sledging opportunities easier and pulk access. I wouldn't need to remove gloves and de-harness to have a two-minute break.

I wouldn't forget my iPod as music can be a real saviour

I would put more thought into food although overall I was quite happy

I would take a simpler stove as I would only need to boil a bit of water for my expedition meals

I would possibly invest in a small tent

What training did I do?

I did my usual running training with an amazing 185-mile race from South to North Wales <http://kingoffasdyke.co.uk/> September (just over four months out) and then a very unique style of race which turned out to be a 54-mile training run <http://escapefrommeriden.co.uk/> about 10 weeks out. I did a few big mileage weeks (for me) of 70, 80 and 90 miles finishing about three weeks prior to the race start. I always know when to taper and always time it well but I don't always execute it correctly. I should have peaked at 90 miles, done 60 the week later, then 30, then nothing. That was the plan. In reality I peaked at 90, did about 40 the following week, 10 the next and nothing the week before the race leaving me feeling pretty lazy with a few kg's to lose. Lucky really as I lost six kilograms during the race and another three in the few days afterwards. I had done an intensive month of Pilates which was completely new for me but was recommended by my excellent Osteopath when I went to see him about a lot of back pain. It turned out my supporting muscles were pathetic so it seems the twice weekly Pilates4life sessions paid off along with my weekly sports massages with Maximum Fitness. Thank you **Max** <https://www.facebook.com/Maximum-Fitness-200483429996011/> , **Helen** <https://www.facebook.com/pilates4lifejersey/> and **Bill** <http://www.healthplus.je/>

I had experimented with tyre pulling and had spent a good few hours walking up and down beaches dragging a standard car tyre. I believe it helped strengthen the hips and back and get me ready for the mundane, slow progress but I didn't go crazy and probably ditched the tyre after just half a dozen sessions and pursued slow, long mileage instead as I felt like a bit of a wally dragging the tyre and got lots of funny looks.

I had also been doing a bit of gym work, mainly to look better and to give my legs a break but I do believe it helps.



Me and Terry the tyre

What did I eat?

Despite my experience in Ultra running, I never actually count calories or calculate what I'm going to need. I should, most serious ultra-runners would, but I tend to guess and usually end up with some spare. I've never not had enough.

This time I did a supermarket sweep with a trolley at the Whitehorse supermarket and threw in whatever I thought I may fancy with a mixture of fat, carbohydrates and protein.

Whilst typing this report I just went on some websites to ascertain my calorie consumption and found it quite interesting. I may start doing this for future events to see how much I usually need.

I had a mixture of energy gels, powdered energy drinks, jerky, salami's, flour tortillas, nuts, wriggly worms (I didn't have enough baggage allowance to take my favourite Percy Pigs), Kendal mint cake and chocolate bars. (Note: All this food would freeze and none of it is very nice when frozen, especially energy gels and Tortilla's. The Kendal mint cake was great).

I split my food into four lots. The first for my sled at the start of the race and then three separate bags for Braeburn, Carmacks and Pelly Crossing. Each bag consisted of the following items and has the total number of calories alongside

2 x expedition meals = **1,600**

10 x SIS energy gels = **870**

9 x High 5 energy drink powders (3 Whey protein and carbohydrate , 3 energy source, 3 Extreme high caffeine) **1,572**

5 Nature Valley chewy bars – trail mix, salted nut etc **700**

1 bag of Jerky **500**

1 bag of salami sticks **600**

1 large bar of Lindt chocolate **690**

1 bag of roasted peanuts **950**

1 bag of wriggly worms sweets **860**

1 pack of flour tortilla's **752**

1 Kendal mint cake **306**

9,400 calories per drop bag. I didn't always consume all of the Tortillas (as they aren't nice covered in ice) and didn't always consume all of the fluid from the energy powders as the hydration bladder was often frozen and would be discarded at checkpoints and replaced with new, fresh water and powders. I did have a few extra chocolate bars on day 1, left over from the training weekend and I also consumed large meals at Braeburn, Carmacks, Pelly Crossing and a giant portion of Moose Lasagne at Pelly Farm so I estimate during the seven day race I probably consumed around **42,900** calories or just over **6,000 per day**. I still lost the aforementioned 9kg's during and after the race despite eating and drinking everything in sight.

What kit did I take?

Clothing

4 x Merino base layers

4 x mid layer fleeces and primaloft smocks (only one worn – Montane Fireball smock)

1 x Montane Sabretooth softshell – worn everyday

1 x Montane Minimus waterproof shell – unworn

1 x NorthFace Gilet – worn every day

1 x Montane Deep cold Jacket – essential and worn many times each day during breaks

3 x Merino boxer shorts

4 x Merino tights

1 x Rab Vapour rise trouser – worn continually throughout the race. A great purchase

1 x Montane Prism over trouser. Only worn once when I was injured and cooling down

1 x pair of Compressport calf guards – worn continually throughout race

1 x pair of liner gloves

3 x pairs of mid layer gloves although only two pairs worn

1 x Pair of Expedition mitts – invaluable and worn everyday

2 x Buff's

1 x Face mask

1 x Montane Punk Balaclava

1 x Montane Yukon Beanie hat

1 x thick Merino hat

6 x Injinji liner socks

4 x Drymax running socks

2 x Drymax winter running socks

1 x Inov8 Arctic claw thermo trainers

1 x Pair of Neos overboots – purchased to tackle overflow and wet river/lake crossings but only worn when I was injured and moving slowly to keep my feet (foot) warm.

1 x Microspikes (unused)

1 x Rab Gaiters (unused)

1 x inflatable sleeping mat (unused and left in drop bag)

1 x sleeping mat

1 x rental sleeping bag

1 x Bivvi bag

1 x silk sleeping bag liner

Survival and miscellaneous equipment comprising of:

Bothy bag

Survival blanket

Signal mirror

Leatherman multi tool

Folding saw

Large sheath knife

Fire kit – comprising of flint and steel, waterproof matches, lights, fire sticks, fire lighters, alcohol hand sanitiser, tampons

Compass

Paracord

2 x bungees

Thermos flask

Spork

Cooking pots (rented)

Gas stove, spare fuel and lighter (rented)

GPS

Leki trekking poles

Inov8 running vry to accommodate hydration bladder

Camelbak Winter hydration pack and insulated hose

Small travel towel

Gorilla tape

24 x Lithium AA batteries (cost a fortune and I managed to take some back for a refund at the end of the race)

8 x Lithium AAA batteries (As above) – On lake crossings and with a big moon I enjoyed not using my head torch and allowing my eyes to adjust

LED Lenser head torch

LED Lenser back up head torch

Camera

iPod (forgotten)

Karabiners

Sunglasses (unworn)

Ski goggles

Wet wipes (froze and were useless)

Toilet roll (unused in first four days and needed a lot more in the last day!!)

Tooth brush and tooth paste

Eye mask for day time sleeping and flights

Waterproof map case

Waterproof phone and ipod cases

Harness

Sled and poles (rented)

Compressions bags for spare clothing

Drybags used as drop bags at checkpoints

Ankle and knee supports

Notepad and pen

Rubbish/used gel bag

Portable charger

Phone charger and plug adapter

First aid kit comprising of:

Plasters

Sun tan lotion

Kinesiology tape

Hand warmers

Vaseline and Savlon (froze and were useless unless kept within clothing) Savlon probably saved me from an early DNF

Silicone toe covers

Bandages and dressings

Safety pins

Alcohol wipes

Needles and syringes

Tincture of Benzoin (Friars Balsam)

Salt tablets

Caffeine tablets

Ibuprofen

Co-codamol

Nutrition

As above

Would I recommend the race? Oh hell yes, without hesitation

As always, huge thanks must go to my sponsors

Mercury distribution

Dolan Hotels Ltd