

LOCALNEWS

Aili takes third in second-annual Gichigami race

Ryan Anderson finishes in fourth place; Amanda Vogel scratches

BY EMILY GEDDE  
Staff Writer

The effects of what meteorologists are calling a “polar vortex” were felt Monday morning at the start of the third and final stage of the Gichigami Express Sled Dog Race at Devil Track Lake near Grand Marais.

The vortex that has locked almost the entire United States under subfreezing temperatures created an air temperature of 31 below zero with a wind chill of 63 below as teams of mushers and sled dogs took off toward the finish line.

“It was really cold,” said musher Ryan Anderson of Ray, who placed fourth in the second annual race.

Keith Aili, also of Ray, took third place in the event while Amanda Vogel, another Ray musher, dropped out, or scratched, after the first day.

Aili and Anderson were among 10 teams that persevered through the bitter cold to reach the finish line in Grand Portage on Monday afternoon, when temps had warmed to 17 below zero with a wind chill around 40 below.

Musher Buddy Streep of Fort Nelson, British Columbia, won the race followed by John Stewart of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Aili told The Journal Tuesday it was fun racing against Streep, who he has known “since I was a little kid.”

“Buddy is an eight- or nine-time world (sled dog racing) champion,” Aili said. “To be that close to him in time during the race was pretty exciting. He does these shorter races and I train for longer ones. This was the first time

we’ve competed against each other. I’m very excited because I know if I adjust my training a little bit, I could race with him.”

Streep’s cumulative time over the three days was 15 hours, 41 minutes, 59 seconds. Stewart’s time was 15:45:10, Aili’s was 16:10:11 and Anderson’s was 16:34:11.

Anderson had the fastest time in Monday’s stage with 4 hours, 32 minutes, 10 seconds.

“It feels good to win the last day,” he said. “My main thing was to bring 12 dogs there and bring them all home healthy and that’s what I did. I used this as more a fun race and as a building block for the rest of the season.”

Aili said he expected a short, faster stage race, but was surprised it turned into more of a challenge.

“It was quite a way to kick off the season,” he said with a laugh.

The biggest challenge was fresh snow covering the trail. Aili said it was soft making for more difficult racing conditions.

“Fresh snow is going to slow things down,” Anderson added. “The dogs have to run through it instead of on top of it and that makes it tough.”

Still, the cold didn’t bother the four-legged stars of the show.

Anderson said because most of December has seen temps well-below zero, his team was acclimated to the cold.

“The dogs handled it fine,” he said.

Aili said he was pleased with the performance of his team despite bitter wind chills.

“Living where we live, they were used to it,” he said.



Nace Hagemann of Nace Hagemann Photography shot this photo of Keith Aili during the 2014 Gichigami Sled Dog Express Race in Cook County. Aili, of Ray, took third place in the second annual event. For more race photos, visit Hagemann’s website at [www.nacehagemann.com](http://www.nacehagemann.com).

“But that wind was pretty bad. Still, all the dogs are happy and healthy.”

TOUGH DECISION

Vogel said she struggled with the decision to scratch from the race after the first day, but knew the health of her dogs took top priority.

“Their feet were getting really beat up,” she said. “Given the timing and the goals I have for the season, it was the right thing to do... I’ve never pulled out of a race. It was really hard to do.”

With the soft trails, Vogel said the dogs’ booties were filling with snow causing “snowballs” to form on their feet. She said dogs can then overcompensate for the built-up snow, which can lead to

additional injuries. With a small kennel, the musher said she has little room for injured teammates.

“I have 13 dogs in training. One is at home recovering,” she said in a post on Facebook about her decision to scratch. “I have no room for error. I am concerned that continuing to train with trail and weather conditions would be too big of a risk to the dogs in terms of recovery time.”

Vogel said her team is tough and would have finished the race for her, but losing their trust was also a concern.

“I didn’t want to ruin their trust,” she said. “That race was for fun and for training – the dogs weren’t having much fun.”



PHOTOS BY NACE HAGEMANN PHOTOGRAPHY

Ryan Anderson’s team of dogs leads the Ray musher to fourth place in the Gichigami race Monday.

NEXT UP

Aili said he trained his team to win the fast-paced Gichigami and now has work to do before his next race – the almost-400-mile John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon Jan. 24-30.

“I have to adjust the dogs for the Beargrease,” he said while driving home Tuesday. “I have to slow them down a bit and do some camping trips with them.”

Because there is just a little over two weeks between the two races, Aili said having a smaller kennel puts him at a disadvantage, but it’s still doable.

“The Gichigami and Beargrease are two very different

races,” he said. “There’s some work to be done before I go, but we’ll be ready. Let’s just hope it warms up a bit.”

Anderson is back in action Saturday to compete in the Voyageur Classic Sled Dog Race in Northome. He said he’ll bring a different team than the one he just raced with, including some members with very little racing experience.

“This is a good race to give some of the younger dogs more experience,” he said. “It’ll be fun to do a local race.”

Vogel said her team will hit the trail for more training in preparation for the Beargrease later this month.

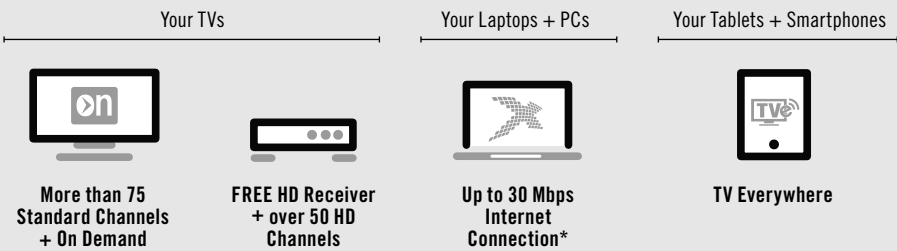


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