

Finnmark 500 - 2009-03-19

day-by-day

by Taisto Thorneus

Pre-race - Wednesday evening:

At arrival to Alta I find out Surya is in heat, but since all three other females are just getting over their heat period, I am not too worried. – I did not have any big problems while they were in heat, so I assume this will be the same. – But it is not, she acts totally crazy (horny !) and the males are crazy, too. We were having a late dinner at Steinar´s place, when we heard lots of noise.

I run out just to see that Surya and Von were making puppies...she has chewed the 4 ton luggage band we had attached her with side of stake out to and most dogs were in a mess...

Well, after sorting them out and putting the dogs in to the trailer, I thought it would be quiet...but no, they kept going almost all night...howling in their boxes, and trying to get out.

Thursday:

I take out the dogs early (before 06.00) Ville sounds like he had been smoking all night and I prepare food for them...No males nor Surya are interested but the other females eat ok. I am worried about Ville and the coughing, I start to think that maybe he got kennel cough, because some of the teams working with us on our tours had it earlier...so I called Lubos to ask him bring me two new dogs for the race in case...but I could not reach him – he was on a long training run with the dogs from my race dogs that was left home...including the ones (Pepita and Liina) I wanted him to bring to Alta...Pavol was also out and luckily he answered the phone and I could ask them to return back to the kennel the shortest possible trail.

While waiting for the two females I went to Strand Camping to see a vet about Ville. There was a bunch of them and they examined Ville and said he has no fever or any signs of illness - it was up to me if I wanted him in the team or not...

In late evening Lubos came to Alta with Pepita and Liina and we fed the dogs ...well, anyhow the females. The males were still not in "dining mood".

Friday:

Most of the day, even when I go to try to get a look at the downhill from town towards the Alta river (we have been warned about it, it is steep and icy, they told us – but I do not find the trail quickly and decide it is not important to if it is difficult or not),and including mushers' pre-race banquet, I spend thinking about who will be the 8:th dog in the team, Ville or Liina ? I am already clear over that Surya will be replaced by Pepita.

In the evening I got some food & water even to the males and feel a little better...but I am still worried when I go to bed.

Saturday morning:

I get up early, and Lubos is up early as well and he goes out to take care of the dogs. I go and have a look at the dogs and decide to take Ville as the 8:th dog. Also we have already filled the new heavier sled with all the mandatory gear, so there is nothing more to decide, just drive to the starting area.

ALTA – JOTKA

I start out as number 4, breaking a lot on the streets, passed the high school and we turn right down the hill...it is about 4 meter wide smooth, not too steep hill turning right, but not sharp or icy at all...I think "was this all" – and it was. I could easily gone down this with transport sled with 4p sitting on it...after 50 meters on the river I look back and see one team already coming down on the river and another is in beginning of the hill. As long as the trail on the river is icy the sled moves easily & nicely, but I notice that only a few cm soft snow on the top of the trail slows it down much more than it should...Anyhow after maybe 3 -4 km I pass

Number 2, Södal Kvam, who has a small tangle and I notice that number 6, Gisle Mjaatvedt is already just behind me. A couple of times on the river, when there is no soft snow at all on the trail I sit on my chair, but as soon as there is a thin layer of loose/soft snow on the trail the team slow down. I realise that I took wrong sled and I am worried about how much in time I will loose before we are in Skoganvarre and get the chance to change sled. Before "Dessika lia", the hill leading up to Finnmarksvidda, I am only 20 m behind number 3, Sebastian Plur –Nilssen, but he is faster than me up the hill and Gisle is just behind. Now I am almost shocked,

because there does not use to be hardly any teams, especially limited class teams who can keep up with my team uphill, even if they work hard and I just help them occasionally...

I work as much as I can up the hill, but going up is heavy. I have to rest a while after getting up the hill before I can help the dogs again – now it is about 5-10 cm soft snow on top of the trail (digged up by lots of snowmobiles) Plur Nilssen is gone and me and Gisle pass each other a couple of times. On a icy lake I sit a couple of minutes on my chair but soon I have to start kicking again, trying not to loose too much of distance and time to fastest teams...

Ronny Wingren pass me, working hard and I don´t even try to keep up.

Coming in to Jotka I decide to make a short stop, snack the dogs and take off booties from the dogs who do not need them. A couple of teams pass me while I do it. Arnt Ola Skjerve pulls also in with a good looking team. I never notice if he leaves before me or not (I think he did)

JOTKA – SKOGANVARRE

At last moment I change Pepita in lead on side of Nurmi & put Nicole back in third pair. The team is working ok, but they can not came up to their normal speed, so I try to help them as much as I can. After a while I pass Gisle (and I think another team...can not remember for sure) At some places trail is more icy and dogs speed up on those spots. I feel I not really moving and try to help them even more. Nurmi starts suddenly to spray the trail with diarrhoea...I fear this is it...I slow down a little and hope for the best.

After what feels like really long time we finally go down towards the lake there the Skoganvarre checkpoint is – that hill was not really bad either...it is getting dark now, so I can see the lights from the checkpoint. The trail on the lake is fairly good, so I pull in not too slow. But I am worried I lost too much to the teams ahead. I am tired of all kicking.

I load my straw but forget my food bag in the depot. I have to walk back for it after I put the dogs in order for rest and I snack them. I go and find a vet to ask what I can do with Nurmi, he asks what medicine I have...I have luckily Canicur (bought it first time ever the morning before) he says that is the best I could have and instruct me how to use it. After Nurmi got his canicur, I get water and cook for the dogs. They all eat well, even Nurmi. I start to get back some hope, but I am still really worried. I go to Steinar´s motorhome and have something to eat and drink, before I go to find the race marshal... he has to see the sled I want to change to before I am allowed to make the change. With some help from Gisle, who pulled in just after me, we change sled, I move over all gear from the first one to the new one, snack the dogs just a little more and I feel I am ready to leave.

SKOGANVARRE - LEVAJOK

Nina Skramstad in open/1000 km is the only one who left so far. It takes a good while before I get hold of race officials so I can leave. Just before I am allowed to leave also another 1000 km team, Tore Bergby, leaves the checkpoint.

Already when I start out I can feel it is much easier for the dogs with the new sled. Standing on the break mat I catch up Tore and he asks if I want to pass - no, not yet, I say. I stay about 10 minutes behind him and then, when there is a wider spot on the trail I pass him. He do not even try to follow. I feel much better since my team can easily keep the speed I want without me helping at all, in fact I am breaking more or less all the time now so they don't run too fast. It is a total contrast to before Skoganvarre. After some 40 minutes on the trail I can see a headlamp moving around ahead of me. It is Nina snacking her team. I pull up behind her and ask if she is ready to leave soon. – Yes, she says, and I say I wait until she starts.

Nina says "thank you and bye" and takes off. My team is not interested in letting her leave us, I have no problems at all to keep her speed, in fact I have to break most of the first hour behind her, but she is moving fast enough with her 14 dogs, so I do not want to pass her, it is much easier to run behind a steady working team than before...After about an hour we reach a very steep uphill and I can not help the dogs up all the way, I have to stop about 30-40 seconds and try to get some air, and Nina pulls away. After the hill we are totally above tree line and I follow 100-300 meters behind her for another two hours, mostly losing a little on downhills and catching up on uphills. It is quite windy and some snow in the air. Our tracks is gone in a couple of minutes, but it is never more than 5-10 cm soft snow on the old trail.

I notice Nurmi is not having any diarrhoea anymore either. We start going down from the highest area and Nina is now maybe 400 meters ahead of me. Suddenly I see her headlamp going around again, at first I think "why does she start snacking again ? it is only maybe 15 km to Levajokk. When I come around the curve I see her team standing against me, she seems

And sounds not totally happy with it and ask me to help her turn. Since she is not on a packed trail she do not want to gamble and put down the snow hooks and turn the team herself. I can not see the trail at first because I have my headlamp on minimum light. She point out the trail and I turn her team towards it, but they turn back again when she wants to start. I drive up my team ahead of her and turn her team behind mine and take off. She follows but can not keep up with me. I am now down on the creek leading to Tana river about 3-4 km up stream from Levajokk checkpoint. When I reach Tana river she is much closer again and she is working hard to catch up. But I want to be the first team to Levajok so I start to work too, any I pull in just before her with still fairly fresh team. We are way ahead of all the other teams.

I snack the dogs, put straw for them and go for a quick meal myself. When I return about 30 minutes later to cook and feed the team a few other teams is in, Arnt Ola and Ronny have parked close to me, so they must be in after me. I cook , check the dogs feets, put some ointment and feed them before I put coats on them . Nurmi gets another pill of Canicur before I leave the team to rest. At the café I get a surprise: A prize for first team to Levajokk - a big Sami knife and an even bigger chocolate box ! (Nina got the same as first open class team)

I go for a nap. It is really nice to have a motor home to rest in...I wake up after one hour and I go and check the team , but from distance, I do not want to disturb them. Now more teams is at the checkpoint. I want to have a longer break here, so I go back for another nap.

I sleep another hour, take my magnesium (against cramp in my legs after working too hard earlier) have some more food and tea and with a coke and a termos flask with warm drink I go back to team and feed them little bit again. They are ready to leave, but I have decided not to leave before all my main competitors have left, since I figure they can not damage the trail on the river it is nice to have them ahead of me now...



LEVAJOK – KARASJOK

Nobody wants to leave first, but I have more mandatory rest left than they have, so they realise they have to leave before me. At first Arnt Ola leave in really good speed. After him Ronny leaves. His team is much slower at first, but I can see they pick up more speed after a couple of minutes. Then Elisabet Edland leaves. Her team starts out even faster than Arnt Ola, but I see that her team slows down already after some 500 m. Now I wait until Bernd Helmich also leave, before I make my self ready. The other reason I wait is that I do not want any team pass me in the beginning and get my dogs start running too fast before they have warmed up. I start slowly and let the dogs go their own speed and it takes long time before I start to get closer to Bernd. It should be easy for the dogs to run , but they do not pick up much speed. I notice I forgot to change runner plastics, but I assume that does not matter so much. I pass Bernd when he gets a lot of trouble on a part of the river there it is no snow at all and he has booties on all dogs. When I pass him I say " take of the booties until Karasjok" but he don't understand...I realise I said it in Swedish, so I turn back and repeat it in English. Bernd take off the booties and follows me about 500 meters behind. We are not moving very fast. It takes another two hours before I spot another team ahead of me. It will another 1,5 hours before I catch that team. It is Elisabet Edland. Just before I catch her up I stop for a quick snacking. Than it takes another half hour before I can pass her. We can see Bernd about 1 km behind, but Arnt Ola and Ronny is out of sight ahead of us. I still move real slow and Elisabet follow until we turn from Tana river in to Karsjok river. I feel at once that my team speed up, either it is a harder trail or it is because Karasjok is much more narrow, I am not sure, but I leave Elisabet behind. Her team does not speed up. We run the next 70 minutes in good speed and reach Karasjok checkpoint well before dark, and not too long after the two leaders.

I do the checkpoint duties and keep an eye on my competitors. As I can see both Arnt Ola´s and Ronny´s dogs look little more tired than mine. I notice I got some splits in some pads but otherwise the dogs look ok. It will be some booties for those with splits from here.

Elisabet pulls in with a team who looks even better than mine...my conclusion is that her dogs are bored of the long runs and do not want to run fast anymore, even if they would be able to do it...they eat well and seems happy at the checkpoint.

Van has a hairless spot on his chest, because of harness rubbing, I put some grease I normally use for pads on and around it, hoping to avoid more rubbing (it worked out ok) After feeding – all except Niina eat ok – I put pad ointment and try to memorise witch feets I have to bootie before I take off. After a quick meal and toilet visit it is time to prepare for next leg.

KARASJOK – JERGUL

Arnt Ola and Ronny leave in good style, but I can see the teams are not really eager anymore. And: They both leave with only 6 dogs ! I start to think...maybe...

Then it is my turn to leave. My team is going out better than from Levajok, I have to keep down the speed on the river until we reach Assibakti and leave the river climbing smoothly up towards Ravnastua and hundevidda. I am moving up quite fast and start to keep an eye up trail, hoping to see one or two headlights...I pass Ravnastua and get a 10 second stop there, but the team starts nicely when I ask and get up the speed again. I come to the trail cross towards Jergul – this is a trail I never been on before – and get the wind in my face. I put on my goggles and keep on looking for the headlamps in front of me. Now I start to understand that the guys in front of me will not slow down just because they only have 6 dogs. They are both moving fast. I had never thought they could move so fast with 6 dogs after about 350 km on the trail, I am impressed. I keep on going as fast as I think I can without risking anything, until we start the downhill to Jergul, as usual I slow down a lot in downhills, in order to avoid injuries on the dogs.

I pull in and find out that the guys did this leg as fast as I did. I snack and prepare straw beds before I cook for the team, which still look fairly good. I take off booties and check feet. No swollen wrists or new cracks in their pads. Again I have trouble to feed Niina, and also Ville is not too eager to eat, so I decide I try again before I leave and go for some rest and food for myself.

Coming back I snack them and Ville eats ok now, while I only manage to get Niina take a couple of small pieces, but she is not tired or in bad mood at all, in fact she looks quite good.

I see that Arnt Ola and Ronny leave, again with 6 dogs each, they leave in ok speed, but I have a feeling most of my dogs is less tired and theirs... And looking at Elisabets team, she will start 30 min. behind me, I feel most of her dogs looks not physically tired at all.

JERGUL – Suosjavre- Mollisjokk – JOTKA

I leave in fairly slow speed, being careful of not driving fast at all in the beginning.

I can see the teams ahead of me are pushing much more... I can see diarrhoea and some dogs have puked up their food, which I assume depends on a combination of that they eat too much and start out too fast...I can see it is mainly Ronny´s dogs who puke, because of the size of the dry food pellets. Until Suosjavri I keep a speed about 13 km/hr. and the dogs, except Ville, would like to go faster. After turning towards Mollisjokk we have extremely hard and icy trail and the wind in our back. The speed goes up without any extra efforts. Closer to Mollisjokk I can see both teams ahead of me have had some stops and one of Ronny´s dogs have puked up a bootie...I pass Mollisjokk and team is going even little faster, but I feel not for pushing. I stop just before Jiesjavri and snack them with honey balls. Nurmi does not eat. Just while I reach the lake I meet two big teams, they are on tour. At the lake the dogs run maybe at 18-19 km/hr, and I keep an eye forward, I think I can see a team about 3 km ahead of me, but I am not sure, it could be a snowmobile as well. After crossing the lake, I notice Nurmi start to have some trouble. He try to loop instead of trotting. I slow down, but he still loop and get a slack line occasionally. I assume his illness in beginning of the race has weakened him and I am really worried. I stop again and try to snack him with honeyballs again, but he do not want to have any...I drive slower now, but he is not ok. Just before the lake leading to Jotka I stop and put him back in the team and move Lucifer in lead. She is eager and I have to break over the lake to Jotka.

JOTKA - ALTA

I have to sign in and out and while starting out again Pepita and Lucifer turns off trail. I have to go and put them back on trail and I leave ok. But Nurmi is not pulling much and suspect he is somehow injured. I stop and take him on the sled until we leave Jotka lake. I put him back because he do not want to sit still. But after about 200m I stop again and put him in my dog transport bag and put the bag on top of my sled. Now he can not make trouble and accept pretty quickly that he have to ride... I get lots of pee stops now, not having Nurmi to pull the females and not let them stop when want to pee. Going uphill, where the snowmobiles have digged up the trail a little I must help the team a lot. On hard trail they still move ok. I realise I will not catch up the two ahead of me. Now I am feeling a big fear for a small woman: I am worried Elisabet may catch me up. The soft uphill is a nightmare, but I can not see anyone behind me, and finally we reach Dessika lia and start going down towards Alta river. Steinar, Lubo and one of my old friends and competitors, Rolf W Johansen, is there at the road crossing to cheer me and that feels good... I keep down the speed until I reach the river. Still nobody behind me and the dogs are running ok. I keep nice speed all the way until the last hill up to high school. The hill is soft and I have to walk and push the sled until I am at the top and hit the road leading to centre of town and finish line. I feel that if the hill had been 20 m longer I couldn't make it without a break.

On the road I get back some air and finish not looking too bad... the dogs looked though better than me... I finished as number 3. As the things were before the race and my mistakes with choice of sled and not changing runner plastics during all the race, and having Nurmi on the sled, I feel I did what was possible. I hope I learned to pay more attention to the gear part and make sure I do not take females in heat with me...



...and hope you enjoyed my story about how I saw this race.

Taisto