

## FORESTHILL, CA, RACE RECAP

March 12, 2011

We woke-up at 3:40 AM. I loaded the dogs while Anne prepared herself mentally for 12 straight hours of fun with dogs and made coffee to soften the shock of early morning. We rolled down the driveway at 4:30 AM per game plan to start the 112-mile drive to Foresthill. We were one of the few cars on I-80 which was a good thing because the lane lines were faint to non-existent and our headlights were coated in a fine film of Dog Valley road mud. Highlight of the trip was the pitch black view at "Vista Point" near Donner Summit. We rolled into the parking lot of the race site at China Wall (17-miles east of Foresthill) at 7:00 AM exactly on time to claim a good parking spot. The sky was overcast and a chilly breeze was blowing. This bode well for dog comfort and trail condition during the race. In the Musher's Meeting race officials announced that the 8-dog sprint class would start first at 8:30 AM. They expected the class to take less than 1-hr to run. The 6-dog mid-distance class would start 15-min after the last 8-dog team returned. Our class, 6-dog sprint, would start 10-min after the last mid-distance team left the starting line. All teams within classes would leave at 2-min intervals. The class heat schedule went sadly awry when one 8-dog team of purebred Siberian husky turtles took two hours to finish the 8-mile "sprint" course. Teams running the mid-distance and 6-dog sprint classes were left warming in the parking lot while the trail rapidly deteriorated from a firm icy surface to soft mush. The temperature climbed relentlessly toward 50°F as waiting mushers fretted. The Seawolf team finally left the starting line at 10:50 AM under a now bright and radiating sun. We were the 3<sup>rd</sup> team to start out of four teams in our class. I wasn't sure what to expect from leader, Dozer, and co-leader, Rainbow.

Last year in this race Rainbow balked just 25-yds past the starting line after catching sight of a photographer at the side of the trail. She dragged leader, Dixie, to a halt. Ever people shy, Rainbow then repeated her balking routine when approaching checkers at turns and when seeing the crowd at the finish line. Last year Dozer was running at the back of the bus and only moved to lead for a few runs during the spring. Dozer was a bit eccentric in lead for the first 30 to 40 hook-ups for training runs this season. It was evident he was thinking big thoughts and making decisions; they usually just happened to be the wrong big thoughts and *what the f\*%#* decisions. In runs from the kennel... He turned the team left into the St Francis statue cemetery<sup>1</sup> at the moment the quick release was popped. He turned the team left into the parked snowmobile the moment the quick release was popped. He stopped 100-yds from the kennel and took the team on a u-turn back home. He turned right when he should have turned left. He turned left when he should have gone straight ahead. He came back to see me whenever I stopped the team for more than 10-sec. Dozer was a box of chocolates – you never knew what you were going to get. However, he exhibited some priceless redeeming qualities. Once Dozer got going he was a pace setting metronome. The team was 5-mph faster with Dozer loping in lead. He even loped up hills. He flawlessly led the team past staged distractions during training– past a rider on a parked snowmobile, past an approaching snowmobile, past an approaching car, past a bike rider and past a hiker with a leashed dog. Best of all Dozer wanted to please. There was hope ... and promise. Foresthill was Dozer's first time in race lead. He'd only been in two races last year and just followed the bushy tail

in front. So it was with a little trepidation and great respect for Dozer's creativity that I anticipated the run.

The race Timer official counted down to "zero" in front of a large crowd of cheering spectators. We took off in a straight line down the trail and passed the dreaded photographers without any hesitation. That was a good thing. However, it was immediately evident that the sled runners had very little glide in the loose mushy snow even with the high tech wax compound I had applied. The dogs were laboring to set a pace in the mush and were heating-up. Siberian husky Sunny at wheel was post-holing into the mush about 6-inches and we seemed to be going slowly. This is a bad thing at the start of a race when the dogs are all fired-up and usually flying. My focus was on Sunny who had shown signs of rapidly tiring in similar soft snow conditions during practice. Thus, I missed co-leader Rainbow's sudden stop to squat to produce her steaming critique of the trail conditions. She was instantly run over by the team and tangled-up. We were all of 300-yds into the advertised 6-mile course. I set the snowhook and trudged to the front to untangle Rainbow. By that time Sunny was on his back and tangled in the gangline. I had just managed to untangle Sunny when the pause timer went off in Dozer's head - he had to take action...now. Wanting to please, he made a u-turn pointing the team back in the direction of the starting line. He knew by dog logic that since I had stopped the team from going forward along the trail I must obviously want to go back. I caught the sled as it went by, set the hook, swung the team, pointed Dozer in the right direction, commanded "stay/lineout" and went back to the sled. I half expected Dozer to be behind me like Marley's ghost. When I turned around he still was pointed down the trail and off we went at "Let's Go". I was just thinking that being done with the tangle and going down the trail was my favorite thing when Dozer suddenly made a sharp right turn onto a side trail before I could get out the command of "on by" or spout any expletives. I set the snow hook, trudged to Dozer, pointed him in the right direction down the main trail and off we started again just as the 4<sup>th</sup> starting team breezed past us. This meant that at only three hundred yards into the race we'd already lost 2-min to Jane Devlin's team that started after us! Actually, this was a good thing as Rainbow and Dozer inadvertently had placed us in an excellent tactical position. Jane's team was closely matched to us in speed and very seasoned. So we followed and eventually overtook her team. Dozer's pace never faltered as he led the team in a flawless pass. Jane's team re-grouped with new tails to chase and re-passed us on a steep hill where they had the advantage of pulling a musher who was about 100-lb lighter. They lost enthusiasm after passing and slackened their pace. Dozer then led us once again past Jane's team. This pattern repeated itself to the benefit of both teams as the dogs concentrated on each other rather than the miserable trail conditions. It wasn't long before we overtook Willie Stephen's team that started 1<sup>st</sup> (4-min ahead of us). Jane's team passed Willie's and Dozer followed her team while making a flawless pass of Willie's. Dozer never broke stride and we quickly resumed the challenge to Jane's team. At about the 4-mile point we were chasing Jane's team as we rounded a curve and caught sight of Alyssa Martin's team that started 2<sup>nd</sup>. Jane had just started passing Alyssa's team on the right when Bino Fowler's 6-dog team came barreling downhill towards us on the return leg of his mid-distance run. I immediately had a vision of a four team pile-up of 24 snarling tangled dogs on the narrow 10-ft wide trail. Jane's team just passed Alyssa's on the right when Bino's team passed hers head-on to her left. Bino's team then head-on passed Alyssa's to her left and approached my team at a closing speed of nearly 30-mph. Dozer executed a perfect head-on pass with Bino's (Bino passing to our left) and immediately threaded the

needle to pass Alyssa's team on just 3-ft of trail that remained to her right. At this moment I was highly impressed with Dozer's natural abilities as a race leader. He went on to make a perfect head-on pass with Jo Watkins' 6-dog team that was returning on the mid-distance course. We were now in the clear having passed two of the teams in our class and once again chasing on the heels of Jane's team. The trail for the last 3/4<sup>th</sup> mile before the finish line was in direct sun. It was extremely soft, punchy and chewed-up by traffic from dog teams and snowmobiles. Puppies, Tango & Tess, were tired and not contributing much to pulling as was also the case for the mature Sunny. This left the work of pulling my 210-lb along the trail to Dozer, Rainbow and Boomer. They kept a steady pace that was a little slower than that of Jane's team and she added another minute or two to her lead. Dozer and Rainbow became confused by the crowd of spectators at the finish line and stopped about 30-ft short. I guided them across the finish line to officially end the time for our run as we finished in 2<sup>nd</sup> place well ahead of the other two teams that were out of sight.

Later review of data collected by my GPS showed that the race course was 7-miles in length instead of the advertised 6-miles. During the run the team gained 628-ft of elevation about three times that of our training runs. The team hit a top speed of 17.2 mph and averaged 10 mph which was only 3-mph slower than our best training run on a much faster and shorter trail. This was an awesome 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish and performance for a team comprised of two newbie race leaders and two puppies aged 9-months and 7.5-months. The dogs seemed pleased with their run and exhibited a new found confidence back at the dog trailer. Kudos to Anne who captured some great photos documenting the first race experience of Tango & Tess! We arrived home by 4:00 PM to end Anne's 12-hrs of fun with canines. That evening I reviewed the National Weather Service forecast for Foresthill and China Wall. A weather system was coming into the area and the forecast was for overnight temperatures above freezing with a 70% chance of rain by 10:00AM Sunday. I decided not to run the team on Sunday as the trail conditions would be worse and possibly too difficult for the puppies. So we ended our race season with a very positive performance and a solid learning experience.

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1. If you've gotten this far you deserve to know about the St Francis statue cemetery. My mom sold her home and moved to Truckee with us from Oxnard. She had a collection of figurines in her patio that made the trip to Truckee. We had no place to put them so they ended up in a group around a tree near the dog kennel. I set St Francis atop a stump beside the figurine collection where he could give a blessing to the dogs. The freeze and thaw cycles of the past two winters have taken a toll on the figurines, hence the term, statue cemetery.