

## OUTDOORS

## CYCLING

## How Mother Nature Won Alaskan Bicycle Race

BY ELAINE MARIOLLE

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

On the Last Frontier, everything from sudden storms to love at first sight is dismissed with a shrug and the explanation, "That's Alaska." And while most Cheechakoes (newcomers) find this frequently difficult to get used to, I had prepared myself for the challenge — something called the Iditabike.

But as race day approached, Mother Nature dealt a new hand. Temperatures rose to 20 degrees above zero, two storms rolled in and race day found us in the middle of snowfall that broke 25-year-old records.

The race organizers, like other "Iditasomething" promoters, frantically tried to save their event. Teams of snow machines worked around the clock to pack the trail, but the temperatures never dropped low enough for the snow to get hard and to set up.

The race started February 17 at 11 a.m. in a full-fledged snow storm. We took off in a sprint down a one-mile stretch of the ice road across Big Lake, jockeying for positions. That first mile or so turned out to be most of the riding I would do. After that, Idita-pushing began.

I alternately jogged and walked through snow that was the consistency of sand, pushing my frisky Fisher bike that was laden with 20 pounds of camping gear. Most of the time it felt as if I were running on a beach. The exception was open lakes and rivers where we waded through knee-deep

snow drifts.

The first checkpoint was at Knik Bar, only 12 miles from the start. The week before, I rode that distance in an hour, but now I was sloshing along at a snail's pace. I was developing blisters. I had planned to ride in these boots, not hike! I pressed on to Knik Tavern because I couldn't face stopping in the snow.

At Knik, I patched my feet in the bar and headed out for the next check station at Big Su, 38 miles away through the wilderness. The Iditapush resumed — it remained impossible to ride. It was beginning to dawn on me that it was near sunset and we weren't really even out of town yet. Based on how previous Iditabike races had run, many of us had expected to reach the half-way point later that night. That was just a fantasy now. I shifted from race mode to survival mode.

On the trail, I joined forces with Jennifer Lazrus-Edman, Patty Brehler, and Paul Brunelli. We weren't going fast enough to make it to Big Su to replenish our water, and at 10 p.m. we stopped to melt snow. Groups of riders started catching up with us and many were in the same predicament, so we melted snow for them too.

**Another Pit Stop**

As we filled water bottles for the new arrivals, our stop stretched out to two hours. When we hit the trail again, many of the 20 riders who had joined our little party dropped out. I needed some dry clothes, and many Idita-pals came through with a shirt and mittens before they turned back. Only our

original gang of four pressed on.

In previous years riders traveled between roadhouse checkpoints in a matter of hours, and they didn't have to worry about camping out on the trail. But as the night wore on, the survival gear we packed for emergencies became a necessity. At 3 a.m., we "bivied" in the snow.

At dawn the next day, we started walking again. It was afternoon as we approached Flathorn Lake and a small Cub plane buzzed us and landed in a clearing near the trail. Flinging open the door the pilot yelled, "It's over! The race was called at 12:01 p.m."

**Halting the Race**

The first eight men and the lead woman had reached Big Su Sunday morning. After some discussion, they unanimously agreed to stop at Big Su and signed a paper listing the finishing order. It was apparent that no one was going to finish the 210-mile course in the allowed 75 hours, and the race promoters agreed.

A mixture of confusion and disappointment washed over us. The pilot told us to strip our bikes, leave them along the trail in the snow, and prepare for evacuation. The pilot, Floyd, was not a race official, but he was a good guy and he was just helping out.

After three hours waiting for others to fly out one at a time, race originator Dan Bull came by on a snowmobile and told us we could complete the remaining 15 miles to Big Su if we wanted to. Lazrus-Edman retired with frozen feet. Brehler, Brunelli and I hit the trail again in the fading evening light.

We spent the night trudging across what we called "the great dismal swamp," fighting the wind and hoping we would not have to bivie again. At 12:45 a.m. we arrived at Big Su and crashed on the floor of the unheated cabin in what little space was left between the bodies of the earlier arrivals.

Walking 50 miles through the snow with blistered feet in 38 hours might not seem very appealing. But I wouldn't trade it for anything, and other Iditacrazies were excited too. Most are making plans to return next year. There's something about doing your first snow-camping at 20 below in four feet of snow and seeing the North-ern Lights that just can't be beat.

**RESULTS** — Of 54 starters, 18 made it to Big Su. Dave Ford was the winner, finishing the 50 miles in 25 hours — the same amount of time it took '88 and '89 Iditabike Champ Mike Kloser to complete 210 miles last year.

Ford credits his win to his Icicle Bicycle. It's a "quad" bike with double front and rear wheels on the same axle that provide a larger footprint and more flotation over the snow. Ford and second-place finisher Bobby Forney of Denver, Colo., also on a quad bike, estimate they were able to ride five or 10 miles to Big Su, where others were only able to ride two miles at best.

The women's race was won by Gail Koepf, a 39-year-old mother of two from Fairbanks. She finished ninth overall, only three hours behind Ford.

The Bay Area finishers include: men — tied in 13th place, Dick Knob (Mill Valley) and Jeffery Linder (Carmel); women — tied in



BY CHARLES KELLY/SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**Dave Ford, with unique protective face tape, was declared winner**

7th place, Elaine Mariolle (Berkeley).

If you want to sign up for next year's race, contact Bjarne Holm, Iditabike Organizing Committee, 11441 Browder, Anchorage, Alas-

ka, 99516, or call 907-346-3910.

Elaine Mariolle is co-author of "The Woman Cyclist" and contributor to California Bicyclist. A resident of Berkeley, she won the 1986 Race Across America.