



Patience and a bungee cord

How a disabled musher is closing in on victory

For the second time, Canadian musher William Kleedeahn placed second in the Yukon Quest dogsled race in February. But this year's results were close—practically a photo finish in dogsledding terms. After 11 days of racing across 1,600 kilometres of frozen tundra and rivers between Whitehorse, Yukon, and Fairbanks, Alaska, Kleedeahn crossed the finish line just eight minutes behind the winner, American Lance Mackey. Not bad for a guy who only has one leg.

Kleedeahn, 45, lost his left leg below the knee in 1978 in an accident, and races with a prosthesis. But it's not exactly a state-of-the-art prosthesis. He attaches it to his stump with a bungee cord. "That way it can bend almost 90 degrees," he explains. Otherwise he would only be able to move it 35 degrees—somewhat limiting for a musher.

Kleedeahn's bungee cord setup backfired on him in the 2004 race. "I was just sliding down a glaciated creek and pulled

my leg too far out of the prosthesis. I got my foot caught between the brake and the sled." Ouch. It could happen to anyone, but when it happened to Kleedeahn, he fell backwards, breaking his prosthesis and his femur right along with it. Kleedeahn had to leave the race at mile 101.

Kleedeahn takes a patient approach to mushing. He doesn't go all out in the heat of the moment, even when the competition is practically close enough to touch. "I didn't try desperately to catch him," he recalls of the last stretch of the race against Mackey this year, after he'd moved from fifth spot to second in the final stages of the race. "I was maintaining my team in a way that if Lance had any kind of holdup, if any little thing went wrong, he would lose."

It didn't work out this time, but after finishing seven Yukon Quest races, Kleedeahn figures he's due. "I know that I'll be back."

—Kate Barker