

# **Sheep Mountain 150**

**Story from the Trail, 2005**

**By Andy Moderow**

Participating in the Sheep Mountain 150 this weekend was an amazing experience for both my dogs and me: All 13 of us experienced terrain unlike any we had traveled over before. The race was the first I've run since Iditarod 2001, and when I left the starting line with 12 dogs, I became reacquainted with many of the challenges and feelings associated with mid distance racing.

A few seconds into my run I was reminded of how strong a team of twelve feels when leaving a starting line. Excitement fills the air at races, put out by both people and dogs alike: The dogs sense this excitement and feed off of it, becoming more energized themselves. This results in a sort of cycle, where everyone becomes more excited because of those who are excited around them. In the seconds before a departure, a team's energy reaches its peak: All eyes and attention are focused on them, and they sense what soon awaits them.

'5..4..3..2..1..Go!' is the conclusion to all the pre-race starting rituals, and the team leaves the chute, giving the musher a feeling that is hard to describe. The power of the dogs is felt in the musher's shoulders as they grip their handlebar firmly, and the sound of barking dogs still awaiting their turn to depart is quickly left behind. The sudden change from anticipation to action can take even a veteran musher off guard, and the first seconds of a run feels much like flying: It feels as if your sled is barely touching the ground.

Thirty seconds out of the chute in the Sheep Mountain 150 I began thinking of how I hadn't felt the exact feelings of a race start for 5 years. This reflection was brief, however, as my daydream became distracted by the task before me, which

was slowing the dogs down and ensuring that they warm up before traveling too fast. Keeping the operation under control as we settled into a sustainable pace was what needed my attention during these first few miles of trail, and I told the dogs 'Easy', hoping that part of my message might resonate in their subconscious: As always, however, they carried the energy of the start with them, and any noticeable effect of the command was unrealized in their actions.

The trail started in the ditch of the Glenn Highway. While many may think that a ditch is a lousy location for a 'trail', I've always enjoyed starting races in ditches. There is something powerful about utilizing a historic form of transportation parallel to a paved road. When leaving the road corridor and heading into areas where cars cannot travel, I've always felt that my team and I are heading into places kept secret from most people who travel in the region. Exploring different parts of Alaska using this silent form of transportation has always been my second favorite aspect of the sport.

One minute into the race, my attention shifted to my favorite aspect of the sport: The dogs. Starting to settle down just slightly, I felt a small sense of control. I admired each of the dogs ahead of me, and I was happy because they were happy: Seeing new terrain always excites a dog team. Watching their personalities come out on races is one of the best parts of participating in events like Sheep Mountain. One dog in my team, Stony, found an interest in the booties that had fallen off the feet of dogs in other teams. Quite often during the race he would grab one while running, and carry it with him for up to a mile. I'd say his name in an excited tone of voice and he'd look back, bootie in mouth, and then, facing forward, he'd shake his head, playing with his treasure like many dogs play with chew toys. It was hard not to laugh out loud at the pleasure he received from what hundreds of other dogs ignore while running down the trail. How an athlete can do this after

traveling 125 miles in 24 hours I do not know, but such an action by a sled dog did not come as a complete shock to me: It is mind boggling the ability of these animals.

A minute and a half after my start, we were still traveling in the ditch. I glanced ahead at the trail approaching, and noticed a sign a few hundred yards away. I was unable to read it because I was facing the back of it. In most situations, I would have turned around and glanced at it after we went by it, because my curiosity would have taken hold as to what the sign said. However, things changed dramatically between the point where I was at, and a place where I could have read it: The scenario that grew left no time for curiosity.

Approaching at a high rate of speed, the sign was next to my leaders. I thought to myself; 'Wow, it'd be a bummer to hit that sign!' Noting that the trail was slightly slanted toward the sign, I gripped the handlebar tighter, and prepared to steer away from it. Yet my actions produced the opposite result: My sled started to lean into the sign. My increased grip on the handlebar made the sled top heavy, and gravity did the rest.

It is amazing how fast things can happen at 17 miles per hour. Realizing that my sled was precariously balanced on one runner, at a 45-degree angle to the ground, I was startled by the situation I didn't see coming. I somehow had the instinct to release my right hand from the handlebar in the split second before it would have been smashed between the sled and the signpost. The plastic handlebar made contact with the metal pipe, and the grip of my right hand became loose as a result. The sled bounced off the signpost.

Gravity wasn't through with us yet, and the sled did not right itself. Just following the impact, the sled tipped all the way over, and I found myself face down in the

snow, gripping the handlebar with one hand, and with that hand, only the tips of my fingers, because the impact had shaken my grip loose. My left hand was at my side when the sled tipped, and in a motion familiar to a swimmer doing the freestyle, I propelled my hand forward, reaching for the handlebar. The motion allowed me to feel the bar with the tips of my fingers at the exact moment when the grip of my other hand released.

Losing a dog team is a musher's worst nightmare, and one that I hadn't lived as a result of musher error since 1997. The last instance when a team left without me was during fall training in 2000 – my gang line snapped, and 14 of my 16 dogs went down the trail. In that instance, the fear of the dogs getting tangled up or hurt was absolutely terrifying: Take that feeling, and add in feeling as if everyone around have just witnessed you make a dangerous, stupid mistake. While this feeling set in after the incident occurred, my first reaction was one of pure terror, watching my team travel without me at over 20 miles an hour. My sled hit a bump and was momentarily airborne. I ran after them, and screamed for them to stop. They responded just like they did to my 'Easy!' command given a few seconds earlier: A few looked back, but they kept on going.

A car had witnessed my crash, and pulled up beside me. Before the driver had even offered me a ride, I ran towards it, struggling in the deep, loose snow between the trail and the roadway. We drove past my team, and offering profuse thanks to the stranger who I'd probably only interact with for 15 seconds in my life, I ran out of the car as it slowed down, preparing to catch my team as it approached. As the team traveled over a driveway 100 feet in front of me, a road crossing guard managed to stop them, ten feet from where I stood. A profuse thanks was once again offered to another kind individual who helped me out of my predicament, and with 12 lunging dogs, time didn't allow for any introductions.

Still today I remain rattled from this incident despite having traveled 149.9 miles this weekend by dog team (with the additional .1 by Ford Taurus), but as the race progressed I relaxed my grip, little by little, on the handlebar, and as the team slowed down and I regained confidence. The terrain that we traveled over was absolutely amazing, and included traveling through a mountain pass, where the bases of two large mountains came together and formed a sharp vee. The hills were an athletic challenge for both the dogs and me, but I think that they had just as much fun exploring the new area as I did. In addition, they made certain that I did my fair share of work, looking back at me if I wasn't running up the hill, lightening their load.

During my second run, which occurred between midnight and 5 am, a full moon lit the terrain we were traveling across, and my headlamp wasn't needed to watch my dogs or find the trail. While running lightless increased my chances of missing an important corner and getting lost, I felt that the experience of running in the moonlight was well worth the risk. Ice fog had left ice crystals on all the brush along the trail, and they sparkled in the moonlight. The first half of this leg was above tree line, and often, in the distance, a lone light could be seen of a musher who chose to have their light on.

In the third leg of the race, we traveled the route that we had run on the first leg of the race back to Sheep Mountain Lodge. The dogs performed amazingly, and the younger pups (Rosie and Stony) that my mom had raced the weekend before in the Gin Gin 120 continued to surprise me with their ability.

Leaving the checkpoint at 10 AM, I felt much more tired than my team of dogs did, mainly because sled dogs are much tougher than their owners, but also because I had only gotten 2 hours of sleep during our two rests, which totaled 11 hours. The dogs knew when we were approaching the finish line, and I knew too:

Once we reached the trail in the ditch, we were only a few minutes from the end. A mystery was solved on this final leg of the race, too: Turns out my sign was an Adopt a Highway sign, recognizing the lodge that put on the race.