

Success out of Failure,
A Canadian Ski Marathon Story.

The day started for me at 3:15 am. I had already been up several times in nervous anticipation of the upcoming day. I knew that any sleep that I received the night before the event was going to be restless. I wasn't wrong. I awoke several times in panic to check over my gear and run mental checklists of things I might need. When the alarm went off I quickly dressed and made my way to the bus.

My breath was taken away when I walked outside the hotel to get on the bus to Montebello. The forecast temperature for this morning was only supposed to be -7 C, but instead it was -25C. It was much colder than I had prepared for, or I had ever trained in. It seems that the months of winter training in preparation for this was nothing but a cruel set up to lure me into a false sense of well being. I could feel my face tighten as I looked up at a cloudless sky and knew that this was going to be cold, and it was going to hurt.

My adventure for the Canadian Ski Marathon's Coureur des Bois started during the week of Thanksgiving 2005. Someone at work told me that if I wanted a real challenge that I should try the CSM. I am in the military, and an endurance athlete. I like a good challenge, so I went to a used sporting goods store and bought the biggest set of skis I could find. Exactly 12 weeks prior to the start of the event it snowed, and I put skis on my feet for the first time in my life. I figured that I had run marathons and triathlons before, so how bad could this thing be? I was about to find out.

The first of two bus rides and shuttles was uneventful; there were only 3 of us there that were staying at the Hotel Lac Carling and braving the Coureur des Bois. The man that sat in front me was the picture of confidence, and he could tell I was nervous. "You'll do fine," he told me, "Just put one ski in front of the other. Eat anything and everything you can get at an aid station, and don't let the dark moments get to you."

The bus arrived at Montebello, where we were placed on another bus full of athletes. The faces of these men and woman were different from what I was used to seeing at the start of cycling races, triathlons, and marathons. These faces were filled with grim determination, and a hardiness that permeated through the iced over windows of the bus. These Canadians and sprinkling of Americans came for a challenge and they meant business. My spirit found strength, as my flickering light of confidence was fed with new fuel. I sat down on the few open seats in the back that were not packed with gear and took a seat next to a man. He was a bit older than me, but he too could see that I was a bit nervous. He made the long ride into the starting area a little easier by taking my mind off of what was to come. He told me his name was Steve. I didn't know it then, but Steve would become a big part of my little adventure.

The bus pulled into the starting area, and things were not going well. The Coureur des Bois Gold athletes had only five minutes to get to the start. Small luxuries like getting a last stop to use the bathroom or even one more application of the day's wax were going to have to wait. I was lucky in that my start was not for another 10 minutes.

I was shocked at the lights and the people. My mind tried to make sense of it all in the dark. I found my headlamp and turned it on. One last minute examination of my gear, and I made my way to the starting ramp.

There were so many people it was amazing. I had never skied alongside another person before. In my hometown of Brunswick, Maine there hadn't been any snow to speak of, and most of the skiers in my area just didn't ski for fear of ruining equipment. The local course had been shut down several times during my training because of rain. Then, in mid January all of the snow melted away, and I had nothing to do but go running with ski poles in my hands. To think now that I was going to attempt a ski marathon was beginning to seem like a daunting task.

I don't ever recall hearing a horn or whistle, but somewhere up ahead the Bronze skiers knew it was time to go, because they all surged forward, and I followed with them. One ski in front of the other we made our way through the forest. Hundreds of headlamps danced through the pine trees like fireflies on a warm summer night. Yet, these were not fire bugs, and it was most certainly not warm. In fact, it was -17.7C (0F) degrees outside, and my breath was quickly freezing my eyes shut. Those hardy souls about me with beards and mustaches looked like they had been flash froze by someone with super freeze powers. The marathon had begun, or rather the first of four marathons had begun, and I was a part of it.

Section 10. The madness begins.

The gentle forest path ended as soon as it had begun, and we were quickly sent screaming down a steep incline. Skier upon skier lined up like lemmings and hammered their way down the hill and into a steel culvert that ran under the highway. Inside the culvert it was dark, and covered in a sheet of ice. The sounds of waxed plastic and tungsten tipped ski poles echoed through the metal pipe. To those outside the tunnel it must have sounded like a legion of endurance athletes preparing for battle.

I copied the pictures of the books I had seen in the library and made my skis like a slice of pizza and snow plowed my way down the hill and followed everyone else into the tunnel. Somehow I managed not to run into anyone. The course description for this section said "intermediate" with lots of ups and downs and a good downhill 1 kilometer from the checkpoint. This is a fair description if you are an experienced skier, but if you add in several hundred of your closest friends, and arctic temperatures on an icy track, you get a recipe for something greater than "intermediate". In the words of one passing skier, "This was very interesting first section."

I don't recall the scenery very well as it was dark out, and I couldn't see anything, because my eyes were frozen shut. This turned out to be a good thing as the "good downhill" at the end turned into a real screamer. I did not know that you could go that fast on cross country skis, but I do now. After 12.1 kilometers, one hour and a half had passed, and I arrived at the Le Droit checkpoint, and the start of section 9.

Rest Stop: My first little break.

The rule I had established for myself was that I was not going to let the checkpoints become a quagmire. I planned to spend no more than 10 minutes at any rest stop. I did not take into consideration however, that there would be lots and lots of other people there all competing for the same honey water, Gatorade, and bananas. Somehow I got my bottle filled back up. I also managed to eat a few bananas and some cookies before my gloves froze solid on my hands.

I had to apply another coat of wax to the kick zone of my skis, but touching a frozen ski with frozen gloves, to apply frozen wax was pure agony. I had to get moving again or hypothermia was going to set in. The volunteers around the checkpoint moved about in small circles to generate some body heat, their breath came in clouds of steam and looked like engines in a large train yard. Overhead the cloudless sky had turned from black to red to a promising orange. It was going to be a beautiful day, but at the moment I could already feel the shakes starting, and knew that it was just a matter of time before my own personal thermostat would register as too cold to continue. After 12 minutes in the rest stop, I put my skis back on and kicked out to start the next 15.3 km.

Section 9: A cold start and a bit of doubt.

After nearly freezing to death in the rest area I got moving again. I don't remember when it was that I began to feel my hands, but the pin like pain slowly ebbed away, and I could once again operate zippers and make clothing adjustments. The Chap Stick I found on the ground was a gift from the Almighty. With each application I could feel the tension on my lips ease up and I knew they would not split. I didn't have too much difficulty with this section, but began to encounter the touring skiers and this was proving frustrating. They had no idea that I was a man on a mission, and that if you were in front of me, you had best be moving. Occasionally, I would spot someone I recognized from the start that morning, but those moments were quickly fading as more and more of those whom I'd started with pulled away from me.

I did begin noticing a trend on this section. It seemed that all of the trail markers were not exactly the distance they said they were. I can remember seeing the 5 KM marker, and that after what seemed like an eternity, the 2 KM marker appeared. I quickly learned not to let my mental guard down, as the kilometers stretched on. The trail markers were not there to help people like me; they were cruel reminders that I still had a very long way to go.

I could hear the next check point before I could see it. I looked at my watch, and saw that I had just finished the last section in 1:52:00. The sun was now up, and the temperature was hovering around -7C; balmy compared to earlier this morning. I clipped through the checkpoint, and tore my skis off. I took out my large mittens and put them

on the ground to act as a barrier between myself and the snow. The water line was not as long here, but the sandy part of the road, and the icy descent just prior to the checkpoint had taken a toll on my kick wax. Also the increase in temperature called for a possible change up. I looked at the ski technicians table and saw they were using straight blue for the conditions, but I saw some experienced skiers begin to mix. So, I corked in a thick layer of green, and then corked 2 layers of blue.

After I was sure I had taken care of my gear I went to take care of myself. I popped open my bottle and filled it with hot honey water and drank deeply. Then as I drank I parked myself next to the bananas and began to stuff myself. After getting my fill I downed some hot soup, and tried to eat a piece of frozen bagel without success. After consuming what I could stomach I walked slowly to my skis. Time was almost up. I had once again broken my own rule about time in the checkpoint, but it was worth it. I walked up to my skis with the bottoms tucked into the snow bank, the tips curved at the top. They waited for me there stuck in the snow like two beasts of burden asking me the same question I was beginning to ask myself; are we going to make it all the way?

As I clipped into my bindings and tested my wax, I looked over to my right and who was there but the man who had I had sat next to on the bus that morning. "Hello Steve," I said, "How are you?" They were the first words I had spoken in over three and a half hours. Steve looked up in surprise at me, and told me he was doing great, but that he had to get going. I could still see the remains of the morning's frost covering his hat and mustache. He looked strong and confident, and my flickering light of confidence once again roared to life as I kicked out on to another 15.3km run.

Section 8: The hills are alive.

I kicked out onto a nice down hill section. The stiffness of my skis paid off as I accelerated through open fields and took advantage of any slight downhill. I double poled to save my legs for later, but even then I could feel the beginning of some aches and pains. My gliding down hill quickly ended though with the first of many climbs. The wax I had put on earlier was great for the flat and down hill sections, but was not sufficient to climb in, so I stopped about 6km into the section to put a longer and thicker layer of kick wax. This seemed to do the trick as I once again began to climb stronger and faster.

I looked at my watch and did some mental calculations as to my pace, and how close I was getting to the 3:15 pm cut off for the start of section 6. The Canadian Ski Marathon is not so much a race for time, but rather a race to be allowed to continue. Touring skiers were under no pressure, but if you were trying to complete any of the Coureur des Bois you had to get across the last checkpoint of the 7th section by 3:15pm or you would be disqualified. For me, it was getting close, and I did not know what kind of terrain lay ahead of me to help gauge my pace. So, I decided that I would push every downhill, double pole the flats, and climb until my hear burst to get myself to the start of section 7 by 12:00 noon.

The terrain was determined to keep me from any sort of rhythm. Any time I thought I had it figured out a hill would pop up, or a steep tree lined descent would squeeze my legs and cause my quads to burn as I fought to keep control of my speed. Once again doubt began to creep into my mind. “You are not good enough to be doing this. This is crazy. Look at all the people who are passing you. Today is the easy day; you still have all day tomorrow to go as well. You are running out of food. You are not going to make the last check point in time. Nobody wants to talk to you here. You are going to fail.”

I knew these words were nothing more than my own mind trying to take control of the situation. It was trying to piece together what seemed to be an insurmountable task. I had only skied 42 kilometers, and still had 120 to go. Then I remembered something that had occurred to me in previous training events. The dark thoughts go away with food!

I was not eating enough. I could feel it, and my mind was threatening to overthrow my body if I didn't eat more. The question was how? My power bars were frozen, my hammer gel was congealed like thick glue, and my emergency bagels made better ice axes than palatable food. All of my training had been in conditions much warmer than this, and my inexperience in the cold was about to teach me a painful lesson. In desperation I un-wrapped a power bar and put what I could in my mouth to let it thaw. I must have been quite the sight, as I double poled through the woods. I was breathing through a stuffy nose, and gasping in air between bites with melted power bar oozing down the sides of my mouth. I did not care though. It was food, and it would chase the bad thoughts away. I let the rest of the frozen power bar lead the way; it's frozen mass protruding into the double tracked snow like the prow of a vessel on an uncertain course. I approached the 2 kilometer mark of the section, knowing that the first three had been nothing but a warm up for the rest of the day. I completed section 8 in 2:53:00, and the time now was just after noon.

Rest Stop: All systems are GO; sort of.

A quick check of my body showed that I was hydrated, a bit hungry, mentally focused, but there was tightness in my right quadricep that was threatening a spasm if I didn't take care of it. I began the same routine as the last stop by taking care of gear first, than myself. I corked in blue, but kept my green handy just in case the snow on the trail got colder as the sun went down. I rinsed and repeated my hydration and eating, skipping the cookies as they were hard to digest. The people at the checkpoint ebbed and flowed like a New England tide. When the line was long, I attacked an equipment problem, or made a stop at the Port a Jon. When the line thinned, I grabbed more hot honey water and threw in some peanuts and bits of fig Newton bar. Time flew by, and once again I found myself past my self imposed ten minute mark. A quick glance at my watch caused some momentary panic. It was now just after 12:20 pm, and I now had just under 3 hours to ski the next 18.7 kilometers. This would require a pace almost equal to the last section over rolling terrain with numerous climbs and descents that were turning icy.

Section 7: The marathon begins.

Every event has a well defined beginning and an end. To the casual eye, the obvious start would be the place where the starter pistol goes off, or an official blows a horn. For those who have done long distance events, the real start to an endurance event is an entirely personal thing. For marathon runners the start of the race may be at mile 20. A cyclist on a century ride might not find the start until after the 85 mile marker. For me, the Canadian Ski Marathon began upon reaching 60 KM.

Shortly after skiing out of the check point area, I crested one of the rolling hills of this section and came across Steve again. He sailed up the hill as I stopped to add more wax to my kick zone after having gone over another scratchy ice section. I said hello again, and asked Steve if he wanted to ski with me. To my surprise he said sure. I was jumping for joy inside, because I hadn't said anything to anyone in over 7 hours. Misery loves company, and I finally found someone to share it with.

Over the next several hours we paced one another up and down the hills. Steve's technique covered more ground than my untrained muscle method, so I sat back and watched him glide and climb and tried to pick up pointers where I could. On one nasty section where the trail was carved out of plowed snow and mixed with sand, I watched how Steve braked while keeping one foot still tracked, and the other out as a plow when he got too fast. As simple as that, I added another tool to my new toolbox. A tool like that would prove very valuable.

Kilometer after kilometer we matched each other. When one of us got tired, or began to have a dark moment, the other was there to help pick things up. Steve supported me, and I think to some degree I supported him. The clock was relentless in its pursuit of the future, and we soon found ourselves in a race with our inner desire to quit, and the madness within that told us to make this section by 3:15pm.

I did some more mental math and became scared. The pace we were on which was as fast as I could go, would have me crossing the next checkpoint at one minute past 3:15. I was horrified to think that I might be disqualified after having come so far. Steve and I pressed the pace, and threw ourselves into our bindings. The steady mantra of compress, kick, glide, pole ruled these crucial minutes. My legs were in agony, and the cold air was playing tricks on my lungs. There was no time to eat, there was just time to wax and splash what I could down my throat in the form of liquid. My internal engine began to falter. I quickly grabbed my gel flask and tried to squeeze out the frozen contents. Then it dawned on me to shove it down my pants and hope that it would warm up. So there it sat and collected my body's heat to the point where it could be consumed. I sucked and pulled at the chocolate glue inside, and finally, like sap from a tree it came out. I needed this boost badly, and in about 30 minutes it would come to me.

I crossed over the 5 KM marker, and looked at my watch. It was 10 minutes to 3:00 pm. It was now or never, and with everything I had, I pushed my body towards redline. My arms throbbed as I double poled the downhill and flat sections. My quads

ignited with each uphill. I crossed the 2 KM marker and the gel I had eaten kicked in. Somewhere I caught a second wind and poured on the speed. As I crested the last hill, I could see the next checkpoint. All that separated me was a farmer's field and a road crossing. As I hammered the flat section, I looked at my watch. It was now 3:12pm. I approached the road crossing, and just then a police officer held out a red stop sign to let traffic go. I pleaded with him to let me cross. He just looked at me as a yellow school bus passed by. I bent down in agony and opened the bindings of my skis. If he wouldn't let me ski across, I was going to run across. I picked up my frozen boards and forced myself into a run. Into the check point and past the water and food station I made my way to the entrance point of the last section of the day. I could smell the honey water, and soup, and my stomach lurched at me. I was hungry, and thirsty, but I didn't dare stop. To stop was to not finish. I ran down the ramp of the checkpoint, and asked desperately if it had closed yet. A large man in a giant fur hat said, "Yes it closed five minutes ago." I stopped running. I was in shock. It had all been for nothing. I fell to my knees. My spirit was devastated. Then he said, "Hey, I am just joking, made it."

This was Canadian humor at its most demented. I fought back tears of frustration, walked across the start, threw my skis down, and collapsed into a snow bank. I didn't have the energy to wax. I could smell the soup and food at the rest area, but it might as well have been 10 kilometers away. In my agony I looked for Steve, and saw him at the top of the hill. I waved and yelled at him, and he skied down through the gate just as they pulled the tables across the entrance. We had made it. We were still in the fight.

Section 6: No rest for the weary.

Steve and I took a quick assessment of our food and water situation. Steve had a little water left in a bottle, and I found some trapped in the bottom of my camelback which had frozen long ago. I squeezed what I could out into my bottle in the hope that it would be consumable soon. Food was another story. All I had was a frozen power bar, and Steve said he had a Cliff bar. Somehow we had to ski the last section of 14.3 kilometers on a sip of water and frozen food. In watching my predicament, a fellow skier took pity on me and handed me a warm chocolate bar. I looked up at him and recognized him from the start some 9 hours ago. He smiled and said, "Keep it, you look like you need it more than I do." I never got his name, but his kindness put a smile on my frozen face. Here in this gift of a chocolate bar, was the other side of these Canadian skiers; kind, generous, and an instinct for knowing when someone else was really having a bad day. I broke a piece off and handed it to Steve. The marathon had truly started for both of us now.

Steve and I were the last to depart onto the trail. Each step and glide hurt worse than the last. Our bodies had long since given up in trying to convince us to stop. It was all mental now. We just had to keep moving forward and not stop. As we skied into the dusk hours the moon rose up over the trees and the first stars of the night began to shine. The hills were up ahead, and we would soon be skiing through the woods on very icy down hills at night. We came upon a road crossing and the military member there told us we were less than 5 kilometers from the end. In our malfunctioning minds, we believed

him. Yet, the 5 KM sign never appeared. Instead we were greeted by yet another hill. The mental games began. Where was that sign? Had we missed it? How much further? Down hill after down hill came at us now, and in the murky dark we made our way through the trees. I came up to a rather difficult looking descent, but nothing that I hadn't skied earlier. I attempted to run it, and caught a ski at the bottom. I went end over end, and landed on my back with my left arm pinned underneath me. My wrist screamed in protest, and I knew that something was wrong. Steve was at the top and asked me if I was ok. I said that I was, but I knew inwardly that this injury might spell doom for me.

We continued down the hills, each placement of my pole sent new shocks of pain through my arm. One ski in front of the other resulted in us finding the 2 kilometer marker. Yet, the trail seemed to never end. We finally stopped our descent and skied towards the center of town. The volunteers cheered us on as we crossed, and entered the final stretch home. We turned off the street and into another section of woods, and then the trail disappeared. There were no signs, no lights, nothing but a fork in the path.

Steve and I fumbled with now re frozen gloves to find our lights to try and look for a trail marker. It was 10 minutes to 6:00pm, the time my bus was going to leave to go back to the hotel in Lachute. I panicked and skied back to the fire truck to ask for help. The man there told us to ski toward a blinking light and make a left. Yet, when we got all the way down there, there was nothing. Where was the finish line? To come all this way and not be able to find the finish line mentally crushed me. I needed this to be over. I needed to get off my skis.

Luckily we found someone to point us back down the right fork in the road, and we crossed the checkpoint. We were the last ones off the course, and it was now 7 minutes past 6:00 pm. My bus was no where in sight. I went into the Chateau Montebello and collapsed.

The Ordeal Begins:

I had priorities. I needed to eat. I needed to wax my skis and iron in a good coat of glide wax. I needed to patch up my now bleeding hot spots from my clothing. I needed a doctor to look at my arm which was now swelling into a painful mess. I needed to sleep. The fact was, I was stranded in a place that was over an hour away from my hotel.

Thanks to the help of some dedicated volunteers, they were able to locate a ride for me. This logistical error was going to cost me. While other skiers were getting a meal, waxing, and getting ready for the next day, I sat and waited for a ride back to my hotel. When all was said and done, I did not get back to my room until 11:00 pm, and I had to get up again at 3:30 to catch the bus to the start of the next day's events. When I got back my wife wrapped my wrist in ice, peeled my clothes off, and got me into bed. I drank bottle after bottle of water. My eyes were red from snow glare, and the tips of my fingers ached from frostbite. I didn't get my skis waxed, and at some point I fell asleep with the ice pack still on my arm.

At 3:10 am, I woke up to get ready for the next section. My left arm hurt with every movement. I couldn't even hold my pole in my hand. I agonized over what to do.

I couldn't even wax my skis as I was one handed at this point. At 3:20 am, I quit on myself. I was mentally exhausted. I didn't see how I could do another day with my wrist, with no wax, and very little rest. I knew there would be consequences for not going on. Failure was not an easy companion to live with. I wanted to get my bronze pin, but this was not going to be the year that I did it.

The Comeback:

I do not think of myself as someone who quits. I woke up the next morning feeling like a failure. I had only skied 80 of the 160 kilometers. I rolled around in bed and hid my head in my pillow. I was filled with shame for not making the start. All my training, all my preparation was for nothing. Or was it?

I hobbled out of bed, and looked at my arm. It was grotesque and swollen, and it hurt badly. I however, I was not going to let this stop me. I was determined to finish with some sort of honor. I ate breakfast, came back to the room and prepped my skis one handed. Satisfied that they were good to go, I began dressing myself. I knew that if I could make it up to the section 2 checkpoint that I could get back into the event. I would not be an official finisher, but I could ski 7 of the 10 sections. With great pain, I duct taped my pole into my hand and my wife escorted me to the start of section 2.

Before I kicked out, I gave my wife a hug, and thanked her for supporting me. Then without turning back, I skied to the start of the checkpoint and began again. This section was only 13 kilometers, but it was hilly, and the descents and climbing would test me. My technique was working well today, as was my selection of wax. I had ironed in several layers of green, and then added a cork of blue for the hills. It was working well. I climbed with little effort, and once again began feeling good about myself. As I approached the checkpoint, I no longer felt anxiety. I could enjoy the event for what it was. I took in the scenery, the people, the sights, and sounds. I was surprised to find myself having a lot of fun. The checkpoint came, and went, and I soon found myself starting the last section of 15.2 kilometers. I don't remember it all that well. I know I crashed a few more times, and my wrist hurt, but I was just so happy to be out there that it didn't matter. I knew I was not going to get a bronze pin, but in my mind it was ok. I had found a wealth of information about myself, and a depth of commitment that I didn't know I possessed.

I came to Canada to ski in the Canadian Ski Marathon. I wanted to prove to myself that I could complete the worlds longest cross country ski marathon and survive it. I did not accomplish what I set out to do. In the end I only made it 110 kilometers out of 160. I skied for a very long time, learned a lot, and made a few new friends. I eventually crossed the finish line. It was a bittersweet moment for me. On the one hand I had gone farther than I had ever gone before, but on the other I did not go far enough. My wife greeted me at the finish, and I felt a sense of accomplishment that surprised me, even after failing to reach my goal.

How was I to know that such a beautiful place was only a few hours drive from my home. How was I to know that there were so many kind hearted volunteers in the little towns that dot my country's northern border. How was I to know that I would fall in love with such an awesome event. I am not going to say that skiing in this event changed my life, but in the near term it has made it better, and opened my eyes to the hardiness and tenacity of Canadian people. It is one thing to read about this grittiness, and another to see it in action in the form of a Coureur des Bois Skier.

After it was all over, I went to the awards banquet, and looked at the Bronze pin. I asked one of the officials if I could look at it. She handed it to me, but I didn't touch it. In my mind's eye, I can see myself wearing it. I will come back to claim it next year. Only next time I won't stay so far away, I'll have more than a few months of skiing under my belt, and I'll finally figure out how to stop crashing into trees. Oh yeah, and before I forget, thanks Steve, I'll see you next year.

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