

Alaska Ultrasport 2007

I have been thinking about the Alaska Ultrasport and wanting to try it since the first time I heard about it over 5 years ago. Even with all the information and stories I have heard from Eric I could never have imagined how brutal this race was going to be. It didn't help that I had a cold before the race started and the morning before the start I woke up with an ear infection. Luckily I was able to start taking antibiotics right away.



Start at Knik Lake

Janice and Steve Tower drove us to the start at Knik Lake and just getting out of the car I found it hard to breathe because of the cold air. I'm not exactly sure what the temperature was at the start, but probably between -10 and -15. The race started at 2 pm outside a small bar, and the 33 participants lined up by an Alaska Ultrasport sign. At the start signal we started pedaling, skiing, or walking across the frozen lake. On my snow bike I had a rack in the rear with my negative 20 down sleeping bag, 2 Nashbar bags with extra clothes, and my down jacket in a compression sack under my saddle. On my handle bars I had a mount with a GPS and a LED flashlight and I also had 2 additional bags for food, goggles, extra gloves, toe and hand warmers, camera etc. I also carried my thermarest under my handle bars and I had a small frame bag (can't fit much into the triangle of a 14" frame) with my stove, pot, spare tubes, and nalgene bottle.



Loaded bike

After we crossed the lake we got onto trails in a forest. We ran into several dog sled teams tuning up for the Iditarod which starts one week after the Ultrasport. The dogs were so quiet you could barely hear them. I was so excited about finally riding in the snow I was pushing fairly hard. I had to ditch my jacket and was riding comfortably in a long sleeved shirt and vest. It took Eric and I 5 hrs and 20 minutes to get to Luce's which was the first CP, 50 miles into the race. It is a weird experience riding on a frozen river in the dark with nothing around but wilderness and all of the sudden you see a neon sign which says "Luce's". Luce's was a small bar/restaurant where we were able to refill camelbacks, dry some clothes out, warm up, and use the heated outhouse. I was so pumped up I was ready to leave after downing 2 bottles of juice and eating a snickers bar, and I might have been slightly impatient when Eric wanted a few more minutes to warm up before getting back on the bike. We still only took a 40 minute break before starting back on the river toward Skwentna, the 2nd CP. It was dark and cold, but the river was hard so we were making good time, although I was marveling at how slow we were. It took us 12 hrs to go the 90 miles to Skwentna lodge which is a small bed and breakfast in a town of 11 people. It was nice and warm inside and we hung our wet clothes by the woodstove and then sat down at the table for some food. The guy working the kitchen told us that it was his grandparents' lodge which is frequented by

hunters in the summer. Our cook was 18 years old and had grown up in Skwentna but was leaving for the military next summer. Nice kid, and he made awesome hamburgers and then he offered us a bed upstairs. Although I wasn't sleepy, I knew we had to rest a little bit and we laid down for a sleepless 3 hours. When we got up at 6 am, I brought in half of a frozen PB and J sandwich from my bike and put it on the wood stove. I had it with a cup of tea as I was getting dressed and got all of my stuff ready.



Shell Lake Lodge

We left around 6:30 in the morning and our next CP was Fingerlake, approximately 45 miles away. Halfway to Fingerlake is another lodge at Shell lake where we stopped to use the outhouse. No reason to go outside unless you have to..... We arrived at Fingerlake at 2:25 in the afternoon. We took our clothes off to dry and sat down for an awesome meal of rice, beans, chicken and tortilla. This lodge is used for cooking classes and is pretty upscale by Alaskan standards. Still no indoor plumbing of course. Here we were also able to get our first drop-bags and I grabbed some ho-ho's, trail mix, Reese's cups, batteries, and more toe and hand warmers. Again, I was way too excited to hang out and we left within an hour. Poor Eric, he knew the race hadn't even started yet, and I was barely sitting down because I was calculating how fast I was going to make it to the next check point..... Riding to Puntilla lake became a

bit more difficult with deeper snow and a lot of getting off and on the bike. The constant getting on and off the bike is very tiring when you are wearing tons of clothes including heavy winter boots, have a hard time breathing because of your facemask, and there is a giant sleeping bag to throw your leg over. With 5 miles to go according to my GPS I decided to take Janice's advice and "when in doubt, let air out". All of the sudden it was much easier to control my bike and I felt like I was flying down some steep hills (at a speedy pace of 7 mph). It got pretty windy toward the end, and had started to snow a bit when we finally arrived at the cabin at Puntilla Lake around midnight. A few people had passed us and we had caught some of the leaders so the cabin was full. People were spread out on bunk beds, a small couch and some cots. The checker at the lodge was great and made me a huge bowl of clam chowder which I wolfed down while laying on a cot. I tried going to sleep on the bunk bed, but after a couple of hours I woke up and my right hand was paralyzed and I felt like the my arm was on fire. It was so painful I had to get up and shake my arm around until the pain subsided and I was able to move my fingers again. This happens to me after almost every 24 hr race and I always attributed it to my camelbak pressing on my brachial plexus. It always makes it impossible to sleep for more than an hour or two.

At 4 o'clock am I climbed up to the top bunk and woke Eric up. I told him I was ready to leave because I couldn't sleep anymore. Eric said it could be a 24 hour trip to Rohn, the next checkpoint, and that it probably wasn't a good idea to leave since the weather was pretty bad. Also, there was no trail over Rainy pass because the snow machines had not cleared it for the Iditarod yet. Our options were to bushwhack our own trail for a few miles through the windy and cold pass or to take a 30 mile detour. I spend a few more miserable hours sitting up in bed to keep my arm from killing me. In the morning we were told that we could have breakfast at the main lodge. I was in so much pain I couldn't think about food. All I wanted to do, was to get going. I was even thinking about going for a hike because it seemed like moving around made my pain disappear. I came to my senses and had pancakes, sausage, eggs and coffee with Eric and 2 other racers, Jim and Jacques. After breakfast we went back to the little cabin and packed up our stuff and left around 10:30 am.



Hell's Gate

The riding up Hell's gate, the detour, was pretty good. We were riding through frozen marsh-land and since there had been little snow this season the alder bushes were sticking up and we had to ride through them. I was a bit worried about getting a flat or a stick in my derailleurs. After just a short bit of riding I realized I could not carry my camelbak, because it was making my arm hurt while riding. Eric took my bladder and I just strapped my camelbak to my sleeping bag. This worked out great except now it was pretty hard to drink, especially after Eric's hose froze up and we had to stop and open the top to drink out of it. By dark we just made it onto the river and my GPS showed 25 miles to Rohn (as the bird flies).

Eric said we might have to get off the river and bivy before Rohn, but I thought we should keep going for a while to get as close as possible. I was never looking at my watch, so I had no idea what time it was. Time didn't really matter anyway. It got really cold and at one point I stopped to get a body warmer out and stick it to my chest. It took me a few minutes to catch back up and I kept getting colder and colder. I also realized that I hadn't had anything to drink or eat for a long time. Eric got my down jacket out for me and I felt warmer at least. According to our GPS we now only had 1 or 2 miles left when we hit some overflow. We could see tire tracks on the other side of the water, but we definitely did not want to risk getting our feet wet, or

falling through the ice. At this point I was bonking pretty bad and was just waiting for Eric to find a safe way around the water. My GPS showed 500 feet... We had to drag our bikes up a steep little climb, and then we were 300 feet away.... I was soooooo exhausted and cold and out of it but I knew I could drag myself 300 feet. Wouldn't there be some light coming from the cabin?? No, that's because there was no cabin where our GPS waypoint showed it was supposed to be. Eric thought we might have missed it somehow, so while I didn't move he went back and looked around. No checkpoint, no woodstove, no hot Tang.... I realized that if we weren't going to find the check point I was going to have to get in my sleeping bag because I could not produce any heat. I had no fuel in me and I was completely bonking and had trouble seeing straight. Eric told me to run around to try to get some body heat up while he got my thermarest and sleeping bag out. I had no energy to run, so I walked back and forth at a snail's pace. Hardly enough movement to produce heat. I got into the frozen sleeping bag and was not the least bit warmer. I heard Eric breaking tree branches off to build a fire to warm me up. All I was doing was trying not to panic. We had no idea how far it was to Rohn and there was definitely no one else to help me out. Eric got the fire going and I felt slightly less cold, I started shivering. Then I heard he got his little isbit stove out and heated up water from his camelbak. I was able to turn over to my side and drink almost a full small Nalgene bottle of hot water and then he made another bottle that I put on my stomach. I finally started feeling warmer, but I was still really scared. It didn't help that we started hearing wolves howling in the dark. At this point Eric had to go and find the checkpoint to see if he could get some help. He left at 6:47 am. I thought I could keep warm in the sleeping bag while he was gone. It is a strange feeling being completely alone in the wilderness, dark, and cold with wolves howling around you. I don't know if I was hallucinating or dreaming but I thought I could hear cars and see lights and I had all kinds of weird thoughts going through my head.

I must have been asleep when Eric came back because I didn't hear the sound of the snow machine. He said he found the checkpoint about 1.5 miles down the trail. I really would like to have a chance to continue the race but if I took a ride on the snow machine I would be cheating. I did not want to make things dangerous or more difficult for Eric so I was willing to drop out of the race, but I was so happy when he said I could try pushing my bike. Before I got out of my sleeping bag I mixed a packet of protein powder into the warm water bottle I still had on my stomach. That gave me a little bit of energy and more heat. I was completely exhausted but I was able to get on my bike and start pedaling very very slowly. Eric stayed behind and packed up my pad and sleeping bag. The 1.5 miles seemed to take forever, but finally I saw the little airstrip and then the lodge. Someone took my bike and someone else helped me inside. (As Eric was helping me edit this, he told me he was the one to lift me off my bike and help me inside). I was totally out of it but I sat down and I was helped out of my clothes and served hot Tang out of a mug. As the 2 women of the group took my long pants off, they laughed and said they could tell I was from California from my tanned legs.

They joked that they should put me outside in the snow in a bikini and I could be an advertisement on their web-site. When they checked out my hands they noticed I had frost bite in my left middle finger. I had a big blister on the back of my finger, and the fingertip was hard and had no blood flow. Lisa, who used to be an EMT bandaged the finger up and said it might be OK if I was able to keep it from freezing again. Eric also had frost bitten his thumb when he was helping me out that night.

The spot where I had to bivy, was also the section where Eric Johnson fell through the ice up to his waist a couple of days later. He was able to get out of the water and off the river. It was negative 25 when he got into his sleeping bag and blew his emergency whistle. Luckily, another racer behind him, Jose Diego, heard him and was able to take Eric's location with his GPS and get to Rohn so send for help.



Finally in Rohn

After a little while I came around, but I had lost my voice, and I could only whisper. The Rohn cabin is used as a checkpoint for the Iditarod and the 5 people using it were all checkers waiting for the dogs to come though. There was a giant pile of food for the dogs outside and they were waiting for more supplies as well as veterinarians and doctors to fly in the next few days. There was a tent with a small woodstove for the Alaska Ultrasport racers, but they were kind enough to let me crash on one of the bunks for a couple of hours.

We spent the rest of the day in Rohn, hoping I would recover so I could continue on the next day. I didn't see how it would be possible, since I was coughing like crazy, had no voice, and had a hard time breathing. We had some soup for dinner and went to sleep on the straw in the tent set up for us.



Rohn Sleeping Quarters

At 9:30 pm I was awakened by the excruciating pain in my arm again. It felt like someone was using a blowtorch on it. All I could do was to kneel in my sleeping bag and shake my arm around until the pain subsided again. Since we were in a tent with 3 other people and it was probably negative 20 inside the tent, I couldn't walk around to relieve the pain so I just sat in my sleeping bag for 2.5 hrs shaking my arm. It was a pretty miserable night, I got up and walked to the out-house a couple of times just to make time pass, but I was glad to be alive.

Around 7 in the morning I hoped the Iditarod checkers would be awake in the cabin, so I got up. They were still in bed, but said they were awake and told me to come inside. Jasper, the cook, made a big thermos of coffee and then started on breakfast. I sat and chatted with Lisa, Jasper, Stephanie, and David, and Terry and learned a lot about the Iditarod and about what they do during the sled dog race. After a little while Eric came inside too, and we had delicious blueberry pancakes that Jasper made. I still had no voice and felt pretty weak, especially since I hadn't slept much, but it was nice and sunny

outside, and I was ready to try to move on, so after goodbyes and picture taking we left Rohn around 10 in the morning. The temperature was 23 below zero when we took off.



Jasper inside the Rohn Cabin

I moved very slowly. I had no energy and there were a lot of short steep hills that I had to walk up. We had to get up one frozen waterfall and I was wondering how the dogs made it up. Alan Tilling and Jan Kopka who had arrived at Rohn several hours after us were right behind us and passed us pretty quickly due to my snail's pace. Every so often I had to stop to cough violently, and the stuff that came out of my lungs was brownish green. It's pretty hard to cough, spit, and blow your nose while wearing a balaclava, goggles with a piece of neoprene glued to it covering your nose, as well as a face mask. This also makes it difficult to eat and drink, especially since I was wearing glove liners, mittens with hand warmers and had pogies on my handle bars. The cold air made it hard to breathe and my lungs really hurt when I tried taking a deep breath. We had hoped to be able to go a little bit past Bison camp, the next unmanned checkpoint which was 45 miles away from Rohn, but after a while it became apparent that my slow pace was not going to let us get that far.



On the river

It took us 12 hours to get to Bison camp, which is a walled tent with a big woodstove, a little table, and straw on the ground for sleeping. The tent is there for bison hunters but there is a sign that says anyone traveling the trail is welcome to use it as long as you restock the firewood. Bill Merchant, the race organizer, had flown out the week before and left blocks of ice to melt for water, a cooler with food, and a couple of Coleman stoves with fuel. We were actually lucky to be a little slow, because when we got to Bison camp the fire was going and it was nice and warm and there was hot water on the stove. We shared the tent with Masuro from Japan, Dario from Italy, Jan, and Alan. The grease in Dario's free wheel had frozen and his cassette just spinning around and he had been pushing his bike almost all the way from Rohn. Eric zip-tied the cassette to the spokes of his wheel so he would at least have a fixed gear. Masuro told us he only carries a 0.5 liter thermos for fluids but that it had frozen on the way to Rohn. He said it was no big deal since it was so cold outside and he wouldn't dehydrate.... Uh-huh!! The conversation at Bison camp was hilarious with all of the different nationalities and misunderstandings due to language barriers.



Jan, Eric and Lou at Bison Camp

After I had two cup-o-noodles I got into my sleeping bag, as Masuru and Dario left in the dark and cold to continue on to Nikolai. At this time the temperature was 32 below zero. I was very congested but I actually managed to get a few hours of sleep that night. Unfortunately the rest of the group were probably not as lucky, since Eric said I snored louder than a 350 pound man and that I would stop breathing for a few seconds only to snort louder than ever.

In the morning I had a few packs of oatmeal and some hot cocoa before taking off. Alan left just before us and Jan left at the same time. Now we were on the Farewell Burn, which is a large area that was hit by a fire sometime in the past. The Burn is wide open and since there had been very little snow this season, grass and dirt was sticking up and it was really difficult to ride over this terrain since it was very bumpy and rough. We were able to follow tire tracks, but Peter Basinger said he fell about 100 times, because he couldn't tell where he was going, and there was ice under the thin snow. I kept getting left behind Eric since I was so slow, but he stopped and waited for me. We ran in to Alan after a while and rode with him and Jan. As we stopped for pictures with Jan, Alan got ahead of us, but we soon caught him when he had a flat tire. Not very fun fixing a flat in negative 20. Later Alan told us that he thought the ice on his rims was slowing him down and he decided to get his knife out and scrape it off. His snow rims are drilled (have big holes to make them lighter) and the tube was poking through the whole and he slashed his own tube!!

Eric and I got to Nikolai just as it was getting dark. We ran into a guy on a snow machine pulling a sled with 2 kids and we stopped to talk for a few minutes. Nikolai seemed so depressing to me. The town has 100 people and is really run down. The homes are mostly little shacks. We rode by "The Nikolai international airport" sign on our way to the checkpoint. Our last checkpoint was at the home of Nick and Olene. It felt good to get inside and it was extremely hot which felt good at first, but was not so good for sleeping. There was a big rack over the woodstove for us to hang our clothes on to dry. Dario's wheel was also hanging there, without the zip ties, so apparently Eric's trick didn't work. Nick said Dario had pushed his bike the whole way from bison camp (43 miles) and he was now sleeping.



Nick and Eric in Nikolai

A few minutes after us, Alan showed up too. Jan got there before us, and had actually taken a shower! I couldn't wait to eat so I could shower too. Olene heated up spaghetti and moose sauce for us. It was pretty tasty to get some real food, but I was feeling really bloated so it was hard to eat. Olene got me a towel and I got in the shower. As I was taking my clothes off I noticed my legs looked like they belonged to someone else. I had huge indentions in my calves from my socks, and my legs were so swollen they looked like tree trunks. My stomach was really jiggly and I felt like I had fluid in my lungs too. I actually found a scale in their bathroom closet and decided to weigh myself to see how

much fluid I had retained. I weighed 120 pounds, which is at least 10 pounds more than I normally weigh.

Eric and I used their daughter's bedroom. There were no covers or blankets on the bed, but the bedroom was like a sauna so it didn't matter. We actually cracked the window to cool it off a little. I could not lay flat because my lungs made this crackling sound every time I took a breath and I was so congested, so I propped up my sleeping bag up against the wall and sat for most of the night. I probably had 3 or 4 pretty bad nose bleeds that night, from coughing or blowing my nose. I just sat there and ate cough drops, blew my nose, and marveled at how my lungs sounded. We only had 50 more flat miles to McGrath, but I was worried about all the fluid in my body and what it would do to my heart and lungs. Eric was also pretty restless and coughing.

I got up several times during the night just to walk around. At 4 am, Nick was up drinking coffee and checking his computer for other racers. I was able to use the computer and it was really nice to check the Alaska Ultrasport web-site and get messages from people thinking about us. Kathi did a great job updating the web-site.

Around 7 Alan, Jan, and Eric were all up and Nick made us breakfast of eggs, bacon, and wonder bread toast. Dario was up too. He had decided to scratch since he didn't have a wheel. He was coughing and looked like he was in pain every time he coughed. After breakfast we got dressed. It was 80 degrees inside and horrible to put all of our winter clothes on. I had bike shorts, thick Patagonia fleece tights on, my windproof tights, sock liners, thick socks, and boots on my bottom. CLEAN tank top, expedition weight underwear, heavy vest, winter jacket, and down jacket on top. I was sweating as soon as we started riding- it was negative 27 when we left- so I stopped and took my down jacket off. It was really hard and painful to breathe because the air was so cold. I had to keep stopping several times to make adjustments of my goggles, balaclava, and add hand warmers, and also to cough. Every time I stopped I was freezing. After about a mile we got onto the river that was going to take us to McGrath and the temperature dropped. I had to stop to put my down jacket on again. Eric asked a couple of times if we needed to turn around, and it was so painful to breath that the thought entered my mind, but I also thought we were so close I did not want to give up. At one point Eric stopped to put air in his tires and when I had one of my violent coughing fits, my nose started gushing blood. I got frozen polka dot blood spots all over my boot and there was bright red blood in the white snow.

After a few hours of riding it started warming up to negative 15. I was pretty comfortable riding without my down jacket, but now my left knee started to really bother me. It had been hurting on and off since Puntilla, but I was always able to get it to feel better after 15-20 minutes of easy pedaling. I took more ibuprofen and tried using mostly my right leg, but with the platform pedals I was still forced to use my left leg, and my knee was really painful. I had to get off my bike on the smallest inclines because I was not able to push down with my left leg. In Nikolai I had cut up 2 super size snicker's bars, and I kept eating the frozen pieces and I drank my protein shake. Once I finished my 400 cc Nalgene bottle that I carried inside my vest pocket to keep it from freezing, Eric refilled it

with water from his camelbak. We rode for several hours in the sunshine and I was dreaming about steak, baked potato, salad, and red wine. I wanted to ride a little faster but my knee wouldn't let me. I had turned my GPS off, because I didn't want to be staring at the distance the whole time.



On the way to McGrath

Sometime in the afternoon we saw an Alaska Ultrasport sign posted in the snow showing us to get off the river. The sign said 9.6 miles, 15 km. After that we saw several signs counting down the distance. I think I cried the last 4 miles. I was just so tired, and in so much pain, and so happy to be finished, and happy to be alive. One reason I finished the last part was so that I wouldn't have to come back next year and do it again.

Around 5 we arrived at Peter and Tracy's house in McGrath. Jan and Alan were there. Dario had flown from Nikolai. Masuro had made it in earlier in the morning and Jose had been hanging out for a couple of days waiting to continue on to Nome. I took the best shower of my life and was able to put on clean clothes that we had sent out from Anchorage. My pants barely fit, since my legs were so swollen. After the shower I sat down at the dinner table where Peter fed us pork, homemade mashed potatoes, salad, and broccoli. I was also able to get my glass of red wine!!!!!!



Peter and Tracy's house in McGrath

I was still only able to whisper and I didn't sleep well because of my arm and my coughing and congestion, but it was great hanging out at Peter and Tracy's. They took such good care of us and Peter made his famous mancakes for breakfast and I drank lots of coffee. We stayed for 2 days before flying back to Anchorage. Although this was the hardest race of my life, it was also one of the most awesome experiences, and I am so happy I was able to complete the race. In the beginning of the race I thought I would be able to ride it alone, but I would not have been able to finish without Eric. It was a really great experience to be able to ride together.