

Iditabike '88

*The Toughest Thing They'll Ever Attempt...
Unless They Go to War*

BY CHARLES KELLY

The message on the bumper sticker was clear:

IDITABIKE—The Brave and Strong Will Show . . . and Still Might Die.

Tough talk, not unlike the starting-line threat, "I'm going to *kill* you out there." In the Iditabike, the phrase, "dying on the hill," is not a metaphor, but a possibility.

If you think the Iditabike is a mountain bike race, you're wrong—it's a contest where mountain bikes happen to be required.

Being a fast rider helps, but isn't enough: The conditions are too harsh.

Having incredible stamina helps, but isn't enough: This year a rider who had finished the Race Across American (RAAM), finished 11th in the Iditabike.

Being tough helps, but isn't enough: Two riders who failed to complete the distance last year were a top-10 Ironman triathlete and Vern Tejas, the first survivor of a solo winter ascent of Denali.

The 200-mile Iditabike is a test of will rarely experienced by mere athletes. No one who's been a part of it is the same afterward, because the event transforms you. It makes you larger than you were, whether you complete the distance or not. This race is the toughest thing most of the

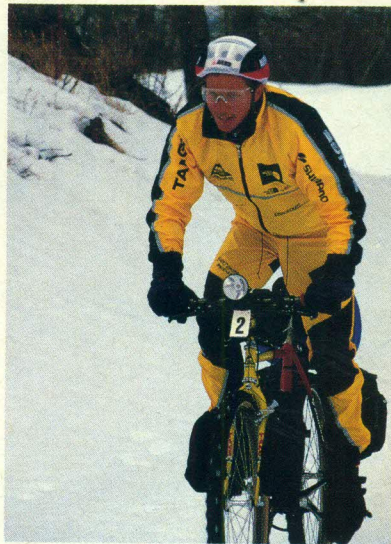


After its gregarious start, Iditabike '88 quickly became a lonesome, snow-bound ride for survival.



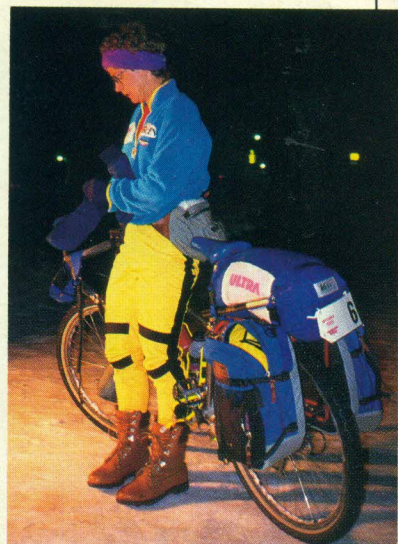
CHARLES KELLY

Through a night as black as coal, the intrepid racers kept moving, moving, moving....



YURI SAMER

Kloser won the men's long race.



DON CUERDON

The women's event went to Kennedy.

Iditabike '88 (200 miles)

Men

1	Mike Kloser	Fisher MountainBikes	30 hr., 18 min.
2	Karl Tobin	Unattached	30:41
3	Rocky Reifenstuhl	Klein	31:16
4	Roman Dial	Unattached	31:46
5	Mark Frise	American Bicycle Mfg.	34:34

Women

1	Martha Kennedy	The Bicycle Group	35:35
2	Sara Ballantyne	Fisher MountainBikes	35:41
3	Jenny Magee	Unattached	66:48
4	Amy Maclean	Unattached	67:30



YURI SAMER

At the Skwentna halfway point, the competitors warmed up, chowed down, and replenished their supplies.

participants have ever attempted, unless they've been to war. Afterward, all involved have bared their souls. If you have an act, don't bring it, because they'll soon find out who you really are.

The chief culprit for removing riders from the race is knee trouble caused by walking the bike mile after mile in the Alaskan snow. With each misstep the rider-turned-plodder sinks knee-deep, causing a slight hyperextension that grows worse as the hours pass. No amount of will can conquer a knee swollen to twice its size. Fortunately, a few days off the bike is usually sufficient.

Two riders who were involved in the first Iditabike, held in March '87, were Nels Johnson and Mark Frise, both of La Crosse, Wisconsin. Johnson was evacuated with a case of frostbite, and Frise finished 7th out of 13. Both were back in '88; Johnson's only goal was to complete the distance, while Frise wanted to move up in the standings. Each said they'd thought about the race every day for the past year.

In the first race, soft snow had forced riders to walk most of a 70-mile stretch. Johnson didn't want to suffer foot problems again, so he prepared by picking up a sponsorship from Timberland. Frise sought to prevent foot maladies by walk-

ing as much as 10 hours per week during training. Last year's winner, Dave Zink, practiced his footwork also, by going for runs with friends while pushing his bike.

The race began with a lecture at the University of Alaska, covering rules, survival gear, hypothermia, dehydration, moose defense (there isn't any), and answers to an endless series of questions. Those who wished to be part of a physiological and psychological profile of competitors had their vital statistics charted. At this station Don Cuerdo, MOUNTAIN BIKE's East Coast editor, pegged the blood pressure meter so hard that the doctor tapped it before writing down the results (186/72). Dondo could find work as a fire hydrant next to a high-rise.

Survival of the Lightest

On race-day morning, March 6, the riders had to show their survival gear to officials. A 20-pound minimum was enforced to prevent cutting back on necessary equipment. Twenty-pound-maximum resupply packages were flown to the halfway point at Skwentna, where most riders would take their mandatory six-hour layover. One rider was rumored to have packed four pounds of rocks, which he jettisoned once out of sight of the judges.

Capt. Dondo's survival gear included a Colt .45 automatic. Apparently, if he ran into a dangerous moose he wanted to be able to kill himself. "Sure," he said, "that's why I brought two clips."

Warm temperatures were a problem in '87, so promoters hoped for cold air to harden the trail. Unfortunately, the temperature hovered near freezing at race time. Because the snow machine operators, chiefly Dan Bull and Dan Mingo, had done such a fine job of packing the trail, the first riders got through all right, but each one made the trail more difficult for the next.

The first victim of the course was RAAM rider Chris Kostman, when one of his tires developed a slow leak. Two quick stops to inflate it didn't seem like much in a 200-mile race, but they put him so far behind that he was reduced to pushing in the deep snow while the leaders raced ahead. Kostman took 19 hours to cover the next 65 miles, spending the time making up new titles for the race, such as "*I-Didn't-Bike*," and "*I-Did-A-Hike*." He also picked up a collection of discarded colored booties that mushers put on the paws of Iditarod sled dogs, which began their 900-mile trek the day before.

During the first 40 miles, Zink, Kloser, Rocky Reifensstuhl, Carl Tobin, Roman Dial and Les Matz pulled away from the pack. Zink and Kloser were the first out of the Big Su (40-mile) checkpoint, and it



looked as though the race might be a repeat of last year's two-man sprint. Kloser spent a year thinking about that one-length loss to Zink, and he'd returned to make a clear statement. But when Kloser fell and struggled to get out from under his bike in the deep snow, Zink moved to a commanding lead of 27 minutes at the Skwentna halfway point.

Zink appeared to have everything going his way. Although tired, he showered and

Even going downhill wasn't easy as racers found themselves in semi-controllable slides.

ate before Kloser showed up with a haunted look in his eye. Tobin wasn't far back, and during the next few hours Reifensstuhl, Dial and Frise also arrived.

Zink took off at 3:20 a.m., and Kloser and Tobin each fired out of the rest stop as soon as officials would let them, mov-

CHARLES KELLY

ing slowly up the river in the darkness, alert for overflows or open water. Kloser lost the trail for a few minutes, and Zink opened his lead to 40 minutes at the Riversong checkpoint (mile 125). Although Zink had appeared healthy, he was suffering from dehydration, and Kloser caught him as they approached the Yentna Station checkpoint (mile 142).

When Zink had to dismount from the effects of dehydration, Kloser offered to wait in the true spirit of the race. Zink urged him to go ahead, however, because Tobin was pressing.

Kloser continued alone, and Zink ac-

cepted a flight out of Big Su at the 160-mile mark. Arriving just before Kloser at Knik Lake, Zink waited under the finish banner to be the first to welcome the man he only sees during this race. Kloser held on for a 23-minute win, erasing a year's worth of frustration over this one-second loss in '87.

The Women: A Bittersweet Outcome

In the women's race, Kloser's Fisher teammate, Sara Ballantyne, arrived at Skwentna with a 1/2-hour lead over Martha Kennedy, and looked to be a sure

winner. Of course, so had Dave Zink.

Only a few miles later, however, Ballantyne strayed off the trail and lost several hours. Convinced she was well behind, Kennedy was shocked to hear that she was now ahead. Despite her disappointment, Ballantyne chased hard and brought Kennedy into sight, but the effort was too much and Kennedy was able to hold her off by six minutes at the line.

After finishing, Kennedy waited to welcome Ballantyne. It was an emotional moment because Sara had lost the race by a mistake rather than from lack of ability. For both women it was a bittersweet out-

Off the Back of Iditabike

BY DON CUERDON

It takes a special person to cover 200 miles of frozen tundra on a mountain bike in a day and a half; it takes a real mutant to stay out there for three days. With all due respect to the top Iditabikers, I believe the most heart-rending heroics occurred at the back of the pack.

*He went trudgin'
across the tundra
mile after mile from
Yellow Snow...*

—Frank Zappa

As in any war story, these were ordinary people thrust into extraordinary circumstances. . . .

"I hate this, I hate this, I hate this. But I'm here so I might as well keep going," said Alan Schreiber, pounding his fist into his thigh. He had limped into the warming tent at Big Su Station slightly ahead of me but in a similar condition: wet, tired, and riding a grossly overloaded bike. But there was something inside urging him on.

I knew what I had left. That's what an experienced racer learns through trial and error. I knew it would take more luck and determination than I could muster to make it around the 210-mile loop. But ignorance is bliss in the case of the neophyte. What he doesn't know won't hurt him . . . until it hurts him.

This was the first race of any type for Schreiber, a U.S. Air Force crew chief based in Dover, Delaware. About 6 o'clock Sunday evening, I watched him stumble into the darkness with Jim "Nanook" Hutto across the Big Su River. They be-

gan an odyssey only one of them would complete. Nanook's race ended at the halfway point in Skwentna. Schreiber wouldn't cross the Knik Lake finish line until 10:30 Wednesday morning.

But our hero didn't cross the line alone. He teamed up with Mike Chard and Bob Woolsey somewhere on the tundra. They amused each other by taking photos of



Yeah, Schreiber made it around.

their hallucinations. The best was a shot of snow blown against a tree in the likeness of a dinosaur. It was an understandable bit of confusion when you consider these guys sometimes humped for 24 hours straight to make it to the finish before the Wednesday noon cutoff.

At 11:15 Wednesday morning, Curt Eury rolled across the line as the last official finisher, with 45 minutes to spare. He'd traveled most of the distance with Alan's group. He had to—his hands had become so numb with handlebar palsy that he couldn't open his panniers to get food or clothing. He'd tried bear-hugging the bag and pulling the zipper with his teeth, but it wouldn't budge.

When he met Alan's group he begged them not to leave him in such dire straits. But there was no need to beg. As Charlie

Kelly said last year, this is a "brotherhood of pain." Nobody dies trying if someone else can come to his aid.

I didn't know Alan Schreiber well, but I sensed a significant change in his life. Before the race he was like Clark Kent—mild-mannered, unobtrusive, a little goofy. But this caterpillar who entered the cocoon of Iditabike changed from one of life's spectators to a participant, to a winner in 73 1/2 hours. All the nice things about him are still there, but now he carries himself like Paul Bunyan.

Sitting next to me at the awards banquet, he'd occasionally break into a huge grin and say, "I made it around, didn't I?" more as an affirmation than a question. Yes, my friend, you certainly did.

And one last footnote about Sebastian, the black sheep of the Iditabike family. Sebastian rides to a slightly different drummer than most garden variety Iditabikers (a strange crowd to begin with). When the race officially ended, Dan Bull rode his snow machine out to fetch Sebastian home, but Sebastian wouldn't quit.

Wednesday night a tremendous wind storm tore shingles and chimney pipes from buildings in Anchorage. Thursday morning came and there was no sign of Sebastian. Although rumors of his death were greatly exaggerated, it put a real damper on our spirits. We assumed he'd become disoriented and fallen through an ice overflow (hole) during the night.

A rescue helicopter found him not far from the finish, dazed and thirsty. But he still wouldn't quit. They gave him some water and off he went again.

An hour after the beginning of the Thursday evening festivities, Dan Bull announced over the P.A. system, "Sebastian's in!" Fortunately the peals of applause covered whatever additional epithets Dan might have muttered under his breath. Sebastian's a goofball, but he's kin. ■

come. Ballantyne, who more than anyone appreciated what Kennedy had gone through, had harsh words only for herself for not concentrating on the trail markings or paying attention to her map. Kennedy would clearly have preferred to dominate the event physically, but owed it to her sponsors to win the race anyway she could... and she did.

The Alaskans came on very strong, with Fairbanks riders Tobin (unattached), Reifenstuhel (Klein), and Dial (unattached) finishing 2nd, 3rd and 4th, respectively. Frise (Northface) moved up to 5th from last year's 7th and swore he'd never do Id-

itabike again. Johnson finished with all his pedal digits (toes) intact. Steve Mitchell had the best collection of sled dog booties. Laddie Shaw avenged his previous Did Not Finish (DNF), burying that subject forever. At the first checkpoint, Capt. Dondo switched from the 200-mile course to the 120-miler, then DNFed after having to camp out in the snow.

Secret weapons were confined mostly to nutrition this year, in contrast to last year's innovations in sledding technology. Despite elaborate preparations by some riders, these foods often froze solid or caused internal distress. Winner Kloser's

secret weapon turned out to be peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. The guys from Fairbanks all looked like they ate live lizards, but of course there aren't any lizards in Alaska in the winter.

This account wouldn't be complete without mention of Bindy Beck. Bindy is a support specialist for ultramarathon events, working as a crew member on RAAM and similar megacontests. On her own time and expense she came to Alaska from California to act as a checkpoint person stationed at a remote cabin. She exemplifies the spirit of this race: There are no spectators, only participants.

Iditagear: What You Need to Survive

There are two equipment strategies for Iditabike: You can pack enough gear for camping on the trail, or you can travel with little more than an unbending intention to move forward. I chose the former option; the top finishers, the latter.

The race rules require riders to carry the following survival items:

- Sleeping bag (4-pound minimum)
- Signal flare and whistle
- One-day supply of food at all times
- Tent, bivvy sack, or two space blankets
- Matches, stove, fuel (1-pint minimum)

Racers had to start with 20 pounds of gear and finish with 15 pounds (not including water). The long-course racers could air-drop one 20-pound bag of gear at the Skwentna (half-way) checkpoint.

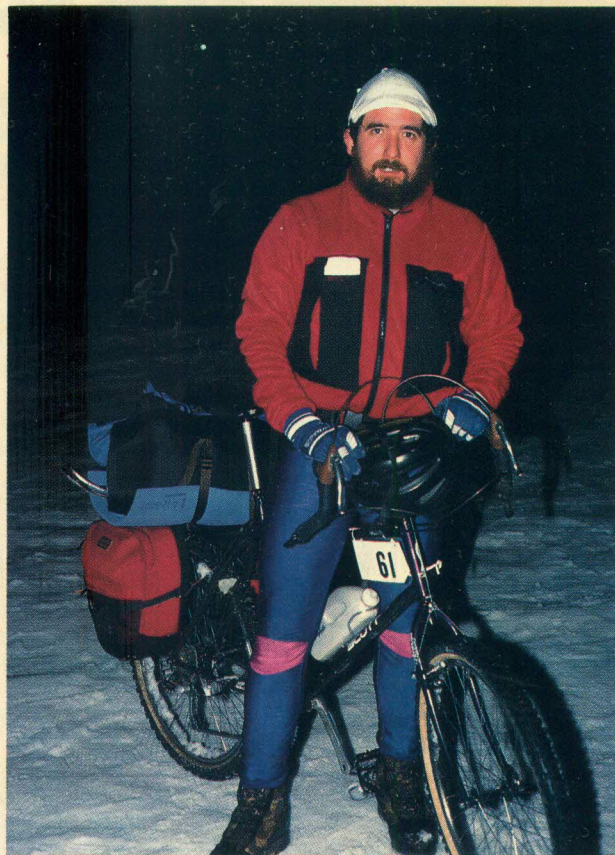
This year's warm weather (daytime temperatures above freezing) softened the top layer of crust covering the trail, causing overweight bikes to constantly break through to the soft snow below. The heavier the bike, the deeper it would sink. This made lightness a priority in choosing gear. Mike Kloser started the race with 22 pounds of gear; I started with about 50.

Riders found several other clever (albeit dangerous) ways to work around the rules. Equipment shaving became a game of semantics. What constitutes a stove? How about a handful of candles or a few cans of Sterno (better known as fondue-pot fuel)? At the pre-race meeting the 4-pound sleeping bag rule was amended to include anything that had to do with sleep-

ing, such as ground insulation, a bivouac cover, even pajamas.

Using lightweight bags was one way to conquer that sinking feeling. Fat tires with strap-on skis was another. It's a simple physics equation: To reduce the number of pounds per square inch on a weak surface, either reduce the weight or increase the square inches. Some riders hauled abbreviated skis that they planned to strap under their wheels for the "Idita-

Capt. Dondo even carried a gun -- and he considered using it (on himself) after the 83rd time this load sank hub-deep in the snow.



push" part of the race. At the start, one fellow was towing a full-size ski that I later saw abandoned at the Big Su checkpoint. The only thing that would have saved me and my wide load was a double rear wheel.

Some of the most interesting innovations involved water carrying. Wide-mouthed Nalgene bottles with screw-on tops outnumbered standard water bottles, which tend to clog with slush at the nozzle when the temperature drops. Some bottles were insulated by telephoto lens bags. The most efficient adaptation seemed to be a modified bota bag worn as a day pack, with a drinking hose clipped to the shirt collar. Next best was a chest-mounted bottle with a short, NFL-style drinking tube. Either of these items can be worn under a parka. Body heat keeps the water from freezing.

Three of the top four finishers of the long (210 mile) race, and the winner of the shorter (130 mile) race, were from Fairbanks. I'm sure they've ridden on snow a lot, and that's the best way to develop Iditaspecific equipment. Next year I'll be sure to arrive in Anchorage early enough to shake down my gear on the trail before race day. Except for one hellacious wind storm, the weather didn't change much during my 10-day stay, so what you see upon landing is likely to be what you'll have for the event. The '89 race will be two weeks earlier in hopes of firm snow.

We fuller-figured racers are praying for a cold, fast ride next time. Let the skinny guys suffer for a change. —D.C.