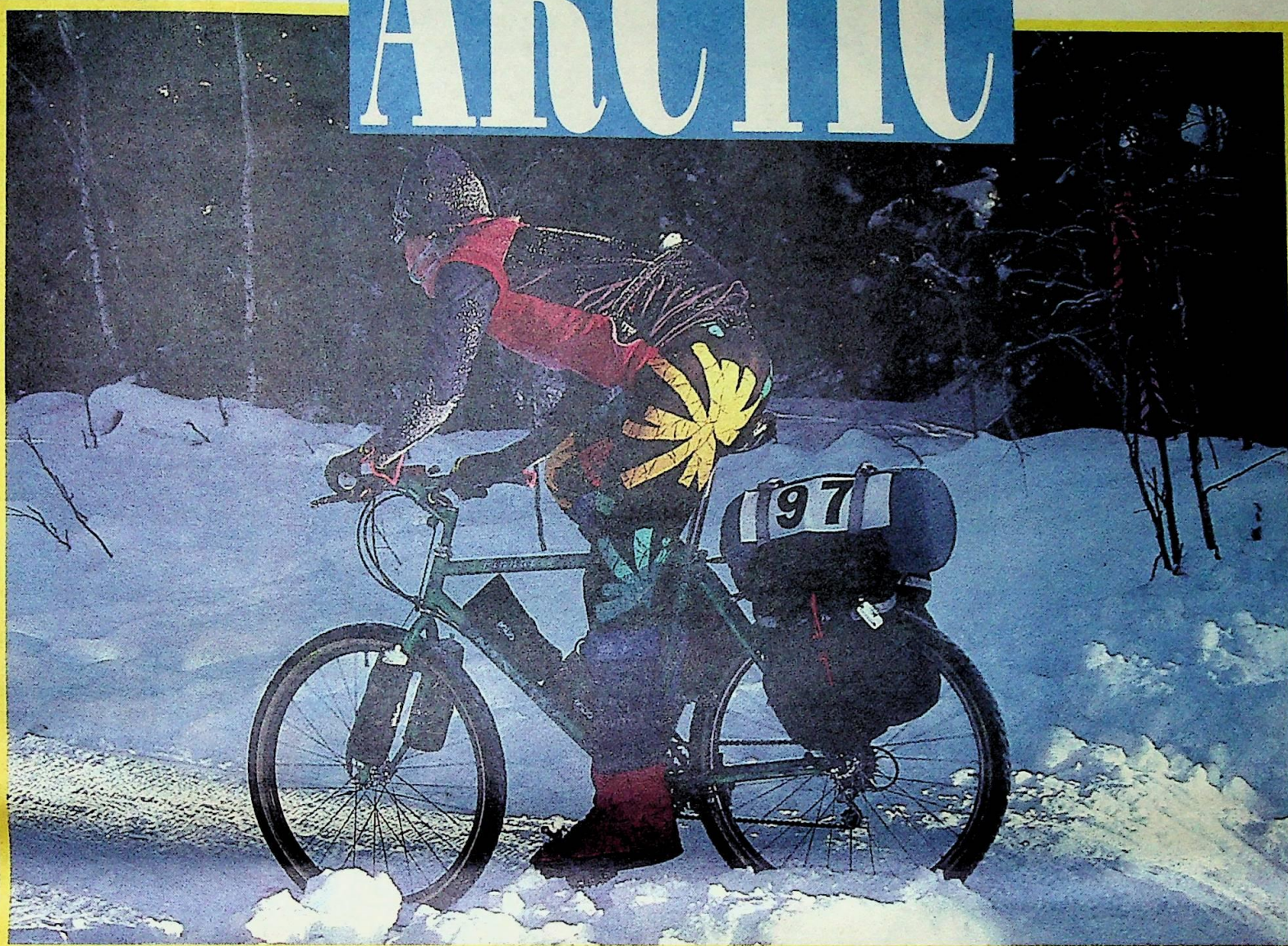


# ARCTIC



Charles Kelly

## KNICKKNACKS

### For Surviving the Iditabike

**7** For the past four years, a diverse group of hardy souls has banded together to challenge 200 miles of Alaska's Iditarod Trail by mountain bike. Iditabike is billed as the world's toughest mountain bike race, but an ATB, a pair of legs, and a **BY CHRIS KOSTMAN** history of insanity in your family are hardly the only requirements for entering and surviving this Arctic gruelathon.

The Iditabike's entirely snow-laden course traverses frozen rivers, lakes, swamps and forests, and its annual race date in February encourages temps well below zero. The unique nature of this race has given rise to a whole new list of cycling accouterments for cold weather survival. In previous races, required survival gear included a sleeping bag, shelter, ground pad, stove, fuel, pot, flares, whistle,

light, food, and water, all of which sounds more like a Mt. McKinley ascent gear list than a bike race gear list to most of us Outsiders (lowly non-Alaskans). While competing in '88 and '89, I was lucky enough not to need any of my survival gear, but each year several riders need their stuff because of getting lost, running out of water, mechanical breakdown, becoming overly exhausted, or all of the above.

Above and beyond the required gear, four years of tinkering and experimentation by the riders has led to the development of some interesting Iditabike-specific gear which probably will never find its way to the starting line of any other race on the planet. Simply carrying all of the above-mentioned gear presents a problem. Believe it or not, panniers are not the obvious answer to numerous Iditabikers. Instead, many of the first crop of riders, and a few today, like race inventor/director/sponsor Dan Bull, use a sled pulled behind their bike to carry their gear. This is the system used by the Iditarod mushers, but it presents its own set of problems. For example, being mowed

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down by a big, heavy, and painfully hard sled on the downhill doesn't strike me as fun. Most riders nowadays use panniers, but they can be tricky, too. Low rider mounted panniers will

catch on the snow drifts while riding in the rut which passes for a bike trail in Alaska. Rear panniers alone will cause wheel sinkage in soft sections and also make the bike unwieldy during the up to 70 miles of Iditapushing. Front panniers alone cause front wheel sinkage, which in turn causes the rider to become an Arctic snowdrift pilot.

Keeping warm while cycling (slogging, shoving, dragging, drudging) in Alaska presents a problem with a set of unique remedies. We all know about layering to stay warm and varying the number and thickness of layers according to the temp, but Iditabikers utilize a few different types of layers than most cyclists. For example, would you go out training in insulated clod stompers covered with knee-high, over-boot doodads called gaiters? And for your hands would you get a set of those big mitts for your handlebars (we call them Bullwinkles) like all the geriatric motorcyclists on Honda



Gullwing touring bikes use? Iditabikers do. Also useful for keeping all twenty digits intact are these tea bag-shaped miracles, called Grabber Foot Heaters, which emit heat for several hours upon

removal from their wrapper. Iditabikers in the know like three-time rider Steve Mitchell stuff them into gloves, Bullwinkles, socks, shoes, hats, or any other body area which needs its own private furnace to keep from turning blue. I actually burned my fingers on one placed inside the inner liner of my gloves while it was 15 below out! A ski mask can keep your cranium toasty, but if it covers your mouth and nose, your breath vapors will drift across your eyes where they will freeze onto your eyelashes and make your eyes stick shut. Some riders use vapor barrier socks which are

like plasticized stuff sacks for your feet. They trap your body heat and moisture to keep your feet warm, much (actually just) like a wetsuit. Just hope you don't ever have to stop for long or that warm moisture will freeze solid along with your toes.

**S**taying hydrated is imperative for top performance in an athletic event, but in Alaska it is an even more serious matter. Hydration is key to staving off hypothermia and frostbite. The Idita problem in this department is that water bottles freeze almost instantly in sub-zero weather. Most riders cover their bottles and cages with soft telephoto lens cases which close at the top with a drawstring. This is what I did in '88, but in a moment of stupidity I decided to try some new hi-tech neoprene covers in '89. BIG mistake. Neoprene lets wind pass right through and thus my bottles froze solid within ninety minutes. Since I use an all liquid Unipro nutritional system when competing, when my bottles froze I was therefore without hydration and nutrition. I credit women's winner Amy Maclean with dragging me in to the halfway point of the race after a gruesome five hour stretch between check points. Next time I'll stick with the lens cases. Other riders use water carrying systems on their body which use their body heat to keep their drinks from turning to popsicles. This can also be tricky, because the surgical tubing through which the riders drink often freezes. When three time Iditabiker Les Matz was descending the infamous Nine Mile Hill (read: cliff) nine miles from the finish, he crashed, went end over end, and completely soaked himself when his biking bota bag burst. BBBBBRRR!! If he hadn't had the presence of mind and pure Alaskan studliness to deal with the situation, he could have easily become the Iditabike's first casualty.

Iditabikers try new and interesting ways each year to improve their likeli-

hood of actually cycling all or most of the trail. One of the most popular items in '87 and '88 (at least among Outsiders) was to try to use a ski under the front wheel to try to float the tyre

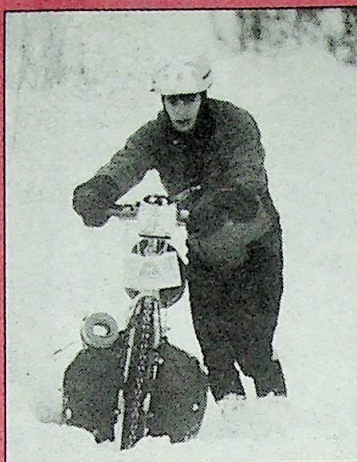
over soft sections and thus avoid launching over the handlebars. Wrong! This is a bike, not a snow machine, and a ski can't keep a top heavy vehicle like a bike upright on snow, nor allow steering input to have any effect on direction of travel. Oh well, at least if it's a wooden ski, you'll have a piece of fire wood if you have to camp out. Studded tyres are also quite popular, but are of little use on the Iditarod Trail. Studs only help on ice and the production model studded tyres are simply too wimpy even for that, anyway. So far, the best bet is to ride any good knobby tyre with

more than a two inch size designation. This, combined with a pressure of around eight to ten PSI gives the biggest foot print possible to keep on top of the snow. Don't forget that cold causes air to contract, so what seems right on the starting line will seem way too low after about five miles of contact with a cold trail. Some riders use wheel covers (AKA wanna-bedisc wheels) to keep snow from building up along the tops of their rims and to improve aerodynamics, but I think they mostly use them to provide a big billboard for their sponsors.

Actually the biggest foot print available for snow riding is not a fat tyre with ultra-low PSI. It's the ultimate Iditacreation to date, Roger Cowles' Icicle Bicycle. This three time Iditabiker's custom made bike has TWO rims laced to each hub with a 2.2 inch tyre on each rim! This humongous four-tyred foot print allowed Roger to cover stretches of the trail which even world class bike handler and Iditabike and World ATB Champ Mike Kloser had to walk. Roger's frame was custom made by Anchorage builder Steve Baker and featured mega clearance for the snow wheels. This Idita-bike also had an internal five speed hub and internal drum brake to eliminate the commonplace fouling of these mechanisms by snow build-up.

Sounds like a gas, doesn't it? Well, before you pull together your ATB, lower extremities, and sanitarium ID card, maybe you'd better go dust off your work bench and see what kind of Iditaimprovisations you can dream up. In an industry overflowing with look-alike groupos and frames, here's your chance to have a really unique steed. Holy inventions, Idita-man! ☺

*Chris Kostman, a card-carrying member of the Iditabike sanitarium, plans to head north again for Iditasport '91. He has been overheard to say that he might leave his Moots Zerkel ATB behind and teach the snow shoe racers a thing or two.*



Richard Larson

**For information on  
the February 16 & 17  
1991 Iditabike, contact:**

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