

Article: Rainy Pass To Rohn Iditarod 2001

By Andy Moderow

The trail to the Rohn River Checkpoint took off out of Rainy Pass and climbed a few hundred feet to the highest point in the run. The moon was bright, and I could see more of my surroundings without my headlamp turned on because the brightness of the lamp would ruin my night vision. The moonlight colored everything a different shade of blue-black, except for the few bushes that were pitch black. My dogs were dark compared to the snow. Their silhouettes seem to float as we ran down the trail. As I approached one bush, something seemed different about it so I clicked my headlight on. It turned out to be a porcupine, sitting a few feet off the trail. I had never run in such incredible country.

Eventually we started heading down from the high point in the run, and changed course towards a narrow pass. I knew this run was going to be even more impressive as we descended towards the Dalzell River, and eventually into the Dalzell Gorge. I was excited with anticipation. Within a half hour, I found myself between two mountains, with bases so close that it felt as if I was running in a tunnel. A slight wind picked up, and we began descending faster.

After a few miles the wind really kicked up and the trail became harder to find. Blowing snow had covered all the tracks in front of me, and in places, the only thing that confirmed I was on the trail were the wooden stakes that had been stuck in the snow. The wind intensity continued to increase, forming snow drifts across the trail.

As I began to get nervous about maneuvering the trail ahead, I clicked on my

headlamp and left it on. The snow depth had decreased, and the ground ahead was black as opposed to white. We rounded a large knoll. At this point the wind had blown all the snow off the ground, leaving rocks. The trail got steeper, and I realized that the real descent had just begun.

As I approached a corner, I watched my leaders go around a large boulder. Next, my swing dogs disappeared, as well as the dogs behind them in the 'first team position'. This isn't uncommon for 16 dog teams, as the dogs stretch 90 feet in front of the sled. But then I watched a few more pairs of dogs go out of sight, and I realized that the corner wasn't an easy, wide corner. Instead, it was a sharp ninety-degree bend. With two seconds to react, I tipped the sled on its side so the rock would strike the strong runners as opposed to the fragile side of my sled, as the side would most likely break under the impact. The sled hit hard, and I bounced sideways around the boulder. After being drug for a few hundred feet over loose rocks, the sled had collected a small mound of rocks in front of it, creating enough drag to stop the team. I tipped the sled up, glanced at it for any breaks, and continued down the trail.

The wind picked up even more and the snow was violently blowing around, making it hard to see in places. The mountains got taller, the slopes got steeper, and the trail started winding even more. We weaved across little bridges with creeks a few feet below, through numerous alder thickets, and over the occasional rocky patch. My sled held up despite bouncing from alder to alder, rock to rock, and the occasional tip over. At the bottom, my knuckles were white, and I was thoroughly impressed with the country that I had just traveled through.

I had been listening to music the whole way down, but didn't notice until I reached the bottom. I quickly turned it off, as something was awkward about listening to music after the descent. I knew we were near the Dalzell River, and the trail was easy, making wide curves around giant cottonwood trees.

Then we began climbing again, and below I saw for the first time the Dalzell

River. Next, we descended from this short climb, and entered into the Dalzell Gorge.

In the Gorge, the Dalzell River is sandwiched between two large rock wall. Because the water is always moving fast, ice freezes in jagged patterns and, in some places, ice doesn't even form. There are also many 'levels' of ice, as the water level fluctuates throughout the winter. Slipping and sliding, we made our way through the gorge. In places I would run and push the sled forward, in others I would apply the brake. Running a dog team over a curvy trail is like being pulled on skis by a 90-foot rope; the sled gets slung around like a tetherball. Often times I would end up running along the sled, pushing or pulling it onto the trail. Halfway through the gorge I noticed something tapping my leg. It turned out that my knife holster had broken off, and the knife I had tied to my belt was dangling next to my leg. I turned the knife on itself and cut the rope that attached it to me, placing it into my sled: There was no way to stop and fix the situation in any other way because the trail demanded too much. I then continued to 'run the sled around', avoiding chunks of ice and open water.

After the challenges of the Gorge were complete, I found myself on a completely snow less trail.. I knew the Rohn checkpoint was close, and we ran along, following the brake marks from other teams in the river ice. The water level had fallen since the river had frozen, and between the water and ice was an air pocket. This made the surface of the ice into a giant drum, and the sound of my sled runners echoed beneath the ice. My brake gave off a hollow scraping sound. I knew stopping would be difficult, so I watched my leader, Bill, carefully as he chose the trail, and corrected him as soon as he made a slight deviation from the trail.

After a few miles we reached Rohn, a small cabin that serves as a checkpoint in the middle of this wild landscape. I was relieved to be there, and fumbled around, exhausted from the last run, caring for my dogs. Once chores were complete, I retired to the cabin to get some rest. Around a table in this dimly lit cabin,

veteran mushers talked about the trail ahead and the trail behind. One musher woke up and emerged from under the table where he had slept. A team was hooking up to leave outside, and we all peeked out to see who it was. A few got up to follow, not wanting to lose sight of that team for competitive reasons. Others sat back, rethinking their race strategies. I ate some food, asked a few questions about the trail ahead, and retired to a bunk to get some much needed rest.

Before I dozed off, I reviewed the last run. It proved to be the best, the worst, the wildest, the most peaceful, the most beautiful and the most challenging dog run of my life. Ahead of me was 700 more miles of Alaska, with similar challenges, more excitement, and many more mental ups and downs. I fell asleep excited about the adventure ahead, and slept like a rock.