

# The Arrowhead 135

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## *The World's Toughest Race on Foot*

Ironically I am currently sitting inside a warm library in Flagstaff, AZ sipping on a school computer sipping on a warm cup of starbucks white hot chocolate (these amenities were only distant dreams, vague, indescribable images in my mind during the Arrowhead 135).

The week leading up to the Arrowhead 135, I had not been getting good sleep, I was overworked trying to adjust from having taken to 15 credits of liberal arts the previous semester to this semester where I was now taking 19 credits of upper level Spanish courses, each with their own agenda, full of homework. Needless to say, this was still a poor excuse for not taking better care of myself during this week leading up to the race.

I left Flagstaff, AZ (the Caribbean compared to where I was headed) and boarded the plane for International Falls, MN, appropriately named 'the icebox of the nation'. I took some melatonin (a natural sleep aid) and passed out on the plane to the grand site of the frozen Rocky Mountains, I passed out again. When I woke up the second time, everything was white, everything was flat and ice was starting to develop on the wing of the plane... "well either Christianity is going to be disappointed when they find out this is heaven or I'm flying over Minnesota" Upon landing in International Falls, I heard the pilot say in a very serious voice "o it's a nice 14 degrees outside right now"...uhhh...(As us San Diegans now anything under 50 is death! And throughout this entire race the temperatures didn't even get into double digits...well positive double digits that is...) I stayed at the Voyager Motel with a fellow bad-ass, that is to say Bill Bradley. For those of you who don't know him, he's ran the Badwater Double-Crossing (that's 270 miles of asphalt in 120+ degree weather), ridden his bike across the United States of America in 16 days and completed the Susitna 100 (a race similar to the Arrowhead 135 held in Alaska). Seeing Bill was a smack into reality..I really had gotten on a plane and flown into northern Minnesota and I really was signed up for the Arrowhead 135.... 'dear god I thought..why can't I have been like the rest of the kids my age and just be into under-age drinking and partying....after all that's what college is about not this ultra-running...' (hopefully you readers picked up on the sarcasm in that sentence). Bill however looked physced for this thing, I looked into the hotel room and it was if someone had put a stick of dynamite in Bill's bag and the contents of his bag had exploded all over the room. Immediately I noticed he had a lot more cold weather gear than I did and looked a lot more prepared than I did. I set up my spot in the corner of the room and began unpacking my gear, just starting to mentally prepare for this lunacy I was soon to embark upon.

Saturday (two days before the race) I awoke with a cough and runny nose...I was worried as hell...I could not afford to get sick before this race, or be sick during this race. I had never DNF'ed a race in my life and I knew that the Arrowhead 135 was going to take 100% of my body at 100% health and I felt like 60% at best that morning...I went on a run to test out my sled and to grab some last minute supplies from the local k-mart (I had no idea that K-marts still existed actually...) On my run I was wearing my face mask and noticed that something smelt

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awful...like death..since I was wearing a closed face mask I figured it was my breathe and thought to myself 'o wow...how am I going to run 135 miles if my breathe smells this bad? I'll literally kill myself...' I was luckily informed later that the awful smell in the air was a combination of the paper mill in the USA and the adjacent paper mill in Canada (which was all of ¼ mile from International Falls, MN)

That night I was feverish, I had the chills, I felt my like my temperature must have been something near 102 degrees at least, I told myself if I felt like this in the morning I would seriously consider dropping out of the race because it would be utterly stupid to enter a race like this while sick.

The fever broke that night! It was an ultra-running miracle! Or curse depending on your perspective on life..I had overcome the sickness but I had also lost my only semi-legitimate reason as to why I couldn't start this insane race...now I was screwed...

"Bravery and stupidity go hand in hand"

The pre-race meeting was full of runners, bikers and skiers and it was absolutely hilarious to look around. Every other person in there had a full face of hair! Hell I even think I saw the bearded woman! (that may have been hallucinated though...) It was such a contrast to the Badwater pre-race meeting, the media, the hype, the 'officialness' of it all, that wasn't there. This was a school auditorium full of a bunch of adults with a serious mental disorders...actually wanting to run 135 miles in -20 degree weather is a sick, sick thing...though I can tell you honestly, I don't know if it was excitement I was feeling so much as 'o shit what have I done!!' and 'ahhh! It's too late to turn back now...' I can equate the feeling I felt that night to going to a theme park with my dad and standing in line to do the park's scariest roller-coaster. You don't want to do it, your body, your mind tell you that it is all wrong. But something about standing in the line, amongst other brave souls other soon to be victims just makes you feel alive. The moment finally comes when you sit in that rollercoaster seat, the attendant clamps down the handlebars and your last thought is 'o shit what have I done...' but then it all comes loose, you let go of everything and accept that your screwed. And in coming so close to death, removing yourself so far from the norm, you realize what life is more than ever. And perhaps that's why I am out here, I just want to feel and I mean really feel what life is.

"I live life on the edge because you can't see anything from the center" –Kurt Vonnegut

Monday January 31st, 2011 local time 7:00am, it's dark outside still, the sun doesn't want to come up, its too cold outside and I don't blame it either, if I was the sun I'd stay the hell out of Northern Minnesota too.

The gun goes off and the fat-tired ambitious snow-bikers are off, that would be the only time during the entire race that I would see them. I wearily approach the start line, unaware that I am about to embark on the hardest quest of my young life over the next 53hrs and 25mins. The gun

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goes off, and the start as always fails to quench the excitement and fear I had felt for the past three weeks. Ultramarathon's don't start off hurting, they don't start off like a rollercoaster with that short click, click, click as you climb up to the apex of the coaster..no quite the contrary that click, click, click lasts hours and in this case days and the climax, the actual part of the race that makes you smile is so blurred in the suffering and insanity of it all, that it becomes impossible to discern suffering and happiness and that I think is where many ultrarunner's are confused when they tell you they enjoy 'suffering', they are just confused, don't listen to them.

I started this race running, pulling my 30lb+ sled, we'll to be honest it was more of a shuffle, as I was pretty sure I wasn't moving much faster than 5mph (which was extremely fast for this race!) The realization that I had not trained nearly enough with running with a sled fixed around my waist came quickly to fruition. Not only was the terrain uneven, it was like running on sand that you barely punch through as you walk on the beach. And the combination between this 'sand-snow' terrain and pulling this 30lb sled quickly brought my pace down to 4mph to eventually a solid 3mph..I felt pathetic at first..I knew for a fact on normal terrain, on a normal trail I could hike much faster than this. But this wasn't a 'normal' race and to compare it to something 'normal' was pure heresy, the only way for someone to understand what it was like, would be for them to come to Minnesota, let me strap a 30lb sled on them and try to run for at least an hour, then they would have a small idea of what us brave and hardened 18 'ultra-souls' had endured.

I followed well behind John Storkamp, the previous years second place and prior years first place finisher. I figured if anybody knew how to do this insane thing it was him. So I stayed my distance but kept a close eye on his technique. And to my surprise he wasn't running, it was more like an extremely powerful power-walk, I was pretty good at powerwalking myself (just ask my crew from the Badwater Ultramarathon) but powerwalking while pulling a sled was something I had obviously not practiced and it was clear to see that John was a veteran in this technique. I lost him about 10 miles into race and didn't see him again until the finish.

Getting to mile 35 was much more difficult and took a lot more energy than I had anticipated. I wasn't 100% sure of the mileage markers, as my progress just felt unusually slow. I arrived however in good spirit and still pretty full of energy for the next leg of this hellish race. The checkpoint itself was nothing more than a gas station out in the middle of nowhere. I got there about an hour before nightfall, which fell sadly enough at 5pm... (it was funny because everything you wanted at Badwater you had at this race and everything you want at Arrowhead you have at Badwater...this is something I'll discuss later)

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Here is a photo of me at the mile 35 checkpoint, notice how 'bonked' I already look:



I left the mile 35 checkpoint at around 6pm and Marcio Villar, an extraordinary international athlete from Brazil, left at the exact time as me. So we decided mutually it would be a good idea if we stuck together through the night. We started off and I instantly realized that he didn't speak English at all, only Portugues..We'll hopefully my 7+years of studying Spanish would come in handy I thought to myself. A few miles went by and we were chattering away as if we were speaking the same language, complaining about the terrain, the cold, the lack of water, these 'basic' human needs seemed to translate between languages beautifully. It was only when I tried to delve deeper into his mind and have conversation apart from the race that I became lost in translation. I filled one of my thermos's with café and gladly shared that with Marcio through the beginning of the night as he warned me from having previously done the race that this next section was going to be very 'hilly'. I told him that I was prepared and didn't really care about my progress during the night of the race, really I just wanted to 'survive' the night.

About 16 miles into the night, or roughly 6hrs, I noticed a red blinking light in the distance. It was another racer that me and Marcio were coming up on. As we got closer I recognized the racers clothing and sled from the first 35 miles, it was an athlete I figured who was new to the race and was foolishly running ahead, and now we were catching an exhausted version of the athlete who I was sure in his condition was going to drop out at the next checkpoint (yes I do make harsh and cruel judgments of athletes during races). We caught him on a hill and asked if he was doing alright and he said 'ya' and I then looked at Marcio and asked, "Would you like to join us for the night? You look to be moving at about the same pace as us" "sure I'll hang with you guys for a while" the muttered and well-clothed human being said. His name as I learned

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was Jordan, Jordan Peoples and he would prove to be the most vital asset of my race, one of the main reasons that I didn't just give in, keel over and die somewhere along the race course.

The three of us ran together for about 3-4hrs until me and Jordan hit a low simultaneously (lows for those of you who don't run are when your body physically quits on you, mentally quits on you and you just feel 'done' 100% 'done' with the race, it's a time when you don't care about finishing, you don't care about your time, you don't care much about living even..but you keep moving forward still because you know whining and bitching isn't going to get you anywhere in -30 degree weather.) I had to stop to get into my sled to get a sip of water and eat some needed solid food. I had made mashed potatoes earlier with some hot water I had left over and the 'fullness' they had dawned upon me, was beginning to wear away. I told Marcio to go ahead and that we would catch up with him later. "va bien, va bien, ya voy, verámos en tre Colinas" or something like that..what I got out of it was I'll see you in three hills. We didn't see Marcio again until the supposed mile 70 checkpoint.

Now it was just me and Jordan and the rest of the night, which I at the time didn't know wasn't going to end until 8am the following morning...and I regretfully asked Jordan about 8hrs into the night what time it was and when he replied 1am...the distraught, anger that I felt was immense..we still had so much of the night to endure and it was only going to get colder and colder...

At mile 48 or somewhere near there, the mileage throughout this course as I have previously stated and will continue to state was extremely inaccurate, there was a hot chocolate stop, some of the race staff had set up a tee-pee on the trail and were nice enough to have brought out hot chocolate and a warm stove to heat up racers inside the tee-pee. Jordan and I were drawn to the insides of that leather tarp, like sailors to sirens. And like the sailors who so remorsefully followed the calls of the sirens, we were punished. Although the warm stove was great, it melted all the ice on our clothing, and left us wet, one of the worst things you can be in -20+ degree weather. When we finally left the tent, my face was dripping and those drips were freezing on my face...It got so bad that my eyelashes extended out about 2 more inches than normal, and if I took to long to blink, my eyes would literally 'ice' shut to the point where I had to wipe off the ice with my glove...it was a hilarious and horrifying experience. Jordan remarked after we had finished the race that that portion was, "by far the coldest and most miserable part of the entire race' I personally didn't think it was that bad when compared to what was ahead of us.

"MelGeorge's Cabin 5 miles away" After too many hours of the night and way too many hours on my feet we were almost at MelGeorge's finally a comprehensible distance! I knew we were only moving about 2.5mph at that point, but still that was only two more hours that we had to spent on our feet until we got to MelGeorge's and the rest of the race which neither of us were thinking about at the time, could be decided and dealt with then.

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We were anxious, we were hungry for warmth, hungry for comfort and ya generally hungry too. We abandoned all stopping, no more stopping for water, for food, to piss or anything we were hell-bound for MelGeorge's come hell or high-water or in our case a 2 mile long lake that was under -35 degrees.

Two hours went by, we hadn't stopped for food, for water, for anything we were drained using every last bit of our energy to get to mile 70 for the hopes that we could 'recharge' our bodies at the checkpoint, neither of us wanted to stop anyways, it was too damn cold, too miserable. However ignoring food and water and still not having reached the checkpoint brought me into a terrible, terrible low. I was exhausted, I could barely keep my eyes open...I could see through my half-open eye across the huge lake a red blinking light that must have been at least 3-4 miles away and I feared..desperately telling Jordan.. "I hate to be a realist man...I really do..but do you see that red-light in the distance?...I think that is the checkpoint..." "I don't see anything man, we've for sure come five miles though since that stupid sign, the checkpoint is bound to come up on us soon" Shit...I was already hallucinating the first night and losing my motivation...Thank god for Jordan though, his great attitude and stubborn determination was infectious and as crappy as I felt, as drained and empty as my ambition was, my pride wasn't going to let him go on without me and what was I going to do anyways? Stop in the middle of the lake in -35 and wait for some miracle? No one gave a shit that I was complaining...and I would have to walk to MelGeorge's if I wanted to quit anyways.

I opened the door to the cabin, I stumbled in, frustrated, angered at the mileage. It was wrong...that wasn't five miles and I was empty, I was on zero, I had 0% left in me...and it was my damn fault for not stopping out there and taking better care of myself...I knew better as a pretty seasoned ultra-runner but I just didn't want to stop in that bastard cold. I stripped down and gave my clothes to aid station staff, they were nice enough to dry off the clothes.

"Nik!" A familiar voice yelled, I turned around "Marcio! Como estas? Por cuanto tiempo has estado aqui?" He said he had barely been there twenty minutes before our arrival. I was glad to see him, especially in such good spirit, he wasn't quitting or giving up anytime soon, I was sure of that. I sat with my eyes partially open, I was partially awake..to be honest I had been partially awake or partially asleep..whatever for the past six hours. I managed to eat quite a lot food there at the aid station as this was one of the few places that you didn't have to battle with your granola bar for an hour trying to use your saliva to melt the damn thing down so you could chew it.

I didn't really sleep during this entire race, I want to say I more passed out of consciousness...sleep never really happened, my body hurt too much, I was too cold, too miserable to sleep. After awaking or coming back to life, I am not sure to be honest, I wandered downstairs, filled up my thermos's, ate some more food and started preparing to leave again. During all this Jordan and I talked about sticking together through this day and possibly into the



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second night, I agreed with him that this would be a good idea, as during the first night he helped me and motivated me immensely.

“esperame esperame!” Marcio was still hanging around when me and Jordan were about to leave, and the trio that had departed during the night was re-united. We took off, all agreeing that we felt pretty much 90-100% refreshed after stopping, sleeping, eating, resting and escaping this cruel reality that we had all agreed was a ‘good idea’. The day heated up quickly..or at least it felt like it, for the first time I was down to only two layers and a very thin pair of gloves, everything else just seemed excessive. We weren’t moving particularly fast at this point but we were moving and we were all in extremely good spirits. The terrain was rolling hills at this point, and I had noticed Jordan the previous night was taking advantage of the fact that we were pulling sleds and actually used his sled to slide down the hills. I thought this was crazy that is until two other racers passed us sledding down a hill while we were running...the time difference wasn’t much at all, you didn’t gain anytime by sledding, however it was time off of your feet and you were gaining distance and if anything it looked fun as hell so I figured I would give it a shot... “damn I told Jordan...you’ve been holding out on me, this was the races best kept secret! Now I feel like we are just three buddies out in a snowy wonderland looking for some good sledding hills!” And we found them..unfortunately many times they were facing the wrong direction...



The steep hills we had to walk up were absolutely killer, the muscles they required were already exhausted from previous hills and the sled seemed to just pull you backwards for every step forward you would try to make up these 15% grade bastards!

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I truly only regret one thing during this race, and that was having not filmed Marcio attempting to sled down a massive hill. His sled unlike mine and Jordan's wasn't elongated, wasn't balanced and was holding a large plastic storage box atop of it. So when Marcio tried to sled down the hill, his balance was all over the place and you could tell he had no control, he was yelling something in Portuguese, when he started to come closer and closer to flying off the trail and phoom! There he went, right off the trail and disappeared almost instantly under the untainted snow. I quickly ran over and helped him and his sled out and back onto the trail but that had to be one of the funniest things I had ever seen...damn I wish I had filmed that...

Eventually the trio parted again, this time me and Jordan went ahead moving at a swift and surprisingly constant 3mph for the rest of the day. I was beginning to estimate our mileage via the map we had been handed during the pre-race meeting and I had estimated that we were about 22 miles into the 38 miles we had in-between mile 70 and 112. We eventually came to a trail intersection though that verified a nightmare. We had only come 18 miles...I was pissed, livid..we had been moving 3mph for the last 6hrs!! And then I did the math...dammit...So I had to re-convince myself that we had 20 miles to go until the next check-point, four more miles than I had previously thought...normally not a big deal at all however, in these conditions, devastating, absolutely devastating... Worse than that though, was the doubt I was having with the 'true' mileage of MelGeorges cabin...for some reason I was doubting that it was 70 miles...I asked a passing snowmobile what the 'exact mileage at MelGeorges Cabin' somewhat bewildered by my question he responded frightfully, '68'...he drove off before hell broke loose...and then hell did break loose, "what the hell!?!?! Bill told me that it was mile 73, other racers told me it was mile 74, I've heard mile 72 and I decided humbly on 70 and it is 68!!!!!! I could kill someone right now!!!!" ,Jordan steps away from me a bit, "Jordan...this means (I recalculate things in my head) that the distance between MelGeorges and Crescent Lodge isn't just 38 miles, its 42 miles and we don't just have a mere 20 miles to go, we have 24 god damn miles to cross before we get there!! And we have worked so damn hard already....I can't handle this...I hate this race...I can't handle this anymore!!" I wanted to quit at that moment...nothing more frustrates me than incorrect mileage, and this was the worst error I had ever confronted in my racing career...I was whining and bitching and what I said earlier beckoned truth once again. NO ONE CARED!! Jordan felt the same way I did, I knew he did, he had too, but he wasn't saying anything about it, all he said was "we'll we'd better get moving forward because standing here and complaining isn't going to get us 24 miles" and he was damn right...the sun went down...

### We've suffered too much to just give up now

"Jordan sometime during this night, I just want to let you know (I felt like a were-man confessing that he turns into a werewolf) I really start to fall apart, I mean like really really start to fall apart mentally during the second night, I'll probably be hallucinating and I guarantee at least one occasion in which I will truly need your help to keep going. I got your back though too



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man, I will pull your ass through the lowest of lows and I will get you to the finish line, we will finish this race man!" He looked taken back a little bit, but promised that he too would help get my ass to the finish line and finish this ridiculous race that we had started.

On our way towards crescent lodge and in the midst of my 'second night delirium', Jordan said to me, "you know what Nick? I feel like those prisoners of war during WWII, I hear the Russians would march them across Siberia until they fell over and died..." Shit Jordan was right...I thought to myself, except I thought, those damn prisoners of war had it a lot easier..they could just fall over and die when they wanted too, they could just give up and be done. Doing that during this race would mean a DNF, I mean if I died I wouldn't 'officially' finish...so unfortunately for me falling over and dying on the cold snowy ground wasn't an option.

We were moving at a great pace well into the night, it was about 11:30pm at night and we had passed a 'shelter' (a wooden structure on the side of the trail where you could set up your sleeping bag on wet dirt) about six miles ago and we figured we were about 13-14 miles away from the Crescent Lodge checkpoint, not a small number in these conditions but still a number none the less. I was talking Jordan out of a low and we were just feeding back and forth off of each others energy when we came to hill, it wasn't any different than the other million hills we had conquered up until this point, but as we started to ascend it, my ability to converse suddenly dropped...then my ability to speak all together... "Jordan....I....ugggmm...I....hmmmm..." I was crashing hard...this was 40+hrs of being on my feet, 90+ miles of running and the second damn night I had been at this ridiculous thing...I was crashing hard. "I...I need to stop..." I unclip my sled..stumble back and forth as my legs are barely able to hold me up "Nick you can't stop here its way too cold outside and were way too far from the aid station still, pull yourself together man...we can't, we can't stop now.." "but....I..." I lay down on my sled...I pass out of consciousness for about five seconds... I try to open my eyes and its darkness... nothing but darkness...I'm going blind, I'm dying or something...I'm taking the easy way out of this race...I'll be DNF'ing if I don't die before a snowmobile can come retrieve my frozen corpse...I can't even compare how I felt with any other low I have ever experienced this was something different..this was literally the verge of passing out and dying I am pretty sure...Jordan pushed me off my sled, padded down some snow alongside the trail got my sleeping bag out and shoved me under it...I felt pathetic, weak, lame that I couldn't even manage to do this on my own, but I was done...I was ready to give up...on this hill, on this race and even on life...I sat under my sleeping bag for what must have been less than five minutes my body temperature began to cool and my muscles were seizing up, "shit dude, I can't stop...we can't stop here, we can't stop now...its too cold and I'll die before anybody comes to find me, lets get the fuck out of here" I throw my stuff back in my sleeping bag and drearily at probably less than 1mph we are moving again...I stop again not too far off, the feeling is coming back, the blackness, the fatigue its getting physically difficult to move forward without collapsing...but I can't now I tell myself no one gives a shit Nickademus...no one cares...no one cares...I distort the saying into 'no one cares if I die...It's not true though I tell myself...no one cares if I complain, if I hurt, if I suffer

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they'll care if I fail though and dying is just the easy way out and dammit I'd never taken the easy way out before so I wasn't about to start...I keep moving, keep trudging along. Jordan pulls out a miracle from his sled, "hey do you want some espresso beans he says?" "huh?? O ummm sure..." I muster up enough energy to open up my partially frozen mouth and squeeze in a few of these miracle beans, within minutes I awake. I am back, I scream, I rage, I explode inside myself "Jordan" I look him very seriously in the eyes, "let's do this shit"

The rest of the night I jack myself up on espresso beans, fighting off the lows the best I possibly can. We come across a humongous hill, the biggest by far of all the hills we had encountered, it was at least a solid  $\frac{3}{4}$  a mile in climbing..we are exhausted at the top but in the distance can see a slight yellow glow, we communally decide that's crescent lodge and with the same brainless hunger we had for MelGeorge's we begin feverishly moving towards that direction.

Side note: that hill we went up had a positive to it though, it had a downhill of equal or greater size, both Jordan and I mounted our supply filled sleds atop the hill and took off down that thing at what must have been 1am in the morning in -35 degree weather, we were flying down the hill at over 20mph without a worry in our mind, this was the great escape, our minds were elsewhere, we were no longer ultrarunners approaching mile 112, we were simply children sledding down a glorious hill.

The worst and most memorable mis-mileage though during this race was the sign roughly 3.5 miles from crescent lodge that stated simply "crescent lodge 2 Miles". For one it pissed me off because I had convinced myself and Jordan about 3 miles ago that Crescent was only 1 mile away and too see concrete evidence that it was two miles away angered me a lot...we still feverishly stumbled upon, like the previous night it was too cold to stop and drink or eat, we longed for the warmth and comfort of the inside of the bar. After running solid and I mean actually running for about a mile we came to another sign that said "Crescent Lodge 2 Miles"...I know understood why the race director had told the joke "I don't know why but some people like to shoot the signs out there" Had I a knife, a gun or better yet a nuclear bomb I would have blown that piece of shit sign to pieces. I was furious but instead of just complaining I channeled that fury into motion and continued towards this forever faraway Crescent Lodge.

Finally arriving, the longing, the desire, the want, they were all exhausted...I was just pissed but too damn cold and tired to complain to anyone about it and too damn far into the race to quit, they would literally have to pry my icy cold hands from my sled to get me out of this thing. We sat down at the bar and the lady spoke to us in some language, it might have been English but I just said "uhngalkd dkdsadsk one of uhmndskf hmmm everything...." About fifteen minutes later I had a small pizza and two beef brisket sandwiches in front of me, I had no idea where they had come from or whose they were but I ate them none the less...as I said I didn't sleep during this race I more or less passed out of consciousness.

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Like Odysseus on the Island of Ogygia under Calypso's spell, we forgot who we were and what we were during, what our goal was...this small bar in the middle of absolutely nowhere was paradise and its lure had captivated our minds. "Jordan! Jordan!" I shake him from his sleep, "we gotta get out of here man! We gotta get going! WE GOTTA GO! We're only 23 miles away from the finish line!" "race? Huh? O SHIT...ya dude let's get going"....and the spell was broken

The sun didn't come up that morning until around 8am and by that time Jordan and I were already three hours towards the finish line having covered at least nine miles we figured. When the sun finally did come up, what a beautiful sunrise it was, the entire sky was illuminated with a brilliant orange hue, nothing like what I had ever seen in California or Arizona and surprising too was the orientation of the sun in the sky, never before had I watched a sunrise from so far north, the sun was so south in the sky it did not look like it was rising from the east.

We didn't hit a single low during the last 23 miles, we stayed constantly motivated off of one another, just bouncing our positive energy back and forth, it was glorious the absolute epitome of the ultrarunning spirit. There were large periods in which neither one of us talked, but I think we were both trying to comprehend and reflect on the fact that this was indeed the third day we were in this race, it wasn't a staged race, there was no 'official' rest and trying to understand that we had both come as far as we had was just insane.

The very last three miles of the race, I told Jordan, "if it had not been for you, and I am serious, I would have not been able to finish this race..you literally saved my race this last night and I am eternally grateful for that...now this last three miles I am going to take off on my own pace and just kind of get myself together spiritually and reflect on everything that has done.."

I put on my headphones and used my i-pod for the first time during the entire race, and the first song that came on was Eminem's 'Til I Collapse, the lyrics ran through my brain like a gazelle running from a lion,

*feel weak, and when you feel weak, you feel like you wanna just give up.*

*But you gotta search within you, you gotta find that inner strength and just pull that shit out of you and get that motivation to not give up*

Thank you Eminem...snap like that I was in the greatest high I had experienced the entire race. (Now a high to define it simply, is the polar opposite of a low, its absolute ecstasy, its adrenaline pumping through your veins, its painless, its ephemerally infinite, it's indescribable) I ran that last three miles at probably close to an 8min/mile, by far the fastest I had ran the entire race, I felt no pain, only ecstasy...I never need to take any drugs in my life because I know nothing can come close to the feeling of enjoyment I received when finally seeing the finishing banner in the distance.

In contrast to every single other race I had ever completed, this finish line was empty. Absolutely empty. There was a banner fluttering in the cold winter wind but not a single soul was in sight

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when I passed under it, I saw around the corner two other races I had managed to catch in that last three miles and I quickly caught up with them.

The three of us were directed by a race official or so I assumed into some random part of a hotel where we left our sleds and were then escorted up to the third floor of a hotel where in a random room the race director got up from his chair and greeted us three with a handshake and a congratulations. This was by far the most obscure and un-dramatic ending to a race that I had ever experienced. For how epic everything was, for how much I had suffered it was just like having ridden the scariest rollercoaster in the theme park and then getting rushed out without even getting that greasy, sugary yet rewarding churro for having completed such a great feat.

### Does Anyone Ever Realize Life While They are Still Living?

This taught me though as stereotypical as it sounds, that the real sense of achievement or accomplishment, wasn't the trophy, wasn't my time, wasn't my place it was that I had finished the damn race! I had endured and managed to scrape by death and emerge on the otherside unscathed and alive.

I had come closer to failure than I had ever desired, closer to absolutely giving up on everything and just dying out there than I had ever wanted to come. Yet, it was this close proximity to failure, this high chance of me not making it, that attracted me to this race in the first place, and I can still proudly say that I have never DNF'ed a race, I have completed ever endurance event that I have ever started. Few people can say that, and those that can are my heroes. I am not impressed by time, by distance, I am impressed and in awe at man's superior sense of stubbornness. His unwavering determination is extremely admirable and I am on a life-long journey to be one of the great. I succeed where others fail, I am always looking for the next challenge, looking for that race with the lowest finish rate, looking for the race someone dares to call 'the most difficult' and putting its name to the test. The arrowhead 135 was a true test of character and of mental ability, it was the most difficult race I have ever completed in several aspects, yet it was also the most rewarding.

And to answer Orson Well's character Emily from the play *Our Town*, "*does anyone ever realize life while they are still living it?*" Yes, god dammit, yes I do...more than ever....

# The Arrowhead 135

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## A Quick Comparison Between Badwater and Arrowhead

- Badwater is legitimately 135 miles in length, you can measure it in a car, you can measure it with a GPS it is exactly 135 miles
- Arrowhead is not 135 miles! It much closer I think to 140 miles or more, you can't measure it though, GPS batteries don't work in the cold and the trail maps mileage are very inaccurate
- This past years finish rate at Badwater was 91% (73 finishers out of 80 entrants), the course record is 22hrs and 37mins
- This years finish rate at Arrowhead was 33% (18 finishers out of 54 entrants), the course record at Arrowhead is 37hrs and 59mins
- Badwater is only 'hot' (like unbearably frikkin' hot 120+ degrees) during the first 42 miles of the race, during night its not hot, in Owens Valley its not hot and climbing up Whitney Portal its not hot
- Arrowhead is 'cold' during the entire 135+ miles, it started out at -16, got up to 5 degrees that day, went down to -35 that night, got up to 6 degrees that day, went down to -42 degrees and then went back up to a whopping 7 degrees at the finish line.
- You cant have ice cream during Badwater
- You can have all the ice cream you want during Arrowhead
- You can have hot soup during Badwater
- You can't have hot soup during Arrowhead
- Badwater you have a crew of 6 people at your disposal for the entire race and they are usually max only a mile or two away from you

## The Arrowhead 135

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- Arrowhead you are alone! Absolutely 100% frikkin' alone...its yourself, your sick thoughts and the frozen water and food your dragging in your sled for 135 miles, ya there are checkpoints but only three for the entire race! That would be like doing Badwater and only having aid at Stovepipe Wells (mile 42), Panamint Springs (mile 73) and Lone Pine (mile 122)
- Arrowhead is 'the worlds toughest race on foot' not Badwater