

2008 Iditarod Trail Invitational, 350-mile & 1,000-mile races www.alaskaultrasport.com

ROCKY REIFENSTUHL rocky@arcticrecreation.com Feb. 24th- Mar. 8, 2008, 3354 College Rd, Fairbanks AK 99709, 907 451-5026 off, 455-6837 hm

350-mile McGrath race

5th Rocky Reifentstuhl: (3 days 23 hours 15 min); 1st Jay Petervary (3 days 14 hours 20 min)

1,000-mile Nome race: 1st Peter Basinger (18 days 4 hours 33 min)

Race Summary

2008 marks my 21st year of human-powered racing on the Iditarod Trail. I finished 5th in the 350-miler, with the 1,000 mile Nome race as my main focus. The 350 miles to McGrath were nearly all rideable, and the best- and most fun mountain biking.

After my 5th in the 350-mile McGrath race, I departed 15 hours later for Nome. I rode the 43 miles to Ophir, and then pushed nearly ALL of the 250 miles from Ophir to Galena in soft, unbroken, snow-drifted trails. And those 5 days of leaning over the bike 15 to 17 hours each day was too much for my right rhomboid back muscles. Additionally, my right arm and hand did not respond to my commands due to severe tendonitis partly from desperately trying to ride impossible trails.

After 48 hours in Galena (mile 620), attempting to recover with Percocet, rest and lots of food, my disabilities remained. Remaining too, were soft trails, new snow and relatively warm temperatures. Phone calls to Dr. Keller in Fairbanks suggested the potential of long-term nerve damage. Hoping for the best, at sun-up, I'm on the Iditarod Trail...pushing, literally. Under lightly falling snow, trail users consistently warn me to expect a soft trail for another 100 miles to Kaltag. Trying to RIDE impossible trails, I soon turned around and pushed back to Galena's airstrip.

As sorry as I was that my body let me down, stopping was absolutely the right decision. My first scratch in 22 years, and the right move.

The two weeks post-race were nothing but a hazy fog of shooting pain. Four weeks post-race has been an endless series of doctors, physical therapists, massages, injections, drugs, and determined recovery. Consequently, this LATE race summary. So read-on, though you know it ends in "screamin' and dyin". Much of the first 350-mile race was a wonderful white wilderness with much spectacular stark and unique scenery, and yes...fun. Really!

The Iditarod Trail is all about snow, of course, from a couple of feet of snow-pack at race start to 20-plus feet at Finger Lake checkpoint (where they dug DOWN to their cabins). Temperatures ranged from the equally rare +30 F and -25 F. Both yield even tougher trails! Typically conditions were -10 to +10 F.



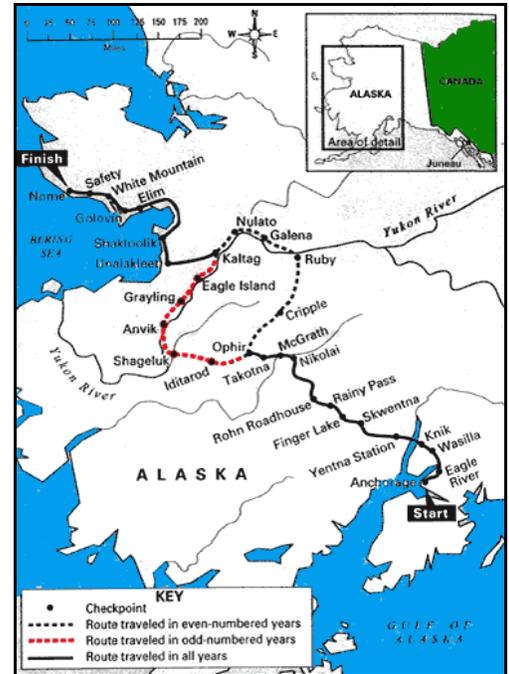
Nearly 50 racers (U.S. BLM-mandated maximum) started under a clear, crisp sky. And within 12 hours the first racer dropped out. The test is long, and the test is hard: over 40% will pull out before reaching their goal. James, from Finland via Oxford, will make McGrath, but frostbite will soon relieve him of some of his toes, though thankfully he loses no bone. This race is about thinking and awareness too.

At 2:00 pm Sunday 24 all of us charge out on the trail: bikers, skiers and hikers. We head out 55 miles to Yentna (a single cabin at on the bank of the Yentna River), our first checkpoint and the same for the dog teams starting in one week. Trail conditions are good as I drop down onto the mile-wide Susitna River at mile 28, and make my way up the ½ mile-wide Yentna River. Snow pack is three or four feet thick atop river ice. Oddly, these big rivers are far from flat. Three or four feet ice beneath the snow cover is buckled, heaved, and thrust up into pressure ridges and

may require an 8 to 10 foot climb or drop. White icy topography obscures what was once a flat river.

My laconic partner, a wireless PowerTap, reminds me to keep my wattage at a reasonable 175 to 190 with only short efforts over 200. Where snow is soft and deep my wattage spikes over 300 watts but I hope to limit this (I record the entire race on several CPU units). Likewise my heartbeat values are under control too. Nome is still 950 miles distant and many weeks. Best to relax; enjoy the austere pink magnificence of the 20,000 foot Denali, some 140 miles north. Winding my way up the serpentine river I catch Jeff Oatley (my favorite neighbor and riding partner), Tim, his partner in this year's event, and Finland-born James. Everyone is riding a "fat bike" except me. I'm gambling on a Bianchi 29er with pretty-darn-fat 2.5 Wilderness Trail Bikes Weirwolf LT tires. This combo feels great, and I'm enjoying my ride now, but I may be at a disadvantage when the trails get bad since 'fat bike' tires are at least 5 inches wide. We'll see. We ride, talk, and check in with each other as dusk falls.

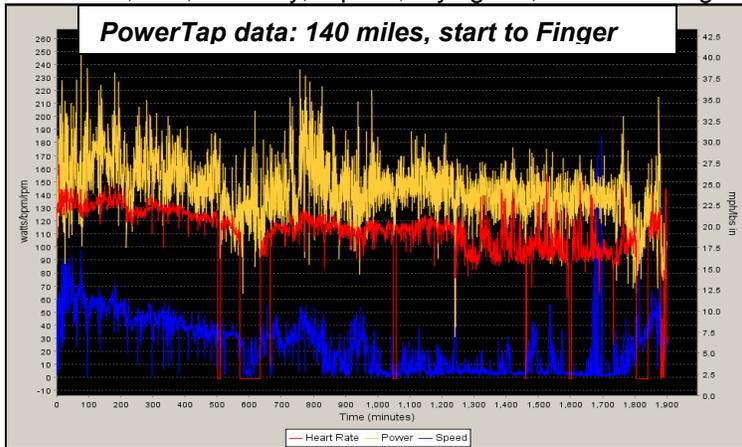
Yentna checkpoint, mile 55. Yentna Station is a log cabin/bar and grill, run by Dan Gabarzack and frequented by snowmachiners and summer river-runners. The family sleeps upstairs. In a small closet-like room downstairs is a 'honey bucket'. If you haven't seen or used one, don't ask. Jay and Peter are sitting at a table waiting for burgers. I say hello, fill up on water, get a couple of non-caffeine sodas and hit the trail. Useable daylight remains outside so I want to use it. Around 7 pm now, the 90 minute Alaskan twilight ebbs as the checkpoint's generator noise disappears and a distant Boreal Owl belts out his eerie call that belies his 8 inch size. Skwentna is 35 miles up-river, and mostly night riding. Soon the distant snowy and treed



20,000 foot Denali from the Yentna

banks of the Yentna are swallowed by darkness. I kick on both of my Princeton Apex lights: on the bars and one on my head. Don't want to run into any moose...that will come later. Eat, drink, pedal, repeat; all in my little tunnel of light.

Skwentna Roadhouse checkpoint, mile 86. After 4 hours or so I'm first to pull in to the Skwentna Roadhouse. I say hello to Bonnie, who asks, 'you doing this race AGAIN?!' The hamburger boys aren't very far behind. Skwentna is a very fine, old, two-story frame lodge with massive wood stove, running water, and bathroom! We won't see another bathroom for the next 220 miles. I disrobe and hang my wet clothes, get some hot food, hot chocolate, and soda. Really, these glorious checkpoints are mostly about heat, rest, recovery, repairs, drying-out, and cramming fluid and massive calories. After laying down for a couple of hours,



groaning a lot, and wondering about the next 900 miles, I suit up and head out at 2:00 am into a 5 to 10° F, clear night. Next stop Shell Lake, 20 miles. But 10 minutes down the trail I find Jay Petervary and another rider in the trail. A recalcitrant single moose, with no calf, won't yield the trail. The standoff has been going on for some 45 minutes in the inky darkness. Moose are often cantankerous, and at over 1,000 pounds and 6 feet at the shoulder, it's their right! This is a tricky and very dangerous game we are about to play, yet I have done it many times in Fairbanks. Three of us line up across the trail, head for the moose, lights blazing and yelling and screaming to pretend for the moment that we are the alpha trail users. Our scenario goes as planned; the moose won't back down and charges at us as we throw bikes and bodies off the trail into the alder saplings. One thousand pounds of hooved beast pounds by

us and heads down the trail. We brush of the snow, process lots of adrenalin, and pedal up the trail opposite the unhappy ungulate.

Shell Lake cabin, mile 104. I arrive at 6:00 am or so. The trail has been mostly rideable to, and across, the Shell Hills with the aurora colorfully dancing in the northern sky.

Zoe is still asleep in the back of her small cabin where locals can buy some prepared meals, coffee, and alcohol. Zoe has a gorgeous view of the frozen Shell Lake and white crystalline hills. I use this stop to regroup, refill water, grab a soda and a candy bar (only the best race food), and briefly rest next to the stove before departing into the morning and growing light in the southern sky with Jacques and John. The trail is rideable for the 25 miles across the marshy and swampy, stunted spruce-woods to the base of the Alaska Range at Finger Lake checkpoint where magnificent panoramas of 6,000-foot high, snow-covered mountains lie before us.



Skwentna River: 15 miles to Puntilla

Finger Lake checkpoint, mile 130. It's Monday morning; maybe 10° F, with a light north-wind nip, as we arrive at Finger. More than 20 feet of snow have buried the main cabin and smaller sleeping cabins. We grab and restock our bikes and pockets from the first ten-pound check bag (Rohn is our next), hang some clothes for the 30 to 40 minutes we're here, and sit down for our meal. Food is included in our race entry, along with the option of sleeping in an unheated Weatherport tent. Kristen Dixon's lodge offers a commercial two day package for two: only \$4,000. So enjoy yourself!! Kristen's food is great but it needs a serious dose of olive oil or butter: I'm not drivin' a snow machine. I'm burning-up half a pound of my body everyday: you just can't eat enough. Daylight is calling; I suit up and begin the 30 mile winter wonderland trail into the heart of the Alaska Range. In many respects this portion of



the Iditarod Trail leads also into, 'the heart of darkness'. I don't see Jacques and John until Puntilla Lake checkpoint. Jay, and Carl are several hours ahead, and Jeff and Tim are a couple of hours up the trail. We have slept more than them. Eighty miles lie between me and my last 10 pound re-supply bags in Rohn, on the north slope of the Alaska Range. I'm stocked with lots of goodies: GU₂O, GU, chocolate bars, bacon, salty pretzels/nuts/M&M mix, and candy bars. Monstrous, jagged, barren white peaks appear everywhere as I ride and push to gain 1,500 feet of



elevation. Puntilla Lake checkpoint, surrounded by 9,000 foot mountains comes into view with only one hour of daylight remaining. Two south-bound snowmachiners are the only life on the trail today. We silently wave. Their passing has now ruined the soft trail for me. The snow will take several hours at the current 5 to 10 degrees to re-grow a crystal structure that will support my wheels. So I push. I pass some 35 marten traps set up adjacent to the trail as it winds its way to Puntilla Lake. Martens are carnivorous, 3-pound rascals related to mink. Traps are 5 feet above ground, have a 4 inch sapling cut and placed as an up-ramp toward the steel trap. The trap has, either in it or several inches above it, a small chunk of meat, bird wing, or bone with meat. Commonly a stove pipe or mail box houses the trap. The Puntilla Lake folks have to make a living but it's a tough demise for the beautifully be-furred marten. These marten pelts constitute a \$1 to \$2 million Alaska industry.

Puntilla Lake checkpoint, mile 165. Checker and co-owner of the small hunting lodge, Shane Perrins greets me as I enter the 10 by 20 foot weather beaten, old log cabin. I leave the increasing darkness outside. Inside, the wood stove is rippin' as I add to the chaos of 4 other racer's hanging clothes. Everyone is passed out. Shane says that Jay has already slept several hours. I grab a

can of soup, some hot chocolate, quickly find a sleeping space. Within a couple of hours Jacques, John and Peter make 8 riders in this warm, moist, lantern-lighted refuge. I lie down and return to sawing logs.

Around midnight, Jay, Carl, and soon after, Peter takes off for the 40 mile trail over Rainy Pass to Rohn. Shane relates that only 3 snow machines have crossed the pass. They are Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race trail breakers, Terry and Lisa Boyle and our Rohn checker Rob Kehrer. By 2:00 pm, after several hours of fitful sleep I prepare to face the trail. I check in with Jeff and Tim, who are ready to move on. Jeff seems to have some kind of glue holding his eyelids together and is having a tough go at it. After chowing-down another can of soup and more hot chocolate or coffee, we load up the bikes for what is often the crux move in this race. The barren Alaska Range pass: remote, vaguely-marked, above tree line, wind swept, and just plain intimidating. Forging over with a bike is risky business, to put it mildly. We're glad to have company. Rohn may be 12 hours away. We ride and push, but mostly push for several miles.

The trail is locally covered or drifted-over with up to several feet of snow. I drift in and out of marveling at our frailty while in the grip of this frozen, uncaring, unyielding mountain range, our tenacious insistence, and hubris of trespassing here, while simultaneously pondering both our resilience and incessant drive that seeks such mind- and body-bending challenges. Oh yeah, out here, I've got plenty of time to ponder!



I silently cheer-on the sun as it battles to scale the surrounding 8,000 foot jagged, icy peaks. Initially the trail traverses wind-drifted snow, and locally protruding brush, but as we climb past the 1/4 mile wide frozen cirque toward the 3,600 foot pass we are soon in a world of black and white: black rocks and white snow and ice. I ruminate about avalanches.

Sunlight slightly warms my back as I cross Rainy Pass and descend into Pass Creek and Dalzell Creek where very technical riding keeps us on the 1.5 foot wide trail while avoiding lots of willow brush. Riding ends at a 3 foot wide open creek. Up or down stream is 4 feet of unbroken snow. I test an icy bank and one foot and hand ends up in the frigid water. Pondering our options, we help launch Jeff across and manage to get the bikes across without too much water-time. Tim and I launch to the other side and

Jeff helps catch us. From this point to the Tatina River, 7 miles from Rohn, the trail is not a trail at all but just a jumble of waist- to knee-deep snow. Shortly we find Jay, Carl and Peter in their sleeping bags waiting for the 3 trail-breaking snow machiners who are stuck 1/4 mile down the trail. Lisa is atop her snow machine with a 10-foot long freight sled. She's waiting for Terry and Rob, who are down the trail attempting to breakout the trail down the Dalzell George toward Rohn. After more than an hour of warming up my wet foot and hand I, organize the plan. We eight bikers push down the trail, past the wallowing snow machiners and take turns post-holing through 3 to 4 feet of snow, across 8 or more natural snow bridges above the open water of Dalzell Creek, and onto the Tatina River. Our troop is a motley one, but working toward a common goal, we put in a 'trail' where no one has passed this year. Four hours and 5 miles later we are joyously riding the 1/4 mile -wide Tatina River the 5 miles in to Rohn.



Rohn checkpoint, mile 210. This makes 10 times that I've enjoyed the hospitality of Jasper, the nicest and best cookin' Iditarod checker in a wilderness cabin. This 12x15-foot USBLM cabin is the only structure in Rohn, save the 2-holer outhouse. Here, at the confluence of the South Fork Kuskokwim and Tatina Rivers, this luxurious heated space is priceless. I find and rip into my 2nd and last 10 pound, frozen check bag and load



the bike with batteries, GU, GU2O, chocolate, Grabber heat packs, extra inner tube, and other goodies. I inhale various food and hot drinks that Jasper whips up during my several hours in Rohn. After 2 or 3 hours of glorious sleep, Jeff, Tim and I emerge from the cabin at 5 am into inky darkness beneath the thick towering spruce forest. Light wind from the north pushes the below 0°F air. Temperatures will drop to -25 F in the next 3 hours as we move north from the Alaska Range and into the Kuskokwim basin. The glare ice of the Kuskokwim River is a treat and a terror. With no effort we glide along for 3/4 miles before we get back on the overland trail. Our next goal, some 40 miles north, is 'Buffalo Camp', a group



of Native wall tents, courtesy of John Runkle, used for hunting the local buffalo population. Trail riding is very good and I decide to pick up the pace and head down the trail. Seven riders are ahead, having departed 2 to 6 hours prior to our Rohn departure.

Where trees give way to saplings and low shrubby growth, I can see the dying light of shimmering auroral curtains of crimson, green and yellow dancing to the north. Dawn breaks in the southeast sky. The sun will struggle for 3 hours before it strikes me, but first it slides along its very low angle traverse to the southwest.

Riding has been great, across frozen muskeg, small lakes and permafrost-stunted black spruce forest. By hour-four I cross the several of the large Farewell lakes. Sun is up but the temperature continues to drop: now -25°F. I briefly say hello, as I pass James and then an Italian rider on the lakes. Riding continues to be good since the trail is set up well from the cold temperatures. Hazards now are the occasional very large piles of bison dung (piles are very big and very frozen), and fatigue causing crashes.

These bison were reintroduced to Alaska in 1928. Soon, the Farewell burn offers new scenery; mostly forest-fire burned out trees. After 7 hours or so, Buffalo Camp wall tents with two parked bikes appear.

Buffalo Camp, mile 265. Jacques and John are melting snow on the Coleman stove and warming the tent with a roaring woodstove. The bad news is that the food promised by race organizers is not here. That puts a damper on our party. But, you can't have a good party without taking your clothes off, so we hang our wet stuff from the roof of our sauna-like tent. The wall tent has a straw floor so we comfortably walk around barefoot, melting snow, filling our hydration packs, eating whatever we have, and generally have fun taking a break and being together. Daylight is



burning, so an hour later I'm on the 40 mile-long trail to Nikolai, a Native village on the banks of the mighty Kuskokwim River. Dry clothes, full belly, bright sun, and great trail: you can't beat that! The 20,000 foot-high Denali now resides to my southeast, whereas the last time I saw the mountain it was to my north, but that was 200 miles ago. The air is crisp at +5° F. Several miles before I see the Nikolai's lights and Russian Orthodox Church, and its onion-shaped dome, I pass Carl as dusk develops. Only Jay and Peter are ahead now.



Nikolai, mile 300, 8:00 pm, 3 days, 12 hours. Nick and Olene Petruska's small home is our checkpoint and this is my 9th visit with the friendly Athabascan Natives in this village of just over 100 Natives. Jay is on his way to win this year's 350 mile race in McGrath.

Peter is in the bedroom sick and sleeping. My focus is Nome, so I make myself at home for 8 hours and don't think about my placing in the 350 mile race. Dark and -20° F tonight on the river is a certainty, so I lounge and sleep until my 5:00 am departure. Carl, Jacques, John, and James have already gone.

Exiting Nikolai I hear the drone of the diesel generator (burning \$6/gallon fuel). Even snow machining has been severely restricted in most of these non-cash economies of bush Alaska. Life in the bush may seem romantic but it is very, very difficult, and tremendously expensive if you try to live like a citified white man.

The 3-foot wide trail is pretty well packed on most of the Kuskokwim River and on the adjacent uplands, with its labyrinth of swamps, muskegs, stunted black spruce 'forests', alder, and tamarack. I have to walk or run several times to warm my feet. The 50 miles to McGrath are nearly done as I catch and pass James. He broke his pump repairing a flat so I give him my Crankbrothers pump which is on its second trip to McGrath. Soft-pedaling down the ice road into McGrath is the easiest riding in nearly 4 days!



Marten pelts of Nick's

McGrath checkpoint/finish (Peter & Tracy Schneiderheinze's home)-350 mile, 1:15 pm: 5th place, 3 days, 23 hours, 15'.

McGrath is a mostly white man's, government-job dominated village of 450 folks. This 'finish line' in McGrath makes 21 years of racing on the Iditarod Trail for me. Each year has seemingly insurmountable physical, mental, and spiritual challenges to test me. These difficulties and the mental and physical machinations they create, drive the fascination, some would say, 'obsession' of this mind-altering epic. In 18 hours I leave for the remaining 650 miles to Nome. The 200 miles to the Yukon River are the most remote and least traveled. I think of those who have helped me, supported me, and believed in me as I repack my bike for the unknown.

On to Nome (only 650 miles)

Takotna mile 368 – We leave under sunny, cold skies for the short 18 miles to Takotna, a tiny Native village of 46 souls located up the Takotna River, a tributary of the Kuskokwim. Riding is good across the ½ mile-wide Kusko, and then up another smaller river, some muskegs and eventually up and over a ridge and into a broad valley flanked by high rounded hills which form part of the divide between the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers. These huge river systems are comparable to the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. The Alaska rivers are frozen solid, however. I catch up with Jay at the village community center. Takotna is built into the side of the large hills here; unusual for an Alaska Inupiat village. Jay and I sit and share a cheeseburger, chips and soda. We won't enjoy such luxuries for more than 200 miles and 5 days.



Ophir mile 403, Friday – We depart Takotna, climbing some major hills, and I say farewell to Jay. I assume I won't see him again. He's riding very strong. Carl and Peter are behind somewhere as I climb and descend this old gold mining road the 25 miles to Ophir. Peter passes me after an hour or so, and to my surprise I see Jay and Peter at the Iditarod cabin with two guys at the Forsgren cabin. They just flew in to the flat snow field (Alaska airstrip!). Ophir is a gold mining ghost town with only one permanent resident, Roger Roberts, a local gold miner known to many as 'The Loafer from Ophir'. But a loafing Alaska bush gold miner is the ultimate oxymoron. During the Iditarod dog race the population triples when the Forsgren's occupy their old log cabin. Ophir was named in 1908 when gold was discovered, The town's name is biblical, referring to the source of King Solomon's gold.

Departing Ophir, the trail deteriorates forcing us to push. Jay and Peter approach me coming back on the trail and suggest that we return to one of the Ophir cabins and wait there for the Iditarod trail breakers, who MAY be through here in four or five days. My question is, 'what are you going to eat for 4 days, and after that what are you going to eat for the next 100 miles, will you have enough food to make it to our final resupply bag?' Neither has a good answer to that reality. So we begin what will be five days of pushing with only minor riding. When we can ride, I struggle and fight my bike more due to narrower tires. I'll be playing catch-up for the next 5 days to stay with them.



We push on into the eye of a nasty north wind which constantly slams 5°F air in our faces. Jay and Peter search for a protected bivy, but there are no 'trees' more than 3 inches in diameter. Kicking out a sleeping spot in the deep snow at midnight, I fire up my stove, melt some snow, have a hot drink and try to pass out.

Bivy on Trail to Ruby mile 428, Saturday – Minus 5°F as faint light graces the southeast sky and the unrelenting north wind continues to buffet. Before moving from the sanctuary of my sleeping bag I begin eating and drinking for warmth. In the bag with me are my boots, water system, and anything else I don't want frozen solid. Getting shoes on and packing up is a cold battle, but it must be won. Soon back on the trail we push through 6 inches of new snow on top of a poor base. No one can ride. The Iron Dog snow machine race ripped through here some 2 weeks ago. No one has been through since. No one has any reason to use this trail. If a person wanted to travel from Ruby to McGrath they would fly a commercial service. Even with a snow machine, 200 miles is a long, expensive, and dangerous trip. 'So what are we doing with these bikes?'

After 7 hours or so of pushing we stop, build a roaring fire, melt snow, and eat. I roast the entire contents of a can of Spam. Totally disgusting/totally excellent, and though 1,200 calories sounds like a lot, I continue losing ½ pound a day. Carl catches us, and we are four pilgrims seeking the Promised Land, where all the trails are rideable! Late in the afternoon we cross some frozen overflow and I find a spot that



has a bit of open water. We all fill our water bladders with 33°F water.

We just saved a lot of fuel and a lot of time. After pushing for some 14 hours with desperately-little riding, our marginal bivy spot is again among stunted black spruce trees all akimbo, struggling to survive on permafrost. These 2 to 4-inch diameter trees may be as much as 100 years old. Whether it's a tiny vole beneath the snowpack, a marten or fox tracking the vole, a lone caribou digging through the snow for lichen, or a drunken spruce forest, everything out here struggles to survive. I'm no different, and realize that one misstep, 100 miles from the nearest help is frightening and empowering, a heavy responsibility and at times exhilarating. Survival requires sleep, so we halt our parade, kick out a 2-foot deep trough, insert sleeping bags & bivy sacks, and dive in for sweet slumber.

Bivy on Trail to Ruby mile ~453, Sunday – Last night was cold in breezy in my neighborhood. No matter, while still ensconced in my bags I wolf down 500 to 1,000 calories and drink some water prior to donning boots, packing sleeping bags and loading bikes. All are cold duties first thing in the developing light. Our little Boy Scout troop is having one heck of a winter camping jamboree; we just forgot to leave our bikes at home. Pulling a sled would be much easier and faster. We ride for 1 mile and push for 26 miles today. A note on effort, lest you think I'm doggin' it: while unbroken trails, my PowerTap heart monitor numbers translate dirt trail, maybe 13 or more mph on pavement, and, say, 6 mph traveling at a 2.5 mph average: high work load, turtle pace, and that is, anything not moving, I eat. Every hour or two we stop, GPS (poor Jay lost his at a bivy), and I share my jar of crunchiness in charge of chipping, cutting and prying the frozen delicacy from each of the 3,000 calories which are 70% fat. Yeah! My cooked where it's at! Jay really deserves a portion of my precious food more than his share of work breaking trail. I marvel at his strength, resilience, and inspirational optimism. Jay has dramatically helped this freezer geezer through a trying trek with these youngsters.



slogging through these into about 10 miles/hour on a on decent snowpack. But we're I'm practicing the 'moving diet', check my map, consult Peter's peanut butter and honey. Jay is its plastic jar. Jointly we savor bacon has been a hit too. Fat is because clearly he is doing

Darkness is upon us as we traverse miles and hours of more disheveled black spruce forest, much of it burned by wild fires over the years. Finally we find in the middle of a muskeg pond, our pile of drop bags. These were delivered a week ago. Thankfully no animals got into them (which happened in Rohn). We are drunk and giddy with the prospect of not starving! I load my bike and pockets with batteries, heat packs, chocolate bars, peanut butter, Spam, smoked oysters, chips, bacon, gorp, fire-starter, GU packets, and a liter of stove gas (no one else has fuel, to my surprise). We even plunder the bags of people we know have scratched from the race. This is great fun! Bill Merchant, the race organizer, will have to dispose of the remainder of these unused resupplies. We head up the dark trail for another hour hunting for yet another bivy spot. Here, by a fire, in 5°F conditions we attempt to replenish our depleted bodies with food and drink.

Bivy on Trail to Ruby mile ~480, Monday – Conditions, terrain, forest, trail and view are mostly in instant-replay of yesterday.

Gold mining and Great Depression era mining-road construction created this trail. Remnants of gold mining equipment litter the trailside near the mostly abandoned town of Poorman (named for what it made most miners). Still, the decrepit junk has a certain historic fascination. The Munsell's, friends from Fairbanks, mined near here for many years eeking out a meager living. Maybe near-\$1,000/ounce gold will help, \$6.00/gallon fuel won't. Placer and hardrock mining here have left 100 foot high tailings piles, 100 foot tall cut banks, rusty bucket dredges, hulks of bulldozers, piles with 100s of rusted-out oil drums, and a variety of machinery and humanoid refuse. Still, for us, this is fascinating scenery compared to the drunken forest! As we push on the ghost town of Long is our next exit off the freeway. Alas, no McDonalds! Fighting the bikes and trails we ride for maybe 1.5 miles with much crashing, swearing, head-plants and frustration. By 10:00 pm the bivy



search is on and Peter finds another marginal spot along Lucky Gulch. Much snow melting ensues. Food is getting thin, and so are we. Still, you can't beat sweet sleep.

Ruby mile 575, Tuesday – We are going to make Ruby today; we have to. After 5 nights of climbing into our bags with moist clothes the loft and insulation value is taking a dive, food is low, and damn it, we are sick of pushing. To make matters worse, temperatures are rising which is not a good sign for



trail conditions. Cold nights set-up snow and yield firm trails. As we approach the mighty Yukon River the road bed that we are pushing on is rideable down hills but only locally on the climbs. This road was a WPA project just after the Great Depression. There was known gold in the hills south of Ruby so Roosevelt decreed that a road project would open up the country to jobs and precious metal production. Dusk and snow are falling as we ride (!) down some 800 feet toward the big city lights of Ruby (population 190). Built on a mountainous hillside with the ¾ mile-wide Yukon at its base, Ruby residents are Athabascan Natives, and white folks. Mining, tourism and subsistence are the main lifestyles here. Ruby is named for the red garnets within the metamorphic bedrock, and though not rubies these marble-size minerals will have to do.

Jay and I elect for Moose Camp Bed & Breakfast; Carl and Peter for the school, so we split up. Moose Camp is unavailable, so owner Carlson Koyukuk a warm, short, wiry, and bespectacled Athabascan with a good sense of humor insists on driving us, not only to Wild Iris B&B which is atop Ruby's huge hillside, but also a local grocery store. The store is in the bottom floor of a home. After 5 days on the trail the choices, however limited, are overwhelming for us. We gather up our goodies and get back in with Carlson. Thankful I don't have to climb this steep hill, I take in the sights of this bush village as Carlson gives us a guided tour, pointing out cabins that are nearly 100 years old. Arriving at Wild Iris, we sincerely thank Carlson and repeatedly insist he take our \$20 for such service! Rachel, the B&B owner, shows up to our cabin. 'Dinner is in 15 minutes; when would we like breakfast, the shower is here', she says, noting to please keep showers short as water is 8 cents/gallon (same as I pay in Fairbanks). Rachel is incredibly helpful and calls the Postmaster asking if we could pick up our mailed resupply boxes. No problem, come down at 8:00 pm! But that's not enough; Rachel calls Mark who drives us 1/2 mile down the hill for the post office rendezvous and a short guided tour of the village. Mark, an imposing, gregarious, fire-plug of a man is Ruby's VPSO (Village Public Safety Officer). You don't want to mess with Mark. Ever. But Mark is as sweet as honey, unless you force him to do what he is trained to do. The VPSO program's motto: "First Responders – Last Frontier". There are some 100 VPSOs covering most of the Alaska villages; VPSOs are affiliated with the State Troopers. Ride a straight line and Mark is your buddy forever. The VPSO program is unique to Alaska. Jay and I dry our clothes and sleeping bags, load-up bikes with resupply gear and look forward to riding on the Yukon River. But first, 6 hours of blissful sleep. In a heated cabin. In a warm, soft bed. With no wind or snow falling on your face: this is like being in heaven. Jay blasts off at 7:00 am, but not before I wish him luck and thank him for his kindness and support.

Bivy on Yukon River mile ~605, Wednesday – I'm riding on the Might Yukon River at 8:00 am under snow showers, 20 to 25°F and a wind from the northeast. Riding lasts merely 150 feet.



Cursing my luck, I remove a layer of clothing and get to the task at hand: post-holing in soft, drifted, warm snow with no apparent base. Snow conditions such as these are unusual, but here they are, and 52 miles to Galena just got a lot longer! After pushing and riding a bit, a pleasant Carl and a surly Peter catch and pass. Fat bikes are riding more than my 29er. Hours later I find Jay behind a logjam, sheltered from the driving snow and wind. He's inside his bivy bag and suffering from upset stomach and diarrhea. I fire up my stove for some hot beverages which helps but Jay has a bug. We soon push down the trail in 6 to 8 inches of unbroken



snow except for a pair of pushers ahead. We switch leads until midnight when we kick out 18 inches of snow along the Yukon's bank, heat some food and drink and dive in our bags.

Galena (pop. 530) Iditarod checkpoint mile 627, Thursday– Waking to more than an inch of new snow on our bags, stove and everything else drives us into howls about this entire ridiculousness! So, we push, and push, and push, though my right arm is in severe pain and I can't really elevate it. The left quad is about the same, even after self administering various strengths of drugs. Still we push on; at least it's not snowing, and the sun has gotten quite nice. After 8 hours of pushing and an hour of riding on Galena's antenna and dump access road we enter the town's one restaurant and have a burger with Carl and Peter. Then, its post office pick-up, and on to the Iditarod checkpoint, headed by Tonya Korta, who invites us in to regroup and sleep. Carrying my bike up the steps into the checkpoint without the use of right arm is awkward, and inexplicably my left quad collapses and I fall on the steps: I need some serious recovery. Carl and Peter leave in the early am, followed by Jay at 6 am; I am on my own. I won't see them again. Jay drops out after pushing another 50 miles; the other two eventually make it to Nome.

More Galena Checkpoint, Friday – Dog teams will arrive tonight; I'll be here: struggling with pain and range of motion, eating, drinking, watching the mushers race-in with 14 and 16 eager dogs in harness, viewing checkpoint chaos, and puzzle. Physical therapists are not to be had today, so I'm out of luck. I hit the grocery store and among other food, enjoy a pint of Haagen-Dazs ice cream. Late in the evening I optimistically pack my bike to continue down river at first light Saturday, hoping that 36 hours will do the trick for my abused body. Checkers and Galenaites wildly cheer Lance Mackey and Jeff King later as they power up from the frozen Yukon. These guys and their dogs are the best in the world. Lance won the 1,000 mile Yukon Quest just 3 weeks ago and will go on to win in Nome (which will make 2 times he's won BOTH races in the same year).



Leaving Galena, Saturday - After 6 hours of drug-assisted sleep I awake; after 30 minutes of overwhelming back-spasms brought on by attempts to stand, I'm upright. Two hours later, stoked with food and drugs, and against my better judgment, I'm on the Yukon. Snow is falling, the trail is very soft and warm, with reports of more of the same for several days. And I'm pushing, and pushing, and I'm in excruciating pain, with little hope of relief anytime soon. So I push and I think about the doctor's warnings about serious long-term damage. After ½ hour of cogitating about the probability of permanent disabilities, I pull the plug. I have to, I want to live and race another day; without drugs! Three hours later I'm on a small single-engine plane to Fairbanks. I have not, and still do not, regret my decision - because RIDING my bike is just too-damn-much-fun.

Thanks to my sponsors (last 2 to 9 years): Bianchi, Crank Brothers, Sports Medicine Fairbanks, Saris-CycleOps, GU Sports, Lake Cycling, Princeton Tec, WTB-Wilderness Trail Bikes, NUUN, American Classic, Deuter Packs.

Alaska Iditasport, 8 wins in 21 years, 4-straight 1st place Iditabikes: '01, '00, '99, '98; Yukon Arctic Ultra 300 mile, Feb., Yukon Territory, Canada: 1st Place '03; '04