

Arctic Challenge – Kids Company Husky Dog Adventure!

Friday 28th November – Monday 1st December 2008



On Friday 28th November, Chris, Hamish, Olly and Jeremy (husband of AIG's Anna Lunden) set off on the first flight to Kiruna, Northern Sweden and Arctic Circle, for the inaugural Kids Company biathlon. With daylight hours limited to the hours of 10am – 3pm, which most of the time was best described

as dusk, we arrived with just an hour's "light" to be briefed how to take command of a pack of dogs and a sled. Instructions were brief "stay on the brake, keep your feet on the rails and what-ever happens hold on" and with that we turned our head torches on and sped off at great speed down what any skier would be happy to describe as a red run.



After little over an hour we arrived at our home for the night known as the Wilderness Lodge which consisted of two huts, no running water and no electricity. Heat and cooking was provided by some amazingly efficient wood burning stoves so for the first time since arriving we felt warm....have I mentioned it was minus 22 degrees?! At this point we really could survey the competition which was made up of 6 other teams of 4 members all competing to win the following day's dog race and Sunday's "traditional" langlauf ski race. To say we felt confident would be an exaggeration, but all four of us felt comfortable we would be able to compete...more of that later.



Saturday: After a night spent listening to the howls of excitement from the 140 plus dogs chained to trees outside our huts, we were woken at 8am for porridge and then out onto the frozen lake we had crossed the night before for fishing. Drilling through the ice, Hamish was soon gnome-like and to much surprise we were one of just 2 teams to catch a fish....apparently in the Arctic, size doesn't matter and a fish is a fish so, despite being smaller than most goldfish, it was a massive success. First point to Team Berenberg.

We returned the fish to the freezing lake and made our way back to the camp where we prepared for the race. Given the number of teams with four members plus a guide, together with the sledges and dogs, we were all sent out onto the ice at 15 minute intervals. At this point the dogs deserve a mention. They really are incredible animals, able to sleep outside in amazingly cold temperatures, their sole raison d'être is to run. So, at the first signs of being harnessed up they go from being incredibly friendly, slightly nervous "pets" to crazed, howling pack animals. The dogs we were using were Alaskan and Siberian mix meaning they combined the strength of the Siberian with the stamina and speed of the Alaskan and whilst being smaller than a Labrador in a pack of 3 had the strength to pull an adult easily. Team Berenberg was the 4th team to leave the base and in no time made our way back to the Musher's Lodge where the dog's live. A time of 1h 23 was recorded which by just seconds has us down in 4th place. A relative disaster....we were out of the points (6 first, 4 second and 2 third) and therefore we sat in 4th place overall with one point thanks to our now crucial fish!





After untangling and re-kennelling the dogs, we retired to the lodge which, now had luxury of running water and light so showers were taken and then mental preparations for the “Swedish Quiz”. Jeremy was our secret weapon given recently marrying Anna “Swedish” Lunden so had been well briefed before leaving the UK. The quiz came and went with Berenberg putting in a “strong” performance and taking a joint win. 3 Points! With our fish that meant up to joint second place with the Langlauf to go.

Sunday: 8am wake up followed by more porridge and then outside. My word it was cold. “At least -22 degrees” we heard and then were handed ex-army Norwegian Langlauf skis. If you’re reading this having ever skied then all I can say is this was nothing like skiing. Even if you’ve ever ski-toured then I’ll bet you’ve never seen anything like the antiques we were challenged to use. Anyway, we were given 10 minutes of “practice” and then in 5 minute intervals set off with Berenberg the last team out....if we over-took anyone we knew we’d be looking good. After an hour there were signs of trouble as Hamish’s binding broke under the sheer strain so we were forced to patch-up and limp on until we could radio in for another set. After 2 hours we were again at full strength when disaster struck. Chris pulled his groin making Langlauf almost impossible and our pace dropped but we soldiered on, buoyed up by two teams making a wrong turn, meaning we were now ahead of them and could see a third team not far in front. 3h 30 mins into the race and it was clear Chris was not going to be able to finish given he could barely lift his left leg. We’d now lost the team in our sights and a team had caught us from behind. There was nothing for it, Chris would have to retire and the 3 remaining team members would have to make up any time we could. 4 hours and we re-passed the Redburn team (still complete) and arrived at a small hut where juice and biscuits were dispensed. Here we heard two other teams had also lost people due to injuries so all was not lost! We set off at a rapid pace and soon caught the illusive team we’d seen ahead of us for much of the race. After an estimated 20km, we managed to finish in an un-official 3rd position in a time of 4h 55 mins. Having started at first light, we returned in total black again using our now vital head torches to find our way. Later our position was dropped to 4th, meaning, like the dog race we finished outside the points.....we were in fifth position overall, thank goodness for the fish!



After showers, stretching and some warm soup we got to prize giving. Thankfully we picked up some more points given for overall enthusiasm and Jeremy’s general love for the wilderness hence taking our final position to 4th in the challenge with the winning team on 11, second on 7, third on 6 and Berenberg on 5....



As I’ve tried to demonstrate above, the whole challenge was an incredible experience and one I wholeheartedly recommend anyone should attempt given the chance. In terms of raising money, all teams combined raised close to £40k for the Kids Company, double what they hoped to raise, with Team Berenberg raising (to date) £6,700 and rising which will be used to feed up to 1,500 underprivileged children on Christmas Day and given a packed lunch for their whole families on Boxing Day. It goes without saying, Chris, Hamish, Jeremy and I are all incredibly grateful to everyone for sponsoring and supporting us and thank heavens for that little fish!

Participants: Chris Armstrong, Oliver Collin, Hamish Edsell, Jeremy Wormington

