

Yukon Arctic Ultra 2018

Jethro De Decker

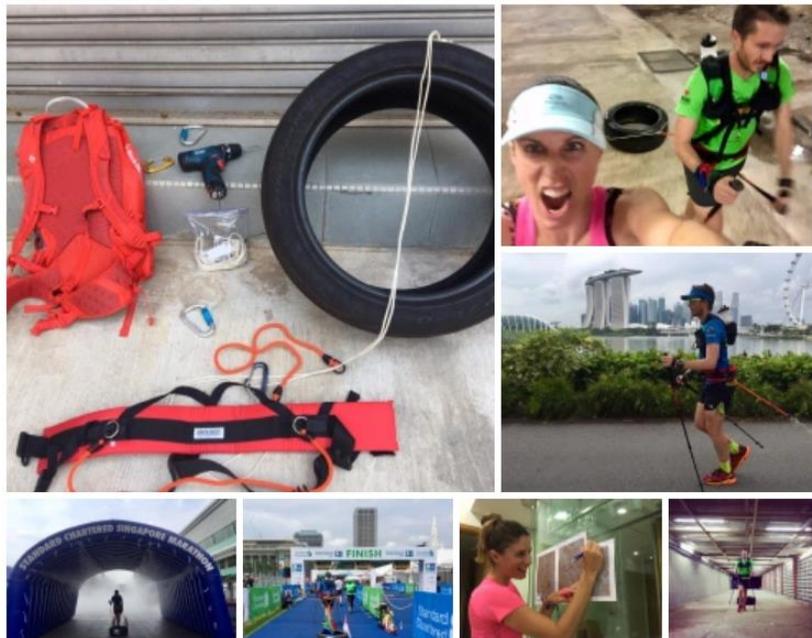
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This story starts on 7 February 2017 at Breaburn Lodge, 100 miles into the 2017 Yukon Arctic Ultra. 15 hours after arriving at the check point. I made the tough decision to withdraw from the race and try again in 2018. I had done everything right – hundreds of kilometers of tyre dragging, months of circuit training, carefully selected each piece of gear, soaked up knowledge at the Survival Training Course, got my nutrition right, sleeping strategy was working – everything right except one thing – shoe size. Just slightly too tight and after 100 miles tendons in my foot were damaged. My options were simple; painkillers and go on, risking long term damage and a greater chance of frostbite, or withdrawing and trying again another time. I chose the latter.

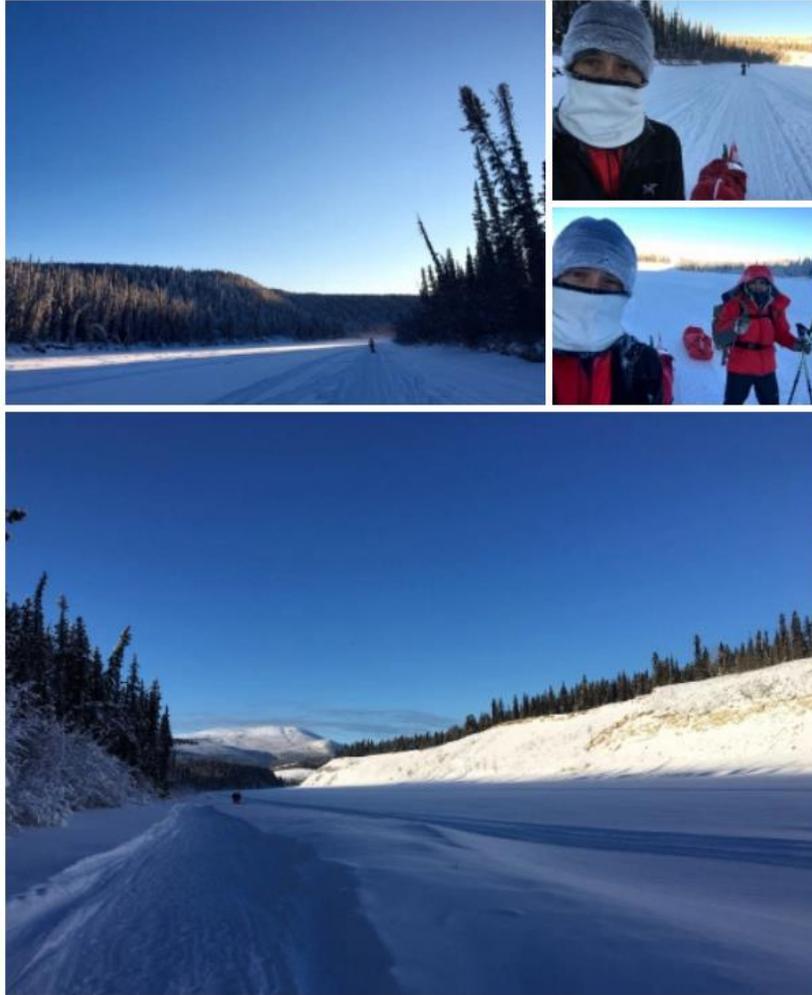
One year later and I'm back on the start line in Whitehorse. 300 miles lay ahead, another year of preparation behind.



This time I knew I had the right gear but was also well aware that just one poor decision over the next sleep-deprived week could mean the end of my race. I had a plan for how long I would sleep, how much I would eat and drink, what I would do if something went wrong and, if it came to it, at what point I would push my SOS button, signaling my race is over and I needed help. Whatever happened, I was going to stick to my plan. Getting to the finish line was the goal – but it was optional. Getting home healthy was non-negotiable.

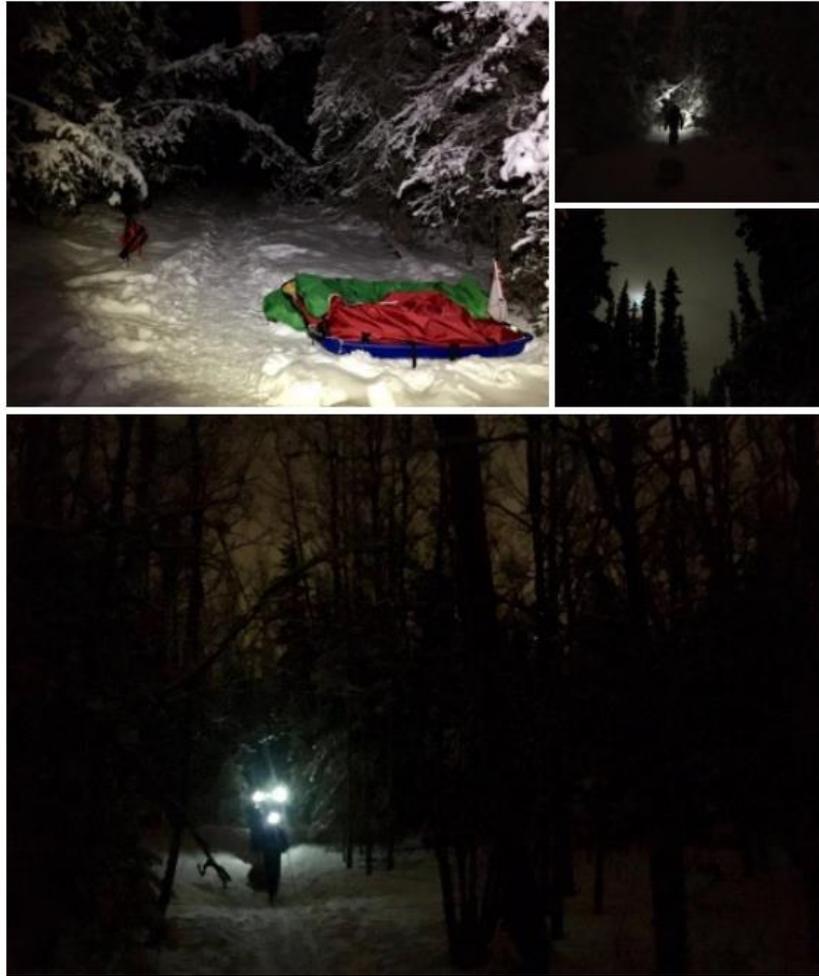


It was a crisp, blue-skied, sunny morning at 31 degrees below zero on the start line. Marathoners, 100-mile racers and twenty-one 300 mile racers started down the Yukon River together. It's a relatively easy first 50 km along the river, with a check point serving hot food at the marathon finish line along the way.



Just before leaving the river I met Ilona, a Canadian racing on skis (entrants can choose to race on foot, skis or even fat bikes.) She was clearly enjoying herself and very comfortable in that environment. She would certainly do well in the race.

I planned to sleep around 10 km before the next check point, Dog Grave Lake. That would mean a big first day of just over 80 km, and an easy walk to coffee and a hot meal after I woke up. I had checked course maps and seen that at that distance there was a forest after a short climb (i.e. sheltered from the wind and at higher ground – so a couple of degrees warmer.) Temperatures dropped to near 50 below that night and it turned out that sleeping where I did had been a very good decision.



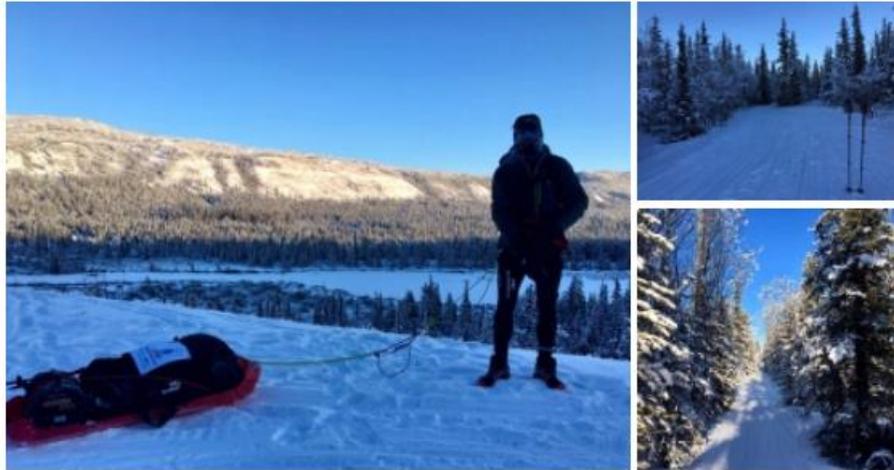
Arriving at Dog Grave Lake the next morning I realized just how cold the previous night had been. Behind me, more than half the racers were being evacuated from the course, many due to frostbite. The race had been put on hold – we were held at the check point while evacuations continued, and our time spent there would be credited back.



Waiting for updates about when, or even if, the race would resume was really tough. Balancing eating, drinking, resting and being ready to start the race again at any time – and staying motivated through all of this – was the first real challenge for me.

Two racers had arrived at Dog Grave Lake ahead of me. Jovica, who I had met at the race in 2017 and Nicolaj, who was in good spirits but already worried about the condition of his feet. After being held up for close to 30 hours the race resumed. By then only 8 of the 21 starters were left. All together at Dog Grave Lake. How many more would succumb to the cold? Surely most of us that made it through that extreme first night would go on to finish? And the overall win – that will surely be determined among whoever is left in the last 100 km? Not the first 100 km.

I walked a big part of the next section with Nicolaj. Ironically, he was wearing the same shoes I had in the 2017 event – and we were walking towards Braeburn together! Unfortunately, his race would end at Braeburn due to foot issues as mine had last year.



Arriving at Braeburn was a huge milestone for me and I had intentionally taken that first 100 miles slower and more conservatively than in 2017. Still being conservative, I slept there for 6 hours (the most I would sleep the entire week) and took my time to eat as much as possible.

And then I left Braeburn.

It felt like it had taken me a year to take that step out of Braeburn. I would still be conservative for the next 200 miles, but now I was in new territory and could relax a little. Surprisingly, from that 3rd day walking away from where I had stopped in 2017, I felt I was getting stronger each day. My body was getting used to the cold, to the new sleep cycles (around 3 hours every 24), to the volumes of food I was putting in and I was getting better at my processes for eating, drinking, resting, adding and removing layers of clothing.

Ilona had been the first to leave Braeburn; Jovica and I followed. Temperatures recovered a little since that first night, but it was still bitterly cold. Well into the minus 40s at night and only coming up into minus 30s during the day. Early in the afternoon of that 3rd day we caught up to Ilona and the three of us swapped stories – mostly about the never-ending lakes we were crossing and where we planned to sleep next.



The big flat lakes are exposed and therefore a lot colder than being in the forested sections of the course. On the plus side we got incredible views of the northern lights that evening, bright green flowing across the horizon from left to right.

I remember having to change my headlight batteries that night. My headlight flashes three warning blinks when the battery life is down to only a few minutes. When you remove the old batteries, the light turns off and there is complete darkness – making it very difficult to put new batteries in. I had thought about this process.

One option is to have my spare headlight nearby. That would take longer, and I would need to have both headlights on my head at the same time – inefficient, not ideal. The other option was to be able to change batteries in the dark. So, I had practiced this before the race, many times, with my eyes closed. I took the battery pack out of my pocket, held it upright in my left hand as I had practiced, grabbed the new batteries – always in my top left jacket pocket – in my right hand. Ready. I clicked the battery pack casing open.

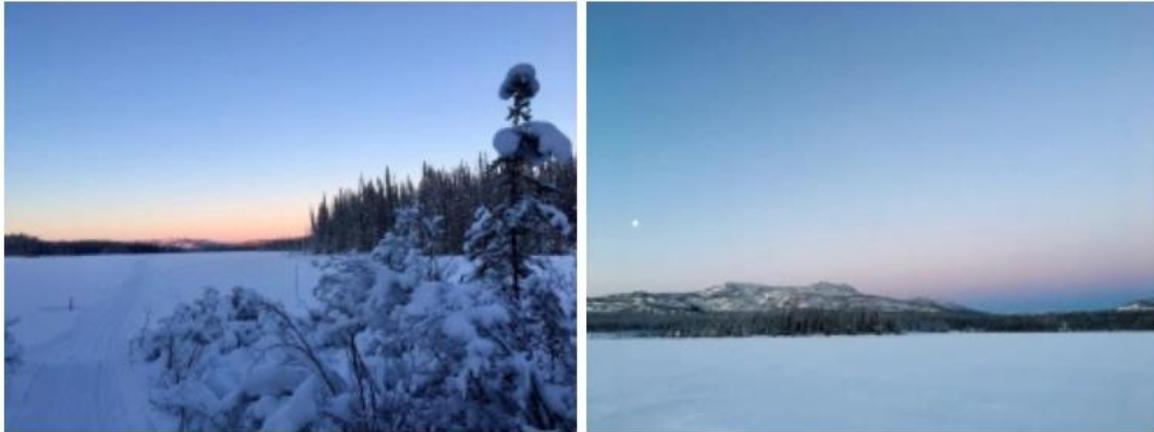
Complete darkness. Hands exposed to the icy breeze coming across the lake. Carefully, placing each new battery in the correct order – positive, negative, positive – replace the cover, close the casing, left hand upright, right hand grips and thumb clicks the casing closed. A new, brighter, beam stretches into the horizon. Maybe 10 seconds of hands being exposed tops, probably less. Every one of these tiny processes and details is critical. Each comes with a risk of frostbite, of losing time, of getting frustrated and making other mistakes. Every action and decision needs to be precise, rehearsed, carefully thought through.



Early hours of the next morning – now day 4 – Jovica and I arrived at the Ken Lake check point together. Not much later Ilona joined us. 222 km done, almost half way. Eat, drink, sleep 3 hours, eat again, drink again and head back out onto the course at around 6 am.

Jovica and I had done well together the previous day, and while we hoped we could do a few more strong days together, that would unfortunately not be the case. His right hand was frostbitten. Again, as in 2017, his race ended at Ken Lake. I hope he makes it back to finish the race one day. He's incredibly strong and I'm sure which just a couple tweaks to his gear and strategy and he could win with a huge margin.

I left Ken Lake check point in first position and would be alone – although never far ahead of Ilona – for the rest of the race. I had kept my iPod's for the second half of the race, but decided I was close enough to halfway now. And there was nobody left to talk to! So as the sun rose on day 4, I stopped for another thousand-calorie dehydrated breakfast, plugged in my Vivaldi iPod and watched as the sky slowly changed colour.



I was feeling stronger each day and kept a good pace all along the undulating trail to Carmacks, arriving just as darkness was setting in. The Carmacks check point is in a First Nations community hall, which also has the only shower along the course. A huge mental boost! Even more so was the Wi-Fi which meant I could call home. That call boosted morale and energy levels in a way no amount of food or sleep could. A WhatsApp message from my Dad came through too; “You’re doing very well. Just keep going as you have.”

Eat, drink, sleep 3 hours, eat again, drink again and go. Out of Carmacks by midnight, 200km to go, excited and recharged.

I walked for hours, feeling strong at first, and then getting really tired. I didn’t stop to eat and drink as much as I had done previously. I didn’t keep a close watch on the time. For the first – and only time on the race – I experienced a hallucination. ‘A’ hallucination because as soon as it happened I stopped. Well, 100 meters further down the dark trail, when I was away from the scary looking skull I had seen! I zipped up my jacket. I quickly drank a cup of hot, caffeinated energy drink, swallowing pieces of chocolate with it. Sugar warms the body and wakes me up the quickest.

While the sugar and caffeine were going to work I forced another huge dehydrated meal down. Hallucinations are a result of not eating, drinking or sleeping enough. All of which can easily lead to frost bite – or worse. I’ve experienced hallucinations on other ultras and taken those less seriously. In the Yukon I knew I needed to immediately stop and fix anything that was going wrong.

I checked the time, expecting it to be around 3 or 4am. It was almost 7am! I had started to lose track of time. Maybe I was too relaxed and not conservative enough anymore. It was a very serious reminder of how quickly things can go wrong.

Coming up to the next check point later that afternoon – now day 5 – I started thinking about the race differently for the first time. What’s the best strategy to stay in the lead – sleep now or push on? Where are the others, how far back? Sleep for less my planned 3 hours to get a bigger lead?



And then I thought of my Dad’s message – ‘keep going as you have.’ I thought of my plan as it was on the start line. Sleep 3 hours, eat, drink, keep moving and ignore what’s going on around you. It’s not a race against anyone else – only against yourself as you try to balance sleeping, eating and moving forward towards to the finish line. I decided I would stick with my plan and sleep 3 hours at the next check point, McCabe. I thought back to the hallucination and decided to add 2 more hours. 5 hours total - it would be my 2nd longest sleep.

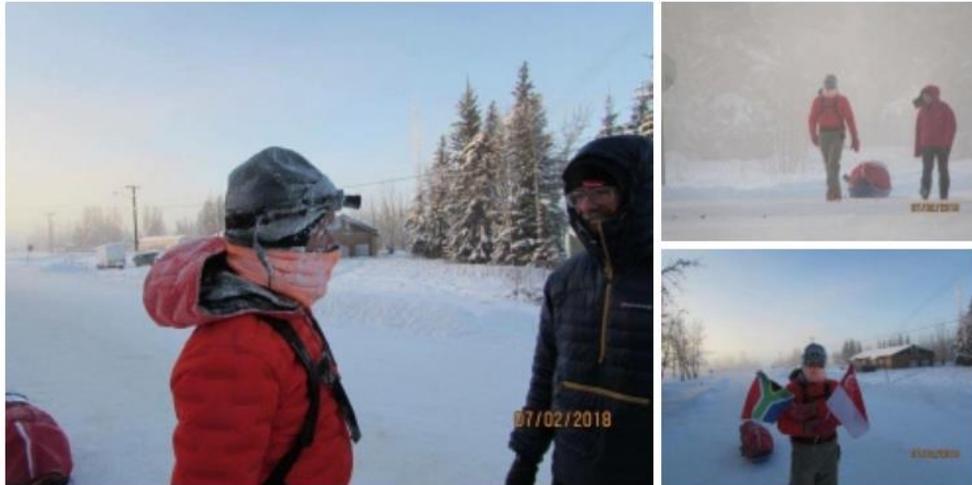
Leaving McCabe at 11pm that night I was inside the final 100 miles. Now well rested, still in the lead and having swapped my Vivaldi iPod for some Bob Sinclair, Avicii and Linkin Park – the party was just getting started!



My mistake the previous night had taught me the importance of having something to peg time and distance to. To keep my mind focused on something. Especially in the dark and at night. Without a reference point of time or distance, it is too easy to not eat enough, to lose track of time or slow down without realising it.

I started counting songs. I estimated that each song was on average 3.5 to 4 minutes. Every 15 songs I would stop quickly to drink. Every 30 songs I would stop a little longer to eat as well. This worked incredibly well. Over the next 45 km (11 hours) to Pelly Crossing check point I counted to 192 songs. (I then re-calibrated my estimated song duration to 3 minutes and 26 seconds – I had a lot of time to do mental arithmetic!)

Pelly Crossing was absolutely freezing when I arrived a little after sunrise on day 6. Only 104 km remained; a 52 km out and back.



Feeling strong and excited to keep going I aimed for a quick stop at the check point to get food in and then keep moving. At the check point I learnt there were only 3 racers left – Ilona a few hours back, and behind her, Roberto. Those behind Roberto had failed to reach Carmacks within the cut-off time.

Just about to leave Pelly Crossing and the crew see that Roberto is likely in trouble. He had wandered off course during the night, leaving his tracker and pulk behind. The race is put on hold again, I'm kept at the check point, and everyone directs their attention to the rescue mission. Fortunately, he is found and a helicopter takes him quickly to hospital. It could easily have been a lot worse and it was impressive to see behind the scenes at the check point how the crew responded to the situation. Once it was confirmed he was in hospital, now around 5 pm, I was given the green light to continue.

Two racers left – Ilona and I.

Stepping out of Pelly Crossing was by far the toughest part of the event for me. Not knowing yet what condition Roberto was in, but knowing it was very serious and experiencing the tension at the check point while rescuing him made real how dangerous the conditions were. Suddenly all the fears of what could happen were much more tangible. I was scared and the thought of stopping my race at Pelly Crossing crossed my mind a few times. I also thought of the amount of training I had done, of stopping at Braeburn last year, of coming back this year - and now being so close to the finish line.

Again, I thought of my Dad's message and my race plan. "You're doing very well. Just keep going as you have." Ignore what's going on around you. Stick to the plan – eat, drink, sleep and move forward. I had done everything right so far and felt stronger and stronger each day.

And so, I continued, counting songs. Almost selfishly trying not to think of where Ilona was, or of what had happened to Roberto. My non-negotiable was to get home healthy. Thoughts of others while I was out there, negative thoughts, thoughts of deviating from my plan – any thoughts that distracted me from doing what I needed to do – were not an option.

Ten hours – that’s five food stops, 10 drink stops and a little over 170 songs – and I arrived at Pelly Farm. Temperatures had dropped through the night and it was close to 50 below zero. I stepped inside the warmth, welcomed by the farmer, Dale, ready with coffee and his legendary lasagna (and later pancakes too)!



And then bad news – Ilona had arrived at the previous check point with frost bite. It wasn’t too serious, but she needed to get to back hospital.

One racer left.

Robert, the race director, made the call that the conditions had gotten even worse and that it would be unsafe for me to complete the last 52 km back to Pelly Crossing. The Pelly Farm check point became the 2018 Yukon Arctic Ultra finish line; making me the only finisher and winner!



Hardly a race. More an expedition. A journey that means something different to each person on the start line, if they get to the finish or not. An adventure to experience the Yukon and to be part of the community of racers, staff and locals that make the event the what it is. An opportunity to learn so much and test yourself, your gear, your decisions and your resolve in a beautiful but absolutely harsh and unforgiving environment.

Can there be a better way to work out who you are and why you make the decisions that you do?

