

Tails of the 2013 CrowDitarod

January 19, 2013

WinterStar Farm

Cokato, Minnesota

PASSPORT TO FUN



Sloe Gin Knickers and Devonshire Cream

by Karina Burger

Icy conditions could not dampen the fun at the third annual CrowDitarod, hosted by WinterStar Farm.

CROW RIVER DOGSLEDDING EVENT DRAWS INTERNATIONAL INTEREST

THE BRITISH ARE COMING

Word spread throughout the working dog world that the CrowDitarod dogsledding event was worth attending. At least that's what we believe after being contacted last summer by Aimee Campbell, malamute owner and musher in the United Kingdom, to ask if she could attend. We enthusiastically encouraged her to come, figuring that it would be fun and that we'd have a solid contact in the UK if we ever travel there.

Aimee did not bring her team with her but hoped to see many of the working lines of mals in action at our event. Winter came early with a wonderful foot of snow in early December. Alas, it was followed by two rainstorms and several cold snaps that left us with quite a bit of ice both on the river and on land but not much snow covering that ice. Many people who planned to attend canceled the week before, fearing injuries to their dogs on the slick trails.

But Brits are made of sterner stuff, stiff upper lip and all that - plus, the airline tickets were non-refundable. So the game was on!

A delightful guest, Aimee entertained us with even the smallest things. We observed that the Brits say "Brilliant!" quite a lot; a very pleasant exclamation. We provided Aimee with



New Event - All Star Malamute Bowling! The team that knocks down the most people wins!



Penny and Ruckus ran lead on Aimee's team.

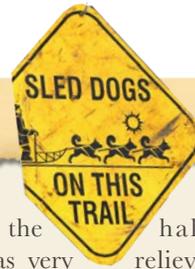


The brilliant Huck (aka Who-k).

The teams were small and some runs were short, but a fun weekend was had by all!



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three or four of our dogs and a sled and sent her out to try and keep up with Tim's team. When she survived the first run without losing the team and only taking down one fence, we were confident that she could handle the team for the weekend. (In other words, she drove the team better than Karina.)

Aimee was particularly impressed with our boy Huck, who ran in wheel on her team. She declared him to be (you guessed it) "brilliant," because he pulls hard, stands perfectly still at stops, and never tangles his line. Because of her accent, it amused us to no end to hear her praising him. She called him "Who-k." We still don't think that he ever realized she was talking to him!

Aimee brought a large and very heavy suitcase with her, but over the weekend, it became clear she had not brought much clothing. This was a bit of a mystery...

NEW EVENT - THE POLAR PLUNGE

Preparation for the CrowDitarod involves figuring out the meals and housing, tracking the trails on the farm, finding volunteers to assist at the start and drive rigs back home, lining up a photographer, and, most importantly, checking the river to be sure the ice is safe. This year, the Crow River was the lowest we had ever seen it, just a few inches deep in many places. With the cold December we had, we expected no problems and planned the test run with Samoyed musher Ricq Pattay on New Year's Day.

Since Ricq has a fast racing team of Sammies, aided this year by an adopted Alaskan husky that is an experienced racing dog, we asked him to run his team out first. We paid the price for this request because, after Ricq's team fell in, he jokingly wondered if we had planned it that way on purpose!

Ricq's team had gone about two miles of the 13-mile run, following a snowmobile track on the river. Suddenly, there was a small open patch of water with the track leading straight to it! Ricq said, "My team went right at it. When the lead dogs reached it, they realized that it was open water and jumped around it, and then kept running on the track. The team and wheel dogs had no option to go around it, as the gangline was tight and we were moving fast. The four dogs in the back of my team all went into the water, but it was not even up to their bellies! They were in and out with one stride. The runners of my sled were longer than the hole, so I went right over the open water without getting wet at all!"

Ricq's dogs reached the halfway point with icicles hanging off of their legs. Though he tried to convince me that this incident did not need to be documented in the CrowDitarod write-up, his attitude was one of resignation. We assured Ricq that we will always invite him, for the comic relief alone!

When Tim reached the halfway point with his (dry) team, he was very relieved to learn that Ricq and his dogs were OK. He described following the trail, coming up to find the open water - and no sign of Ricq. Tim could not tell if the ice had broken and had no idea how deep the water was at the open spot. Upon learning that the ice did not break and that the team had fallen into a small spot of open water when the rest of the river at that place was frozen, some good-natured ribbing began. Tim told Ricq that "Malamutes are smart enough to go around open water," to which Ricq replied, "Well, it is very easy to navigate a trail when you are moving as slowly as a malamute team!"



Ricq and his team after taking the Polar Plunge. Brrrrr!

It turns out we had a lot to learn about current and its effect on freezing. Had the river been deeper the current would have been slower. Currents create heat, and we noticed that some of the lowest places on the river were very slow to freeze this year.

SLUSH PUPPIES

There is a saying in Minnesota: "If you don't like the weather, just wait ten minutes. It will change!" That certainly was true on CrowDitarod weekend! An inch of fresh snow fell on Thursday, the day Aimee arrived. Friday's temps would go above freezing and turn that nice snow to slush and ice, so we told Aimee, "We don't care how jet lagged you are, we are sledding first thing in the morning!" She took this drill sergeant approach to her vacation in stride and declared the plan to be "brilliant!" before she collapsed into bed. Off we went the next day for a few miles on the river, a really lovely run with bald eagles, wild turkeys, and white-tail deer all making appearances. Later that day, the rest of the mushers arrived.

Saturday, was warm and getting warmer, going above freezing. We anticipated the river would become a slushy

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Meet the Mushers



Tim O'Brien and Aimee Campbell mushing the WinterStar Farm malamutes at Ney Park.



The Mummy Returns? Nope, Aimee models UK dogsledding headgear.



Ricq Pattay and his team streak across the horizon.



Karina and Minnie skijored the river Friday, before the snow melted.



John Schultz and an Istari team.



Karen Taylor driving Freya and the Schultz's dog JRR.

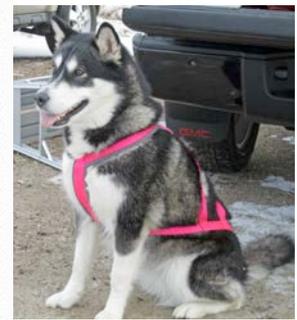


Helen Schultz and an Istari team on the river.

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All together now: "SLOE GIN KNICKERS!" The CrowDitarod crew after sledding Ney Park.



Freya eagerly waits for her hook up.

From left: John Schultz, Aimee Campbell, Ricq, Melanie and Gwen Patta, Karen Taylor, Lindsey and Dane Peterson, Tim O'Brien.

mess, so we loaded up the teams and drove to the new trails at Ney County Park. These trails were fast and icy and the sleds would often slide sideways down the hills. Five teams enjoyed running the scenic park before it warmed up too much for the dogs.

At the park, we sent the teams out to make an immediate hard left (haw), which was a difficult maneuver with energetic dogs that just wanted to sprint straight. Our valiant volunteers, Lindsey, Dane, Melanie, and Gwen, placed themselves at the trail intersection to force the teams to turn. From a distance, this looked like a bizarre game of All Star Bowling, with the dogs as the bowling balls!

Saturday night, we enjoyed a prime rib and Yorkshire pudding dinner party, to give us the gumption to try the river! On Sunday morning we ran 10 miles on the river with four teams. We were pleased to put working legs on several of the dogs and to finish a Working Team Dog title on one of them!

Monday dawned bright, sunny, and very, very cold - 20 below zero (-29C), with a stiff wind on top of that. Remember what I said about the weather in Minnesota changing quickly? In just a couple of days, the high temperature was nearly 60 degrees different than it had been! We have run our teams in these frigid conditions, but we all decided simultaneously not to go out. Everyone started packing, and the fond farewells began.

INSIDE AIMEE'S SUITCASE

The mystery of Aimee's ultra-heavy suitcase unfolded bit by bit over the long weekend. Right after she arrived, I checked with her to see if everything was OK with her room and found her cleaning up her suitcase because one of the four (yes, four!) bottles of homemade sloe gin that she had brought us as a gift had broken on the flight. She assured me that nothing was damaged, except that she now had "tie-dyed knickers!" Thus, "sloe gin knickers" became the slogan for the weekend.

Next, Aimee brought down a bottle of wine and two large pans of torte for dessert - quite delicious. The following day, she appeared with two liters of Devonshire cream (think of a very rich pudding) to heat and pour over the torte! It is pretty safe to say that the calories consumed this year exceeded the calories burned on the trail.

When we dropped Aimee at the airport, her suitcase seemed to be empty. Arriving back at home, we found a stack of additional gifts - two huge British cookbooks, boxes of chocolates and confections, gourmet hot chocolate and English tea, just to name a few things. We now suspect that the "sloe gin knickers" were the only clothes Aimee had brought, besides what she wore! Our jaws dropped at her extreme generosity, and all we could say was "BRILLIANT!"



River Scenes

