

'06/'07 Journal

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This journal is for your reading pleasure. It is an extension of the book, *Following My Father's Dream* by James and Christopher Warren, available for purchase on Amazon.com. Enjoy! Jim Warren



**A Passion for Sled Dogs:
Christopher at Start of UP 200**

June 10, 2006: Life is full of wonders. Last weekend my wife Jennifer, daughter Whitney and I attended the Highland Scottish Festival at Alma College in Alma, MI. Whitney is touring colleges to choose which to attend and Alma is high on the list. I didn't expect what I found. With a name of Warren it is obvious I have Scottish ancestors and we do name many of our puppies with Scotch-Irish names. But I have never thought of myself as a Scotchman, just an American. A few hours at a Scottish Festival caused me to re-think some things.

The weather was sunny and temperature was in the high seventies, a comfortable day for many people. But I was not comfortable. It was too hot for me and the bright sunshine was oppressive. I had come to think I was just weird and not normal, much preferring cooler weather and even liking cloudy skies. But as I looked around at the hundreds of folks there many were visibly as uncomfortable as

I. This was a surprise. I wondered if my adversity to warm and sunny weather was genetic. I thought perhaps I was not so weird after all.

My tendency to sunburn and for skin cancer was another thing I thought of as just a little weird, maybe a defect. My skin and complexion is not made for sunshine. It hurts me. I would have died years ago if it were not for modern medicine treating the cancers. But as I looked around almost everybody there had the same skin complexion and hair color. Actually, there was every shade of blond, red and transparent hair you could imagine. I began to feel normal, not weird.

We sat through the opening ceremonies. The MC and many others were dressed in their Scottish Highland garb with kilts and all the trimmings. Sorry, I still think this is a little weird but it was clear you'd never convince those Scots it was weird. I'll let that one go.

The speech was what grabbed me. It instantly took me back to my early childhood when my Dad would take us to visit my Grandfather. He lived in a well kept but simple farm house without electricity, oil lamps, and wood heat. I remember sitting in the small living room in the gathering darkness on summer evenings while Dad and Grandpa discussed and debated politics, current events and family affairs. I didn't notice at the time but he spoke with an accent and often used words I didn't understand. I thought that was just the way a Grandpa spoke. But the Scottish accent and speech pattern of many at the festival was a dead ringer to Grandpa's. I could almost hear his voice when some of them spoke. I thought of him sitting in his chair with a fly swatter in hand talking to Dad while the last light of the day faded.

The music was the clincher. It just sounded right. I am as musical as a rock and some sounds good to me and some other just sounds bad. This sounded right. Not good or bad; right. I could have sat and listened all afternoon.

I have never walked into a place and felt more at home, comfortable. That was a day I'll remember. Life is full of wonders.

June 11, 2006: I free-ran the 9 week-old puppies this evening. They followed the ATV as I drove along the Christmas tree fields and through forested areas of the Christmas tree farm. They love to run and traveled the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of trails easily. They look to be a superior litter. Then I took out a few adult leader trainees. Mustering the patience necessary for training leaders is a challenge for me. I have never been blessed with an abundance of patience.

The weather has been cool and started me thinking about running dogs. This week when I was at SledDog Lodge the temperature dropped to 32°F with heavy frost. Here downstate at the Christmas Tree farm it is almost as cool, only up to 58°F today.

July 24, 2006: "I still have my dog." These were words from a man in his seventies who had just lost all of his material possessions in a house fire with no insurance and no income. As a firefighter, I have seen and heard plenty of things that make you think. This one came back to me in an unusual way.

I was sitting in a church service on Sunday morning with my wife Jennifer and daughter Whitney. The sermon had finished and I can not remember what it was about. My attention span is much shorter than sermons and even good ones seldom make the 'take it home' list with me. Mentally I was taking in my surroundings. It was beautiful, almost perfect. The church was immaculate with all of its Presbyterian trimmings in perfect order. The pianist was playing a fantastic number while the ushers were collecting the offering plates. The piano and animated pianist was silhouetted against a large window covered with a sheer white drapery in the front center of the church. Behind was a spectacular day with dappled sunlight backlighting the drapery. A large cross was in the center of the window.

Around me sat a number of people who were well dressed and reverent. This is a church where more than a few are financially well to do and they are generous with their time and money. These are good people. We were of one spirit, reverent. This is worship.

As I marveled at the order of the surroundings and the perfection of the moment, my mind wandered. Yes sitting in this environment of order and affluence I mentally was in a world of chaos, devastation, poverty, and adversity. I heard again a man's voice with the words, "I still have my dog". It was true, that was all he had left.

It was a sunny morning in early April. I was working on a long to-do list, the penalty for spending 9 month training and running Iditarod. The temp was nicely above freezing when I finished the dog chores. On this perfect morning I wandered the dog yard, talking to and checking out some of the dogs. They seemed to need some "Jim" time and like it when the Boss spends a little time with them. The serenity was interrupted by the sound of my fire department pager. It was a call for a fire in a mobile home.

I ran to my truck. flipped on the red strobe and siren, and tore down the road. You don't waste any time when a mobile home is burning. They are deadly for the occupants, and firefighter too for that matter. I arrived to find heavy smoke and flame at the back of the structure. When Station 21 Engine arrived within a couple of minutes I already had the propane shut off and had surveyed the scene. A man in his late seventies was holding his dog and talking excitedly with another man. He wore a 20 year-old Carhartt and seemed unable to move about with normal ease. It is my job as a firefighter to notice especially people at a scene and make mental notes.

I was ordered to perform a hose attack through the front door. Daytime in a rural fire department is always short on available people. Alone I pulled a hose lay off the truck and pulled the heavy empty hose across the yard and set-up at the front door and waited for the hose to be charged with pressurized water. When ready I kicked the door open a few inches and stood to one side out of the way. Conditions were right for a back-draft and you really don't want to be standing in an open doorway should one occur. Nothing happened so I stepped in front of the partially open door and trained the water stream at the flame in the smoke filled room. Kaboom! The room erupted with a blast that slammed the door solidly in my face. It was good the door closed because it sheltered me from a blast of hot gas and fire. It was bad to have the hose stream impinging on the closed door. You

could almost drown with that much water blasting into your face. So, repeat! The room was burning pretty badly when I kicked the door open the second time but in a few minutes I had the fire pretty well knocked down.

I stepped into the room checking the integrity of the floor as I moved ahead. You definitely don't want to fall through a floor in a burning building. As I advanced across the room I noticed the neat housekeeping. A picture on a lamp table caught my eye. It was a classical shot of a US Marine in uniform alongside of a smiling woman holding an infant. I thought it may be the man in the front yard. It was a reminder of a better time, a time of youth, a time of hope, and a time with promise of a future. It was in great contrast to the destruction of the moment.

We were able to stop the fire before it completely destroyed the structure. In firefighter lingo it is called a 'save'. But almost all the interior was destroyed. There was nothing of value, a total loss. The 'save' was a shallow victory.

The fire out, there was nothing left to do but to pick up the gear. No, there is no back up crew to clean up while you cool down. My turnout gear was soaked from the inside by sweat and the outside from water. But as I worked at rolling hose and loading the gear back on the truck I again noticed the man sitting on an overturned plastic bucket petting and talking to his dog. He looked a little forlorn and maybe overwhelmed.

I asked one of the other firefighters about the man. Nobody really knew but best we could find he had no insurance, no income, and had just lost all he had in the fire. He has been living alone for years, his wife had died, his one son was in prison and his one daughter lived miles away and had no contact. He was alone, except for a few neighbors and some relatives. As I went back for another load of gear I couldn't help but notice him. I felt great compassion for him but I had done about all I could have done. I wished that I could have saved something for him.

I remembered the picture on the lamp table and wanted to retrieve it for him. I walked back into the house and looked where it had been. It was gone. Nothing but a pile of rubble occupied the space that once was the home of a personal treasure. Disappointed I went back to work hauling hose.

With a 50 foot length of fire hose over my shoulder I stopped in front of him and for a moment just looked him in the eye while studying his face. Then I asked, "How are you doing?" emphasizing the word you. To my surprise, he smiled and with a cheerful voice said, "I still have my dog." I smiled although puzzled and went on my way. We put him in contact with the county welfare services for shelter and other necessities of life.

His response has stuck with me. I had expected a response having to do with the adversity or loss.

Sitting in a poster-perfect church service where everything is in order and perfectly orchestrated, it finally sank in. He was no stranger to adversity. He had somehow learned one of the great lessons of life; he was thankful for what he had. "I still have my dog" are words that will stick with me for a long time.

When my fire department pager sounded that morning I had left home to serve, to help someone, and to give back to my community. As I view it now, I was the one who was served. This man's response to adversity has been a lift. I came away better for hearing his words. Life is full of wonders.

August 15, 2006:

From Christmas Trees in Michigan to Sled Dogs in Alaska

Hundreds of families in mid-Michigan come annually for their family Christmas tree to the Warren Homestead Tree Farm. It is also the home of the Homestead Huskies Kennel, the sled dogs that run in Alaska's Iditarod. Visitors at the farm often ask about this unusual mix. This is the story.

In early spring shortly after the snow has left the fields in mid-Michigan the tree farm chores begin. The Christmas tree seedlings, thousands of them, are placed with care into the cool moist earth. The yearly cycle has begun once again at the Warren Homestead Christmas Tree Farm in rural Linwood, Michigan.



Planting Christmas Trees

After planting is finished, the effort turns to the older already-growing trees. It is a lot of work to care for them. Fertilizer is applied, weed control herbicides and insecticide is sprayed. The springtime tree farming is not finished until every one of the 20,000 or so trees are ready to grow fast and to ward off the attacks of weeds, bugs, heat and drought.

As weather warms and summer draws near most people are concerned with golf and backyard barbecues. At Warren's we are mowing in the tree fields, and adding pesticides for weed control and more insecticide. This special and costly care for the trees is important because with tree farming you only get paid once at the end of a ten year wait. You just can't afford to let your guard down with all that can happen to trees in ten years.

There is more. Following the 4th of July week, the shearing begins. The crew of 4-6 shearers head out to the fields to clip the excess growth and shape each tree. It is hot, hard work and there are occasional bee nests that vex the sweaty shearers. But each tree needs to be sheared, every year. Anyone who has ever sheared in a commercial Christmas tree operation remembers well the hard work.



Chris Running Shear; Bryant Hand Shearing

More mowing follows to keep down some of the weeds that try to grow near the trees in the fertilized soil. Then after Labor Day there is a final application of fall weed control. Yes, more mowing too. Later in the fall the advertising needs to be purchased for the sales season that starts after Thanksgiving, Thursday. The sales lot is put in place, with the signs, equipment and more. It is ready!

The sales season is a festive time. People are in the holiday spirit and enjoy their time at the farm. The Choose and Cut sales at the farm are handled by a crew of young men and women of college and high school age. They greet the customers, help them find, harvest, and load their tree on their car. The sales crew is fed all the chocolate chip cookies they can eat and joke that they 'run on cookies'. At the end of the day they smell like pine sap and sweat. It is hard work but there are a lot of smiles and holiday greetings.



Sales Lot

Yes, the dogs. They need food, and care. Our kennel of 40 Alaskan Huskies cost about \$16k per year and is a heavy cost burden. The profits from the trees go to support the kennel. We joke about our work to turn trees into dog food. But we love our dogs.

The kennel began in year 2000 after Jim and his wife Jennifer took a 3 week tour to Alaska to spectate the Iditarod. We had only a Golden Retriever at the time. Things moved quickly and in 2004, Jim as the oldest rookie finished Iditarod Sleddog Race in 13 days. Jim and his son Christopher wrote a book about their adventure.

I am often asked how I got started in Christmas trees? In 1953 my Dad, Al, bought the farm where the Warren's now live. The land had been pastured and for good reason, the soil was sandy and not a good choice for cash crops. Al debated for months on how best to put the land to work. One day after working for a tree farmer pruning Christmas trees, I presented the idea to Dad of growing Christmas trees. It seemed a good fit for the soil.

The next spring we planted a bunch of Christmas trees. Things went along pretty well for 3-4 years until disaster struck. A high population of voles had girdled the bark under the snow and killed most of the trees during the winter. Al was disappointed to say the least, he really needed the money. He scrapped the whole idea of Christmas trees and called it a dumb idea. I didn't agree.

I needed money for college in a few years. Cash was scarce in our rural home and I thought the trees might be the solution. So I worked out an agreement with Al where I'd borrow his land and grow the trees for college money. I scratched together enough money to buy trees and hire help to plant.

Once more things were going well. The trees were 4-5 years old and looking pretty good. Then, while I was home on a weekend from college my Dad happily announced he had agreed with a buyer to sell the house and half the farm. I quickly

asked "Which half?" The look on Dad's face said it all. Without checking the exact location of the tree patch, he had inadvertently sold my college trees. He felt pretty bad but it was too late.

Ten or so years later Dad offered to sell me the remaining acreage at a very attractive price. He said it was the least he could do to make up for the mistake he'd made years earlier. I encouraged him to bump the price up to market value and he agreed. Then I bought the neighbors farm too.

There I was with 60 acres of good tree land. Of course I was going to grow trees. I was convinced I could do it profitably but after a few years in a professional job, I knew knowledge was a big factor in profitability. So I set out to gather all the information I could about the Christmas tree industry. I was committed to doing it right.

I visited a Nursery in nearby Midland, MI that was run by a man who I knew had a no-nonsense approach to business and life. He knew the value of hard work mixed with knowledge. I walked into Maple Hill Nursery and told Len Servinski I was serious about growing Christmas trees and asked where I could get good information on growing and marketing. He grabbed a magazine and tore out a page listing the Michigan Christmas Tree Growers Association and an application for membership.

The phone call I made shortly thereafter was without doubt the most beneficial call I have ever made. I called Michigan State University, I think the department of Forestry, and identified myself as a Christmas tree grower about to scale-up and asked who I might talk to get off on the right foot. The call was transferred to Dr Mel Koelling whom I didn't know at the time. My sense was he just happened to be standing by the receptionist who had taken my call and may not have been the designated person to handle such a call.

Although perhaps a stroke of good luck to talk to the right person, I had already thought through pretty well what it was I needed to know. I knew what reasonable options I could implement but I needed critical refinements to my plan with information from someone who was knowledgeable.

His brief and to the point response to my questions was exactly what I needed. That five minute conversation launched a successful business starting from day one. I can't say enough to describe my appreciation to MCTA, MSU and Dr Mel Koelling.

I have attended every MCTA grower meeting and MSU Extension Service technical seminar I could since then. The information presented and relationships gained have been a big asset.

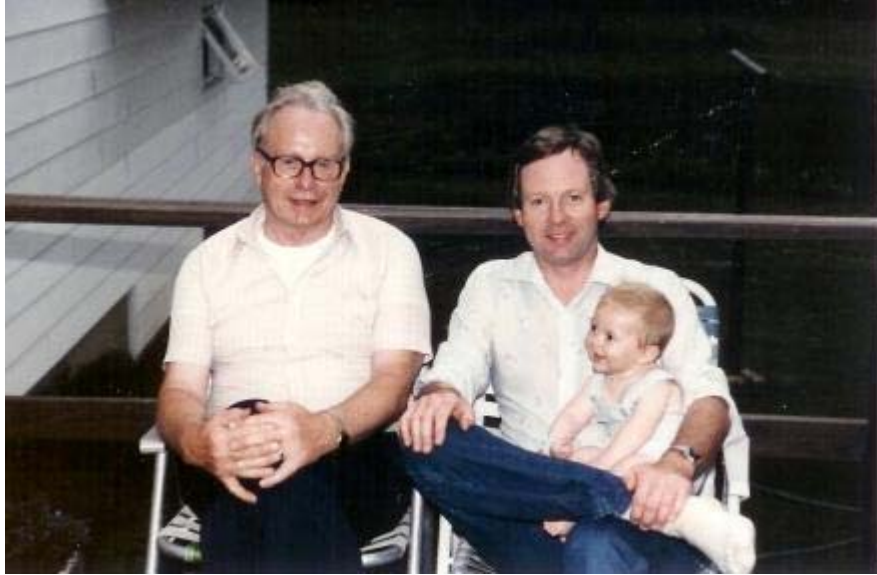
That was in 1979. We began our first scale up planting in 1980. In 2006 it will be our 20th sales year. I wish my Dad was still alive so he could see how well the 'dumb idea!' is working.



Fall at Warren Homestead Tree Farm

Dad played a role on the sled dog side of our operation that I'm sure would have come as a complete surprise to him. This passage from our book, *Following My Father's Dreams, Journals from a Rookie Iditarod Run* by James and Christopher Warren describes his influence.

"Sitting there (in the woods) on the ATV I (Jim) began thinking about where did this Iditarod stuff start with me. It is so much more than a sled dog race. Is it the freedom, the space, the adventure? Is it being alone on the trail with my dogs, at peace? I think it started when I was about 10 or 12 when Dad handed me a book titled, *White Fang* by Jack London. He gave me every other book by Jack London after he finished. It struck me many years later that Dad read every dog and Alaska book ever written. I noticed the ones he had on his shelf were badly worn from reading. The Bible was the only thing he read more. It also struck me that he followed the Alaskan homesteaders in detail and he often told stories of what he had read. Yes, I believe he dreamed of Alaska, and of having a healthy body so he could go and see it for himself. But he didn't. He never saw the northern lights crackling overhead. He never saw the salmon in the streams, the mountains, the wolves, Denali at dawn, or Unalakleet with 80 MPH winds. He never saw the sled dogs with 1100 miles in 10 days come trotting into Nome, and he never saw daylight at midnight. But I know he dreamed about it, and his dream infected me."



Al, Jim, and Chris Warren, 1986

It was my good fortune to be able to run my dog team in Iditarod '04, as the oldest rookie, and finish in 13 days.

There you have it. From Christmas Trees to Sled Dogs, or to say it differently, "From the dirt of Michigan to the Iditarod finish line in Alaska, it has been a great adventure and a long hard ride."



Christmas Trees and Sled Dogs



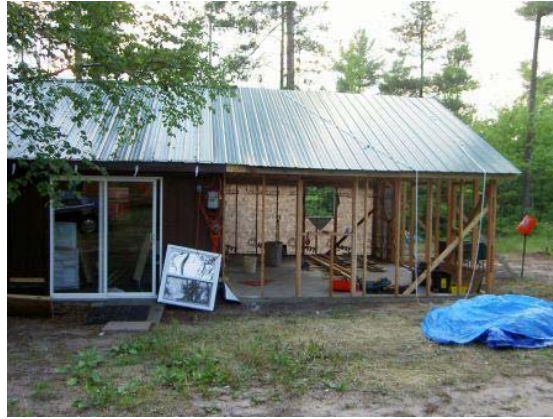
A good Day, A Very Good Day!

* * *

September 15, 2006: It is 6am, Sunday with a temperature of 64 °F and thundershowers. It is too warm to run the dogs. But my wife Jennifer is here along with Daughter Whitney and Whitney's friend. I like having people here and so do the dogs.

Whitney visited Northern Michigan University at Marquette, MI on Friday. She talked to several people in the School of Nursing. She was favorably impressed and there is a good chance she will choose NMU for her college.

Dog training is in full swing at SledDog Lodge after a too busy summer. There was much more work than expected on one of the cabins to ensure structural integrity. This is heavy snow country and the snow load on the roof is devastating to a building not properly constructed. But the work is nearly done and it soon will be ready for occupancy.



Cabin Repair at SledDog Lodge

Jen and I free-ran the puppies yesterday. They love to run, mess around and act like dogs. It is good for them and good for us to watch them play and tussle. They are 5 months old now and have been running in harness for about a month. They have been an easy group to train.



Puppies Cooling after a Training Run

The adult dogs are enjoying their running. We are at the 5 mile stage of training and it is merely a short run before they are back in the dog yard where they

get the customary cool drink and snack. I am ready for longer runs but the dogs need to work up to that and the weather needs to cool a lot.



Jennifer and Gracie

September 18, 2006: Jennifer, the love of my life and the mother of my children is the glue that keeps it all together for Homestead Huskies. We cannot thank her enough for her contribution to our lives and our passions.

She was here at SledDog Lodge this weekend mostly for the purpose of assisting Whitney in her selection of a college. This is not an easy or small decision. Much has gone down to get to this point both for Whitney and her mother Jennifer. But wouldn't you have guessed, Jennifer also was here to check in on her other children, her dogs.

She grieved after Al Hardman took a couple of puppies from the litter of Sackett and Ruby. But that was the agreement. Sackett is out of the Susan Butcher kennel and is a good match for the Jeff King bitch out of Saunderson's Victor. So it is a good deal for both Al and me. But Jennifer still grieved to give up the puppies she had raised from their first breaths.

That behind she turned to more mundane chores like cutting toenails. I think she knows I am more focused on the bigger picture items and often forget the small things like toenails. She also checked every dog for weight, and other physical and emotional issues.

At the end of the weekend she had a list of to-do chores for me. Pena is overweight and needs arthritis meds, Beta just needs more running, Siesta needs running too, Peg needs hugs, and on and on. At the end of the day she had addressed the physical and emotional needs of the whole kennel. These dogs never had so good a mother as Jennifer.

On behalf of the 40 dogs in the Homestead Huskies kennel, thank you Jennifer. You are our best friend.



Jennifer Holding Gracie on Front Porch of SledDog Lodge

October 4, 2006: Training is going well here at SledDog Lodge. The dogs are healthy and seem to really enjoy their running. The weather is just about perfect and is in the 30s in mornings and 50s in the afternoons. The hardwood forest is sporting its fall colors and the dog training runs have spectacular scenery. It just doesn't get any better than this.

When I stepped out to the porch last night there was a large harvest moon hanging low over the dimly lighted forest. The quiet was everywhere. An occasional close-by coyote would howl triggering the entire kennel to respond in a unison howl. Life at this remote location on earth is as it has been for millennia.

Yesterday, with Mike Howard, we ran two teams through what we call 'water training'. It is a water crossing between two small lakes that is about 100 feet long with varying depth of water. It is important for the younger dogs to become accustomed to sloshing through water and sometimes have to swim. Flowing water

and temperatures of minus 30 °F can and do happen on the Iditarod Trail. Survival could depend on how the dogs handle it.

Jennifer, Chris, and Whitney were here last weekend. It was nice to visit with them. Weather was a little too warm to run the dogs but life has been demanding on my family and they were happy to simply rest and enjoy each others company. It was a rather unusual weekend for that high-energy crew. I can't say I was comfortable with the slow pace and I had become a little uneasy by the time they left. It was time to get back to the work. I have a cabin to finish and dogs to train.



Guest Cabins @ SledDog Lodge



Chris and Special Friend Swen



Jen, Chris and Riley

October 18, 3006: I spent a few days with my brothers hunting mule deer in Wyoming. The open plains of Wyoming are a lot different than the forests of Michigan. I found Mule Deer somewhat stupid and easy to hunt. This is the story.

At about 11am I moved to a different ridge to make room for Cousin Perry Eddy and his son Tony. At noon I ate my lunch sitting on a very high 20 foot wide ridge with a stunning view. Looking one way over a 500 foot drop there were ranches along a river valley with grazing horses and cattle. The other direction was two ridges separated by long meadows extending maybe ½ mile down the valley into rolling sage. I was sitting on top of the world it seemed. I lounged on my backpack and fell asleep. A distant gunshot awakened me so I scanned the ridges to my North.

I noticed about 350 yards down the ridge a group of deer working slowly my way browsing as they came. There were about 10 deer with a good half of them antlered bucks. They were on a course that would take them below me about 200 yards away along the sage ridge. I settled back for the show because I only had a doe permit since I had already harvested a 6 point opening day.

Not even remotely interested in harvesting a doe I marveled at the fact it would have been more difficult to shoot a doe here than an antlered buck. Then I glanced along the second ridge and noticed a couple of small deer-like objects about 500 yards down the valley. Even at that distance I thought I saw antlers on one. A closer check with the rifle scope revealed there were 5 bucks with one a monster with very wide antlers, almost 'elk' like in appearance. Well now I had two groups of deer in sight with about ten or so antlered bucks. I thought, "This is a real nice birthday treat. I'll just sit and watch for as long as I can see them."

After a delightful half hour my brother John checked in on the radio and asked if I had seen anything. I told him the situation. He asked how far away they were and wondered if I thought I could hit them. He said take a shot. I still have my buck tag. So I readied my backpack as a rifle rest and settled down in a prone position to take a very long shot at the biggest buck I had seen in years.

The group of five bucks were strangely clustered and seemed to be all around the big guy. I put the cross hairs on the deer and to my surprise the thin cross hair covered almost his whole body, not a good thing. I dialed the Leopold rifle scope up to 10 power. Better. I placed the crosshair so there was just a tiny bit of light between the crosshair and the top of the deer's back and slowly squeezed off a round from the Browning Auto 7MM Rem Mag. When the scope dropped back on the deer I could see he was hit. He was stumbling awkwardly and thrashing his antlered head. Although hit it didn't look like a mortal shot. One of the other bucks charged at him but pulled up short just a couple of feet from him. I readied for a second round. I squeezed the trigger gently, only this time with just a tiny amount of additional elevation. When the scope again dropped back after the recoil I watched a deer take a death lunge running for about 50 yards to the left and drop. I watched the exact spot, not moving the rifle for a good 5 minutes. Then I started looking left and right to be sure I could identify the landmarks at the exact location when I finally walked the 500 yards to the deer. I later measured the distance with the Garmin GPS to be 480 yards.

I looked back to find the other deer hadn't moved far and were not too sure what to do. One 4 point began working back along the ridge in my direction. The remaining deer continued slowly along the same path they had been on. Through the sage I thought I saw glimpses of what I thought may be a second heavy antlered buck and thought I had not previously noticed him.

After a half hour, I moved down to take a closer look. I saw an 8 and a 4 point run by me within about 75 yards, and an easy shot. Then I saw another 4 point down the valley walk by pretty much disinterested in what I was doing. I found the location where I had shot the first time. There was no obvious blood on the ground. I found the spot where the second shot was made marked by heavy blood. I followed it down hill for 50 yards to find a dead 4 point, definitely not the deer I had been shooting at. I was confused beyond belief. What had happened? Where was the monster buck I had been shooting at? Was he dead or wounded nearby? It is hard to describe my disappointment mixed with dismay. What had gone wrong?

I spent the rest of the day slowing walking a tight grid marked by the track function of my Garmin GPS. At one point I found a short section of trail with tracks in the sand with a few blood drops. But that was all. I examined the dead 4 point and noticed the exit wound was on the opposite side that would have been the exit wound on the monster buck. Had the 4 point walked into the path of my second bullet or did I shoot a little too high and hit a deer beyond? There is no way to tell.

When it was all over, I had shot twice at almost 500 yards and hit two deer. That is a long way to shoot, a damned long way. I feel bad for the big one that we didn't find.

On the good side, I saw 17 bucks that afternoon, almost all were in a reasonable shooting range. So as the sun sank beyond the horizon that evening I

thought of it as a good day. I turned 62 years old that day and thanked God for the health and opportunity to wander the mountains and hunt for deer with my brothers. I was again reminded that life is full of wonder

October 23, 2006: I stepped out on the porch in the predawn at about 5:30am to find a steady rain and a temperature of 37°F. I shivered and went back indoors to fire up the coffee pot and stoke the wood heater.

I turned to the computer to catch up on correspondence and make a to-do list for the day and next few weeks. Well, that was disappointing! I found that I just can't get it all done. So I had to make some difficult choices and adjust the to-do list. I face this dilemma every year. The combination of dog training and Christmas tree sales make November and especially December a challenge. It is a brutal schedule and a time to endure. However it makes the Christmas holidays even better for the Warren family. We retreat to SledDog Lodge too tired to do much more than rest, spend time with each other and our dogs.

Back at the computer, I wondered about my habit, almost a compulsion, to step outside to check the weather. I really don't have to do that but somehow I just can't wait to step out on the porch to smell the forest scents and feel the cool air on my face. (No Chris, this is after I go to the bathroom!)

Perhaps it is because indoors is just unnatural, confining and almost a prison to me. Outdoors is freedom with the wind in the pines, clouds scurrying by, the smells of damp pines, and the flight and calls of the ravens or owls. Indoors, isolated from the natural surrounding but toasty, is just not a comfortable place for me. Yes, sometimes when in the bunk I open the window at my head just to connect to outside. Life is good.

October 26, 2006: I worked late last night on the interior walls of the cabin to be used by Dr Richard MacAuley's handlers this season. I had gotten up early and put in an hour before first light. Then I watered the dogs and cleaned the dog yard before breakfast and coffee. I resumed the cabin remodeling until noon then after lunch ran an 18 dog team, now about 12 miles. After a snack I went back to the cabin to continue until baseball's World Series. With the baseball game on a rain delay I worked until, well I don't even know.

Yesterday was Clara's day to be porch dog. I let a dog run free each day so they learn how to cope plus it gives me a friend to accompany me on my daily chores. Clara is a special friend. She is always nearby and snoops into everything I do. Yesterday I was in the barn squatting while looking into some sacks on a shelf containing plumbing supplies. She sat along side of me and with one paw on my shoulder was looking intently into every sack mimicking my actions. Later she saw a squirrel in the yard and looked at me for a signal it was ok to chase it away. I gave the, 'NO' command just to be consistent with trail expectations. She complied but didn't take her eye off the squirrel.

When I finished working in the cabin I turned out the lights and walked outside into a cold drizzle. It was pitch black and I couldn't see a thing. I walked best I could tell across the yard toward the main cabin that we call SledDog Lodge. There were no lights in the cabin so I was guessing at where it was. It was a little spooky.

Then I heard running feet coming my way! Something furry slammed into me from out of the dark. Instinctively I threw Clara to the ground before I realized it was Clara. Apparently she couldn't see any better than I and misjudged my location.

Well thanks Clara! Now disoriented, I didn't know what direction to take to get to the cabin. In a cold rain I was lost in my own yard, probably only 30 feet from two cabins, I stood still to think before I moved. Guessing, I moved ahead cautiously and in a few steps fell onto the porch.

I sat on the steps for a few minutes out of the rain, safe, and with a wet dog on my lap giving me doggie kisses. Life is good when you have a dog.

The dark and total disorientation brought a flashback of Iditarod '04 when I ran for miles in the dark without a headlamp. I won't do that again!

It has been a long week and I was so tired I don't even remember crawling into the bunk. But I was awake and ready to go at 5am.

November 8, 2006: Yesterday was one more day of a string of very long days. I ran an 18 dog team ahead of the ATV for 25 miles, shortening the run because of the warm temperatures, 53 °F. The dogs ran ok but after getting back to the dog yard Ian was vomiting and didn't eat. He is a hard puller and may have overheated. It rained intermittently all day. After dog chores I put some finishing touches on some the cabin remodeling. Finally it is finished. But it was late by the time I hit the bunk.

The constant footwork running dogs and cabin remodeling has aggravated my injured Achilles tendon. It is not healing. I have to see a doctor just to be sure but expect to be told to stay off it to give it time to heal. Yeah right! Unless it somehow heals-while-running, it will keep me from running in some of the races I had planned. I am not happy with that prospect.

However, even with the steady rain on the metal roof and the prospect of not running in some of the races I had looked forward to, I am pleased, almost upbeat, to change focus. Today I will run a 40 mile camping trip, raining or not.

Then I will turn to other dog management items and start by making a to-do list just to be sure I am not overlooking something important. Then a second to-do list for Tree Farm items needed for the sales season coming up after Thanksgiving.

The rain is falling steadily and temperature is almost 50°F, not a stellar day for running dogs. It would be easy to be depressed but I am not. I had a warm and dry bunk to sleep in last night and just had breakfast. The quiet and wet forest trails will be our home for most of today. The rain, fog and damp is just one of the moods of the forest. Even a bad day on the trail is much better than a good day at the office.

November 30, 2006: A day at SledDog Lodge: I rolled out of the bunk shortly after 5am. As my feet hit the floor I noticed my Achilles tendon injury is finally feeling a little better. This is a good thing. It has kept me from training myself and has slowly improved. I made a cup of tea and turned to paperwork. Now with remodeling done I have to catch up on other details. After my bowl of cold cereal and watching the Jeff King video on NBC Today Show it was daylight enough to go to the dog yard.

I planned a 40 mile run up to the Lake Superior shore. I would run the 18 dogs ahead of the Honda ATV towing a small trailer with supplies for dog snacks.

After days of rain the temperature had dropped below freezing making a thick layer of frost in the previously wet ground. These are conditions that play havoc

with dog feet. I decided to delay my departure until later in the morning in hopes the ground would thaw. I didn't have to plan for a delay; it was already in the cards.

The ATV shift buttons were sticking. The days of rain and now freezing temperatures had created a problem. I fussed with the shifter and finally got it working. Knowing that weather changes makes for problems with equipment I poured fresh fuel in the ATV and added the deicer to the fuel.

Back in the dog yard the dogs reminded me I hadn't yet fed them breakfast. I inserted one more task before feeding; I towed the steel beam behind the ATV to do a final leveling of the sand before permanent freeze-up. It is easier to walk when the dog yard is level.

I noticed the time was fast passing so I got the dogs harnessed. When harnessing the last one I notice the ATV had slid a few inches ahead with the tugging of the excited dogs. The 18th dog was going to be the 'straw that broke the camels back.' Sure enough! When I attached the 18th dog the sliding ATV came past me but I was able to grab a bar and climb on. We were off.

As we rocketed out of the dog yard and onto Swamp Lakes Rd. it occurred to me I had forgotten to feed the dogs! To make matters worse I had failed to connect the trailer to the ATV with dog food and other supplies. Now that is rather irresponsible! It also occurred to my parka was still in the storage box on the back of the ATV and was in danger of falling onto the roadway. I pulled it on while riding. Good! The wind was bitter and damp. I reconsidered my planned run. We were to run 40 miles. It was cool, there was water puddles on the trail, and these dogs are in good physical condition with good body weight. They can handle missing a meal. I'll give them double later. I decided to stay with the plan and run the intended 40 miles.

I turned the team on side trails to avoid the abrasive frozen dirt on the main trails. These are the conditions that can cause cuts on the dog's feet. We traveled North and West on Swamp Lakes Rd., then onto the snowmobile trail leading North to Rainbow Lodge. As we passed points where we had stopped for dog snacks earlier in the fall, I noticed a few of the dogs would look back at me. How can they remember where we snacked last month? They've run over 500 miles this fall on numerous trails. It was clear they had become accustomed to eating on 2 hour intervals.

The weather remained heavily overcast with a light but damp wind off Lake Superior, temperature was about 34°F, a grumpy day. Even the forest looked tired of the rain, wet, and cloudy days.

We turned onto County Road 412 and at mile 18. I stopped the team to check on the condition of the dog's feet. Hartley had a little blood on one toe. But foot damage it is hard to spot without snow so if you have one with injury there are likely more. The temperature had risen and softened the roadway so the danger to dog feet had past. I didn't turn in and shorten the run as I would have if the condition had persisted. We continued along the Lake Superior shore near Crisp Point and then planned to turn South to connect with Betsy-Tower Rd, past Betsy Lake, The Little Two Hearted River and then into SledDog Lodge. At mile 27 Alto looked exhausted. I checked him out and concluded he was simply tired. I pulled him out of the team and tied him beside the trail to pick up later. He was happy and quickly curled into a ball and went fast asleep. The team continued on running at 10-12 MPH but some were showing a little fatigue. We stopped every 2-4 miles for a mental health break.

Running into the dog yard they all looked pretty good. But they reminded me they were hungry and I'd better not delay getting the food ready.

On the dry-erase board at the cabin was a alarming note from Tom. His dog Libby had broken away and had been lost for over an hour. I immediately began helping find the lost dog. Finally we got a phone call that Libby was at the

Tahquamenon State Park and was unharmed. I went back to my chores and decided to drive to get Alto with the truck.

Well the dogs finally were fed just before dark. The ones who ran got an extra big helping. No body complained, but I think there were a few grumbles. I finished chopping frozen beef for the next days feeding after dark. I loaded the wood box with firewood for the night and warmed some roast turkey and squash in the microwave for my dinner.

The dogs were happy and slept well. So did I. Yes even a bad day running dogs in better than a good day at the office. But this was a good day running dogs. Life is good.

December 9, 2006: Earlier this week we took a run with two 18 dog teams intending to run 40-45 miles, maybe a 4 hour run. Well, there was already 12" of snow on the ground and the snow was falling heavily. Soon we were breaking trail in 18-20" of fluffy snow. The dogs did splendidly plowing through the snow for mile after mile. Of course I had to continually cycle leaders out of lead to give them break from the rigors of breaking trail. I went through 7 different leaders and finally began using the big-guns, Utah, Swen, Brutus, and Eric. I shortened the run to 30 miles but it took over 5 hours. They still had plenty of steam when we returned. They need that kind of run to mentally prep them for Iditarod. I was pleased with their stamina and heart. These are solid and reliable sled dogs and they handle adversity well.

Well the MacAuley's crew is on site and will begin training tomorrow with Richard (Dr MacAuley). They have one of our cabins. Then in the other cabin is Tom Roig who has been training for this Iditarod. Scott Doepker is here for a few days of vacation and is helping tend my dogs when I am at the Christmas Tree Farm. The cabins are completely separate but folks tend to congregate around the wood heater in the evening and share the stories of the day. SledDog Lodge has been transformed into a snowy oasis with a hundred dogs and people who love to play with them. Happy dogs, happy people, lots of fresh, clean air and good nights sleep. Life is good.

December 13, 2006: The Howl of the Wolf: Rain drops softly tapping on the metal roof was the only sound in the predawn at SledDog Lodge. The temperature was hanging at 35°F underscoring the 40 mile training run would be pretty soggy today. As I poured my coffee into the cup I heard a long low howl coming from the dog yard located a short distance behind the cabin. It was a single howl, then silence. After a few seconds another, then silence. The rain pattered on the roof. With coffee in hand I peered out the window at the darkened dog yard wondering about the almost reverence of the wolf-like howl. I could make out the dog houses against the white background of snow but there was no movement of the 40 inhabitants. Then a second voice in the dark from the dog yard took up the response. The dogs were responding to the wolf who had howled in the distance. A few more of them joined the reverent chorus. More of them joined, responding in the same low, long, reverent tone. Then silence. I stood motionless taking in this ancient event. A chill ran up my back.

As I walked across the darkened room to the computer I wondered about what I had just experienced. The dog's response to the 'call of the wild' was a beautiful part of the natural world. My 'chill' too was an instinctive human response to 'the wolf'. Yes, hardwired into the human brain is a response when the wolf calls. I wondered about it while I pulled on my fleece jacket. I reminded myself I wasn't really cold, the chill was caused by the call of the wolf. I wondered too about what my

forefathers might have thought when the wolf called in the dark while they were standing in the rain by a sputtering campfire. Did they have the same chill run up their back?

As I watched from my dry seat near the warm glow of the wood heater the cold wet foggy dawn crept across the puddled dog yard. Swen was on his feet staring into the still forest while the rest of the dogs slept.

I am indeed fortunate and feel honored to be here where one can live with the ancient rhythms of the wilderness. I find strength in the solitude. I am blessed.

December 29, 2006: The year is almost done and most musher's plans are in shambles the result of pitifully little snow. Yes, even here at SledDog Lodge there is only a trace of snow, too little to run sleds. The weather forecasts offer little encouragement for the short term. Rumors are the Seney 300 is canceled and the Tahquamenon will be at best delayed if not outright cancelled.

These are the hard times that cause kennels to financially fail. Large kennels are a business supported by massive amounts of work and dedication of the owners. But at some point even the most devoted can't support the drain and have to give in. I hope some of our friends who put bread on the table with the kennel can make it.

With that glum picture I turn to re-ordering the plans here at Homestead Huskies Kennel. The priority will be to have a well trained 12 dog team for Chris to run in the UP 200 in mid-February. He is capable of winning there. We now have the time to do that up right.

A second priority will be to check out other dog events in the mid-west to see if anything fits with the schedule. Another priority will be to develop sponsorship relationships that are win-win. This is vital for our future with sled dogs.

Just writing about the future has improved my state of mind. I like planning and 'making it happen.' This is good.

Looking ahead I am thinking through changes. The month of December is an almost unworkable load with the combined work of both the Christmas tree farm and the kennel. I have tried my best but both operations suffer during the December tree sales. More help is needed but neither operation can afford to pay for the needed help. I think the solution lies in inviting partners who would enjoy sharing the sled dog experience.

I am thinking about inviting partners, people who want to learn or experience life with an Iditarod dog kennel. I think it should be 'retirees' maybe a married couple, maybe 2 or 3 guys who want to trade off duty at the kennel. They may be professional photographers, or writers, or who knows. They will have to be able to deal with the physical rigors of muscular work, cold, deep snow and sometimes less than ideal conditions. Critical to the ongoing smooth operations of the kennel, this is something that needs to be thought through. I think it has some positive potential beyond just getting the work done.

Should anyone have more ideas I'd love to hear them.

December 31, 2006: The year is at an end. I am again staring into the bright computer screen here in the predawn at SledDog lodge writing in my journal. The dark room is lighted softly with the orange glow from the wood heater.

Writing is not an easy thing for me. Words come clumsily both in speech and writing. It takes a lot of time for me to get things in shape so they are at least passable.

My normal nature is not one of precisely chosen words and smooth sentences. Instead, I am a forward looking, planning, hard-charging, 'git er done', and adjust on the fly type of person. I am an up early, work harder, and keep moving forward

guy. At the end of the day I will have gone farther, gotten more done and consumed less resource. I am happy to let others bemoan the little stuff, blame, and play the 'poor me' games. I have things to do and a short time to do them. Yes, with limited skills and even less patience, writing is hard and excessively time consuming for me.

But I will likely continue, perhaps limited. It helps me focus, sometimes, and keeps me from things like cleaning the dog yard before dawn.

I wonder what 2007 has in store for the Warren family and all the dogs?

January 1, 2007: One thing is certain; the weather is really screwed up. It is 7am, dark, with a driving rain. It has been raining throughout the night in sharp contrast to the forecasted snow. There are only puddles on the ground, no snow. The dogs have been patiently enduring for days their wet and puddled home, the dog yard. I feel so sorry for them. I'll give them dry straw today

But they had a good run yesterday. Rodney Whaley and I took out the entire dog yard. We ran north to Tower Rd then looped around and back to SledDog Lodge. I had to slow them at first to keep them from getting too warm. But they ran 40 miles pulling the ATV and maintained about 10 MPH, even at the end of the run. I was pleased with their performance. This is a good team.

With the season moving quickly and many local event cancelled, I have to think through the plans for the balance of the season.

It is predawn here at SledDog Lodge and I am finding it hard to be optimistic. Depression is lurking. I had better make a cup of coffee and perhaps regain my normal sense of humor! The fire in the wood heater is friendly and seems to talk to me. Enough said.

January 5, 2007: I awakened by a single distant howl of the wolf. The dogs responded with a subdued chorus of howls. It is 41 °F this morning with light rain. It is depressing even to the dogs!

I have not yet mentally committed to a new plan for the balance of the winter. So, today I will swing into project mode on maintenance chores. It would be too easy to just 'stall out' and let things get me down. I will talk to Jennifer later to get her thoughts.

One hope is that the UP 200 get's enough snow so it can run. We really need a bright spot around here.

January 9, 2007: Photos of Chris and Puppy Team

Yes, snow has arrived, snow is falling, and snow is in the forecast. I actually fired up the John Deere and blew out the driveway.

We are training for the UP 200 over a month away. Chris with his friend Lauren is here to help while they enjoy the last few days of Christmas break from Michigan Tech University.

We ran the puppies and enjoyed the snow.

January 10, 2007: As is so many days for me, it is predawn at SledDog Lodge and I stare into the glare of the computer screen with a coffee cup within inches. The soft orange glow of the wood heater sheds it's warmth into the darkened room. The dog yard is quiet. It seems the entire universe is asleep, except for me.

My thoughts organize the activities of the day and plan them to fit the available time and mesh with the longer range plan. When I looked at the calendar I noticed Chris' 21st birthday is in two days.

I traced his life in my mind from the pregnancy, first breath, on my shoulders hiking mountains, school, and more. He has grown and matured into a capable and



Christopher with Team

energetic man. It gives me a deep satisfaction, much like finishing an Iditarod, to see his success. He has become and will continue an asset to those around him.



Christopher, Siesta and Dave the Dog

Perhaps it is like a puppy you raise from its first breaths. You keep it warm, fed, and healthy. You then teach it all you know how. But, mostly, it is up to the puppy to become what it can become. You can only take credit for 'dog care'.

February 1, 2007: Well the weather has gotten back to normal at SledDog Lodge. The snow is falling every day, temps are about zero, and it is good dog running weather. I am doing the final conditioning runs to get Chris's UP 200 team ready.

I had run most of the Seney 300 last week and the dogs were fast and strong with a lot of enthusiasm, almost too much. They ran the 43 miles from SledDog Lodge checkpoint to Jim O checkpoint in almost record time even though the snow was falling so fast I could hardly see my wheel dogs much of the time. The hard charging team during the heavy snow with may low hanging branches because of the weight of the snow made it almost a frightening run. No, it was a frightening run. But, after passing 5 teams, some starting an hour ahead, the dogs broke trail for the last 20 miles and maintained their lead. This is a strong team with a lot of spirit. I like what I see.

Today I left at 12 noon sharp for a 60 mile run. The snow was falling as Swen took the team out of the yard in his normal fashion, head down, looking neither left or right, and just ran hard for the joy of running. Swen is in his prime and it shows. He loves to run.

Within 5 miles the snow dumped on us. I could barely see my clenched fists on the handle bar some of the time. I didn't remember snow so heavy. The dogs

seemed even more fired up and ran headlong into the blinding snow. Thank God for good leaders, I couldn't tell where we were. Even on familiar trails it is tough recognize landmarks you've passed dozens of times.

The snow had let up somewhat when we rolled up on the two hour mark, time to snack the dogs. I dropped the snow hook and dug in the sled bag through the packed snow to find the sack of kibble. I ran to the leader and started throwing a big handful in front of each dog. They gulped the kibble getting much snow along with it. In three minutes we were finished and I pulled the hook with a quick whistle and "let's go". I checked the GPS and we had traveled 23 miles in 2 hours flat, not bad under the heavy trail breaking we had been doing. The dogs ran on.

The snow continued making the trail breaking even more of a chore. The dogs moved easily through the sometimes 1 foot of new snow but I knew it was a big energy drain.

As we got close to home I wondered if they were getting near exhaustion. They had slowed a little for a half hour after the last snack. After 50 miles they should have been getting at least a little tired. I had the option of shortening the run. But their speed was still 8-9 mph and they were running, hauling me and the loaded sled on the uphill. I was impressed but realized they do have limits. They are merely muscle and blood and we, the dogs and I, know all too well that we do have limits.

Then, at mile 57 Tom Roig's team which had been on the trail earlier took a shortcut toward home. But I turned the team away from home, again they were facing an unbroken trail. Some of them stopped pulling and a couple simply sat down. It was clear that some dogs had reached their limit and were unhappy with my decision. It was my job to get them through the down time and teach that 'together we can get through it'. Yes the next few miles were slow, and took more patience than I have. I was tired and hungry too. The miles and miles of pounding snow had found it's way into every pocket or tiny opening in my garments and I was a little wet. But as we got within a couple of miles of home their thought of a warm supper and a straw bed overcame their fatigue and they rocketed down the last mile while I was standing on the brake.

In the yard, I gave each a rub down while removing their harnesses and put them at their house. I gave them a great warm supper and put them to bed on cozy straw. They had impressed me. They had run 60 miles, breaking trail, and had done it, except for the last two or three miles, averaging just over 10 mph. Wow!

Later, inside SledDog Lodge as I broke loose the frozen zippers and ice crusted garments that had protected me in the teeth of a UP lake effect storm, I was thinking of the dogs and how they had excelled. It was sinking in just how far 60 miles through unbroken trail really is and what it takes from a dog to run for that distance. I was there but I didn't run. I stood on the runners so maybe I don't really know. But saw it and I cared for and loved every dog as I put them away. They were tired and they told me so. They also thanked me for supper before they dove into their straw. Yes I am amazed at the dogs. They are awesome creatures.

February 27, 2007: It has been a long time since I last updated the journal and people are calling to remind me of it. Yes, when the weather became normal with ample snow I was swept into a 24-7 life style and some things just didn't get done. Plus, our season-end schedule is a little different, actually more relaxed than some other years. Maybe Jen and I can spend a little time reflecting on our personal priorities and plan the future. This is a good thing, I think?

UP 200: Chris finished the UP 200 late in the pack after a significant adversity during the first leg causing a couple of hour delay. A rare event, Victor one of our

top young dogs, fell suddenly with an apparent seizure. Instantly the other 11 dogs attacked him. This instinctive behavior is nature's way of culling a bad trait from the breeding pool and is instinctive with these primitive dogs. It was frightening for Chris and with 11 to 1 odds he had his hands full to save Victor. Fortunately there were spectators to lend a hand. A little shaken and not sure about the best care for Victor, Chris waited until he had word from race veterinarians before he moved on. Chris always tends to go the extra mile in dog care. Victor was fine and rode into the Wetmore checkpoint in the sled. Now, substantially behind the field, Chris and team would have to play catch-up in the heavily falling snow.

A press release follows:

Press Release

February 24, 2007

Mid-Michigan Man Makes Iditarod Qualifier at UP 200 Sled Dog Race

Chris Warren finished the grueling UP 200 Sled Dog Race in Marquette, MI, the Midwest's premier long distance sled dog race on Sunday evening February 18th. The 21 year-old Linwood man's finish gave him a critical Iditarod qualifier. He has one more, a 300 mile qualifier, to complete before he can run in Alaska's Iditarod, often described the 'the last great race on earth.'

Chris is a student at Michigan Technological University in Houghton and studies Civil Engineering. He was driving many of the dogs that ran with his Father Jim in Iditarods '04 and '06. Chris and Jim authored a book, *Following My Father's Dreams, Journals of a Rookie Iditarod Run*. The book is available on Amazon.com.

Chris and his 12-dog team left the start line in downtown Marquette at about 8 pm on Friday evening heading for the first checkpoint near Munising, 65 miles toward Grand Marais. At the halfway point of Grand Marais many hours and 120 miles from the start line the dog team rested on beds of straw, sheltered from the brutal wind driven snow in the 15 degree temperature. After their rest, Chris and his dog team again headed back into the night to cross many miles of some of the most remote parts of Michigan's UP.

Chris and his hardy team arrived at the finish in Marquette Sunday evening, 240 miles from the start. While a third of the field scratched from the race, the dogs and Chris had hung on to finish well enough to make the 'qualifier.' Tired? Yes! The dogs were very happy to get some warm chow and find a warm and soft place in the straw to take a long nap. Chris left early the next morning for classes at MTU.

When asked when he is going to run Iditarod Chris hesitantly responded, "I haven't made up my mind. At this point I have college as a priority." Jim says, "You have to understand Chris' perspective. He hitchhiked by bush plane while I ran Iditarod in '04 and he saw first hand the brutal toll the Iditarod trail takes on the mushers. He has good reason to be a little hesitant."

The Warren family operates Warren Homestead (Christmas) Tree Farm near Linwood, Michigan where the dogs spend the summer. Fall finds Jim at the family's SledDog Lodge near Tahquamenon Falls where he trains the dogs.



Chris arriving at Grand Marais 130 miles and half way



Chris Thanks Leader Eric for Breaking Trail in 1 foot of New Snow Coming into the Wetmore Checkpoint



**Molly and Hartley Resting in the Falling Snow
At Wetmore Checkpoint**



**Chris at the Finish Line of the UP 200 in Marquette
after a 240 mile trek; Happy it is Over**