





# TOUGH STUFF IN A FAR PLACE

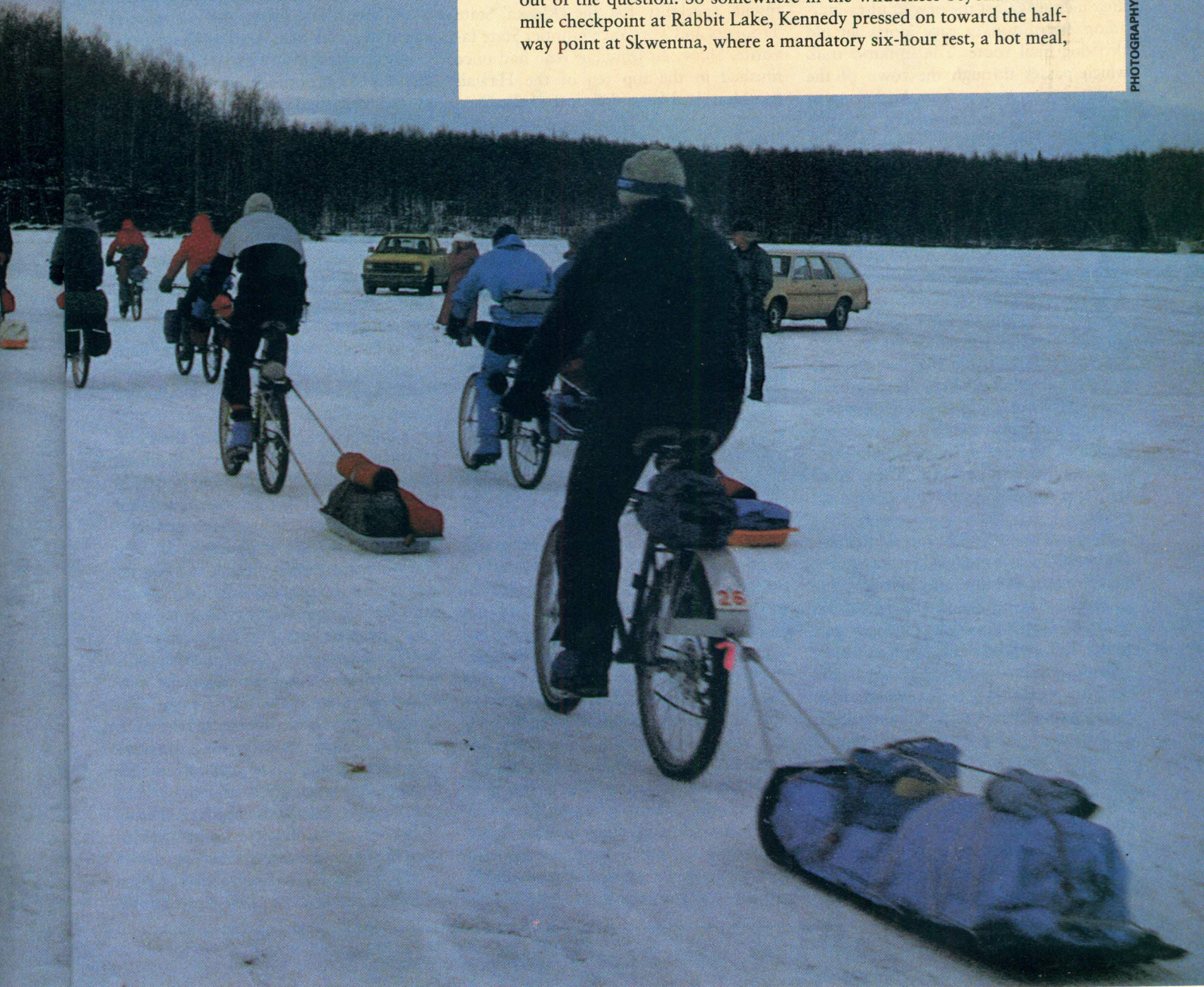
TO THOSE WHO HAVE THE PROTEAN FACULTY  
OF ADAPTABILITY, THE NOVELTY OF  
CHANGE MAY EVEN BE A SOURCE OF PLEASURE;  
BUT TO THOSE WHO HAPPEN TO BE  
HARDENED TO THE RUTS IN WHICH THEY  
WERE CREATED, THE PRESSURE OF THE  
ALTERED ENVIRONMENT IS UNBEARABLE.

—JACK LONDON



They lied to us. There is no Skwentna,” moaned Martha Kennedy. “We’re all going to have to push our bikes the 1100 miles to Nome. No wonder all the people from Anchorage turned back.” But the 29-year-old Kennedy, top Expert class woman at last year’s NORBA Nationals, wouldn’t turn back. Over 50 friends and neighbors in St. Paul, Minnesota, had contributed six dollars apiece so she could compete in Alaska’s inaugural Iditarod 87, a 210-mile mountain bike race on the Iditarod Sled Dog Trail. Quitting was out of the question. So somewhere in the wilderness beyond the 71-mile checkpoint at Rabbit Lake, Kennedy pressed on toward the half-way point at Skwentna, where a mandatory six-hour rest, a hot meal,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY P. YURI SAMER





and some badly needed shelter from Alaska's bitter cold awaited.

The 5'4" rider had lost contact with the rest of the starting field a half-day before, when she had dropped Fairbanks rider Phil Vigil. For the past twelve hours, she had been riding and pushing her bike alone through the snow-covered southern drainage basin of Mt. McKinley. At that particular moment in her life, it was difficult to recall why she had gotten herself into this mess in the first place.

"It seemed like it would be the ultimate off-road bike race," she said later, recalling the moment last December when she first read about the challenge. "It took a couple of weeks to decide, but being a first-time event made it seem more exciting—you would never know what was going to happen."

Indeed, it was the allure of this unknown that drew Kennedy and 25 other hardy souls into the Alaskan wilds to test their mettle against the newest ultra-marathon expeditionary race along an old sled dog mail route. The Iditarod trail, which passes through the town of the same name on its way from Anchorage to Nome, first gained notoriety in 1925 when 20 mushers and their dogs relayed 300,000 units of diphtheria serum to an epidemic-threatened Nome. In the 1950s, a fellow named Joe Redington got interested in the trail and began efforts to insure its maintenance, which had declined since the advent of aviation services in the area.

In 1973, Redington organized the first Iditarod Sled Dog Race of the modern era, an 1100-mile trek that has become the Super Bowl of Alaska, drawing ever-larger entry fields and spawning a growing family of winter races along what has become a National Historic Trail. Iditashoe was the first spin-off. Three years ago came Iditaski, a 200-mile nordic ski event.

Then last year, the 73-year-old Redington bought a mountain bike to augment his off-season conditioning. He loved it so much that he called the Mountain Bikers of Alaska about organizing a race on the trail. Iditabike was born.

So on Sunday morning, March 8, the day after 63 sled dog teams departed for Nome, a motley mix of mountain bikers, cross-country skiers, triathletes, mountaineers, and generic hard-core recreationalists stood in the sub-zero calm of Knik Lake. Some fidgeted with equipment, of which each had plenty. Every racer was required to carry an arctic sleeping bag, a bivvy sack or tent, a stove and fuel, and a space blanket, first aid kit,

and emergency flare. None knew if they would need the stuff, be burdened by it, or wish they had more. Above the intermittent chorusing of sled dogs kenneled in the nearby hills, race marshals called out final instructions concerning rights-of-way for Iditarod mushers and some last-minute advice on dealing with moose. Then they were off.

You have to understand that Alaskans do not believe in cabin fever. While indoor volleyball leagues sprout up in the lower 48 to carry people through the winter, Alaskans get a kick out of challenging the elements. Moreover, their disdain for those wretches who seek shelter in blizzard conditions just because their tootsies are a little chilled knows no bounds. Consequently, it surprised no one that the natives confidently predicted that the "Outsiders" would soon turn tail and run.

"It's a matter of whether they're used to cold," said Laddie Shaw, a search and rescue specialist for the Alaska State Troopers and a pre-race Frontier State favorite. Shaw, an Ironman who had once finished in the top ten of the Hawaii triathlon, had been skeptical of the Out-

**"I had a model of doing Iditabike as four 50-mile races back-to-back," said rider Janet Niichel. "When I reached the first checkpoint, I was just trying to finish alive."**



siders' abilities to cope with Alaska, and meeting the competition at Friday night's pre-race meeting did little to gain his respect. "Cowards won't show and the weak will die," he said grimly.

Forty miles into the race on Sunday, Shaw quit. "The race is a flop. No one will finish," he declared. Volunteering as "the first realist," he officially scratched, and ten of the original 26 starters followed his example, tossing in their parkas at the first checkpoint. The problem, it seemed, was that it was simply too warm in Alaska. Clearing skies had produced unseasonably mild temperatures—in Alaska, that's the upper twenties—making the snow too soft to support the

bikes. Somewhere between Laddie Shaw's bravado on Friday night and his bow to "reality" on Sunday lay the discovery that the inaugural Iditabike trophy might be awarded not to the best mountain bike rider, but the best mountain bike pusher.

Compounding the problem was the passage of the sled dogs the day before. "The dogs just tore the hell out of that trail," said Mike Kloser, a former motorcycle racer and mogul skier now riding for Fisher MountainBikes. Except in the earliest going, he reported, the entrants had been slowly mushing their bikes toward Skwentna in a depressing parody of the sled dog race.

Nevertheless, Kloser and Dave Zink, an unaffiliated second-year rider from St. Paul, Minnesota, made a decisive break before the landmark Susitna River crossing. At that 41-mile checkpoint they were 20 minutes ahead of Midwest NORBA champion Mark Frise, and 45 minutes ahead of a four-man Alaskan chase group vainly working to live up to pre-race predictions of a Frontier State sweep. Kennedy and Phil Vigil came through 45 minutes later.

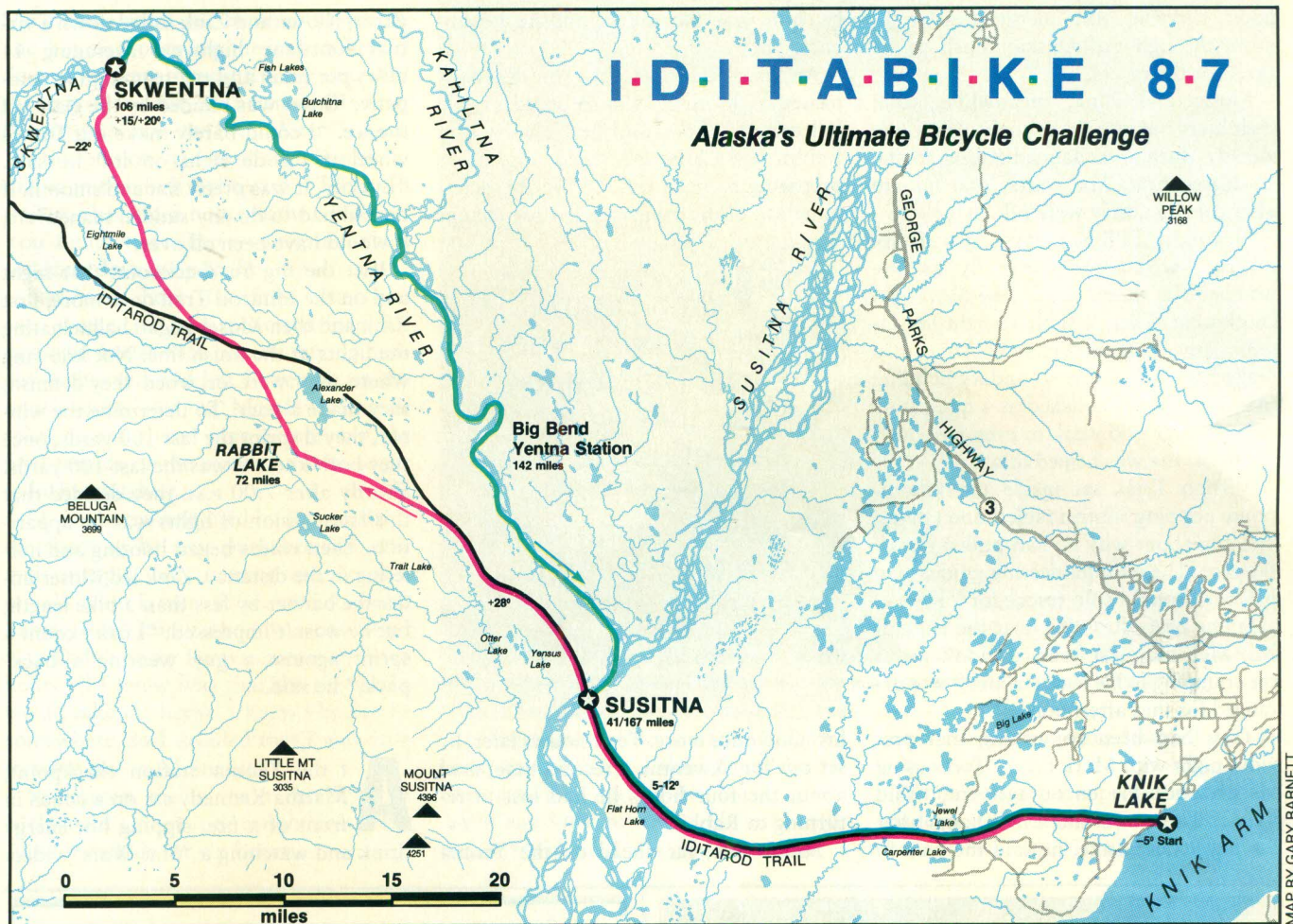
Three hours behind Kennedy and Vigil and four hours behind Kloser and Zink came the only other women finishers, Janet Niichel and Diane Munson. Niichel, who had placed eighth at the NORBA Nationals and was now sponsored by Bridgestone, approached Iditabike with a careful strategy, quickly shattered by the race conditions. "I had a model going into this of doing it as four 50-mile races back to back," she said later. "By the time I reached the first checkpoint, I was just trying to finish alive."

Despite training for a week in the Colorado Rockies and arriving a week in advance in Alaska, Niichel found herself in dire straits. Fortunately, she had Munson, a novice rider from Fairbanks later nominated by fellow finishers for the race's sportsmanship award, to keep her company. Primarily a nordic skier, Munson entered Iditabike to reclaim her personal shame at having scratched from the Iditaski race a few weeks earlier. Not even owning a mountain bike, she borrowed one nine days before the race. "Oh, I rode it a couple of times to get the hang of it," she said. Munson sang songs to keep herself going while pushing her bike through the snow. Thirty miles into what had become Iditapush, she called out, "Now this is my favorite song," before launching into the next tune.

Nightfall came before leaders Kloser and Zink reached the second checkpoint



## Alaska's Ultimate Bicycle Challenge



MAP BY GARY BARNETT

at Rabbit Lake, one-third of the total distance. Normal racing strategies took a backseat to the bizarre conditions. “The pushing got real tedious because you could only go three or four miles per hour,” said Kloser.

Zink, who had entered “because it had been such a boring winter in Minnesota” was used to ten or twelve-hour training sessions for marathon canoe racing. “Even so,” he said, “if I had been by myself, I may have thought of quitting, but not with Mike right there.”

The two took turns breaking trail and waiting for each other through the extraction process that followed regular headers into snowbanks. “Even in the rideable parts it was five feet deep,” said Zink. “When you’d lose it, it would pitch you. A couple of times I was head-first into it.”

Ten miles outside Skwentna, an area that had received 157 inches of snow that season, the trail firmed up considerably. After 60 miles of Iditapush it was possible to ride the bike again, but then you had to find Skwentna. It’s a clearing that qualifies as a town in Alaska, though it is nothing more than a dozen buildings in the vicinity of a plowed airstrip. It also sits in a

cold-air bowl, and as the riders approached, the temperature sank to minus 22-degrees.

Now chilled as well as tired, Kloser and Zink wandered within two miles of the Skwentna schoolhouse for an hour and a half. They were hungry for real food and eager for the rest imposed by the mandatory six-hour layover. They found it at 3:39 A.M.

**J**oe Delia, Skwentna postmaster, moved there 49 years ago, “to be north of it all.” Delia looked out his window Monday morning to see a mountain biker approaching. Heedless of her audience, Martha Kennedy rode by on her way to the Skwentna schoolhouse check-in, muttering, “Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.”

Delia turned to his wife. “It’s time to move north again, dear.”

Kennedy pulled in at the schoolhouse just as Kloser and Zink were rising from their naps. After shedding some layers, she watched in fascination as the race leaders tucked into the victuals: moose stew, French toast, pork sausages, cinnamon rolls, lemon meringue pie, ultra-energy drink, and coffee, a “turnaround

breakfast” prepared by Jim and Marilyn Bitney, the school’s faculty. Zink, a vegetarian in other circumstances, ate four bowls of the Bitneys’ moose stew before realizing it was largely red meat. Shrugging, he polished off two more bowls before stacking his dishes, bussing them to the sink, and getting ready to depart for Knik Lake.

Race marshals in Anchorage, Knik Lake, and Skwentna held a conference via ham radio and telephone. Iditarod Trail conditions were a disaster, and the weather looked once again to be too nice.

Enter Roman Dial, a Fairbanks journalist chasing the story. Dial had ridden his mountain bike up the frozen Susitna and Yentna rivers on the hunch that it would be quicker than the trail. His hunch was right. Based on his report, the organizers changed the return route from the Iditarod Trail to the rivers between Skwentna and the Big Su checkpoint 60 miles south.

Homesteaders at the big bend in the Yentna River offered their lodge as a checkpoint to replace Rabbit Lake. Morale picked up immediately—it would be a riding race all the way back. A volunteer snowmobiler left for the new check-



point, carrying ultra-energy powder 30 miles through the Alaskan bush to be there for the racers.

Kloser and Zink, meanwhile, took their bikes out into the sunlight. "Hey, it's already warm," exclaimed Kloser in the 15-degree heat. Six hours, one minute after check-in, they were off.

"I wonder if I'll be that energetic in six hours," wondered Kennedy as she watched the racers depart the Skwentna checkpoint. Then, unable to fight her fatigue any longer, Kennedy hitched a piggy-back ride to the secondary building that had been established as a quiet zone for sleeping. Too weak to even pull open the door, she was helped to a cot.

Vernon Tejas sat inside the schoolhouse popping Motrin tablets and talking amiably about why he had pulled out of the race. The mountaineering guide, who had performed a solo rescue for a Korean climbing party stranded near the peak of Mt. McKinley last year, couldn't arrest the cramping in his legs. An airlift was arranged for that afternoon.

Tejas had been sojourning that previous night with Mark Frise. "I was using his presence for encouragement," said Tejas. "Then, two and a half hours after leaving Rabbit Lake, he said the pain in

his hips was too much, and he headed back."

An hour after that, Frise and Kennedy passed each other. "I'm so bored I could kill myself," Frise told her. But back at Rabbit Lake, Frise met three more riders preparing to head out. Seeing the determination of the others made Frise change.

**"I didn't know who I was, or where I was. Didn't know I was in a race," said Iditabike finisher Mark Frise. "All I knew was that the tire tracks would take me home."**



his mind once more. Ten minutes later, he set out for Skwentna a second time, mad about the four hours he had lost in returning to Rabbit.

Meanwhile, far ahead on the Yentna

River, Kloser and Zink sailed down a virtual four-lane highway, averaging 11 miles per hour and tag-teaming for company. Kloser was blinded by the glare off the ice. "I could barely make out Dave's wheel if I rode right on it," he said. "Luckily, it was pretty flat and smooth. If he had had to do any sudden maneuvers, it would have been all over."

Past the Big Su checkpoint that night and on the Iditarod Trail once more, first Zink and then Kloser began hallucinating the lights at the finish line. Not knowing where they were or when they'd finish, they made a pact: To determine the winner, they'd sprint the last 100 yards, once they both knew it was the last 100 yards. Shortly after 7:00 P.M. they decided that this latest vision of lights was no apparition. Then voices began hooting and hollering in the distance. Zink led Kloser under the banner by less than a bike length, but he wasn't impressed. "I can't count a sprint against a guy wearing a backpack," he said.

**A**t the Yentna Station checkpoint, Martha Kennedy sat on a couch in front of a fire, sipping hot energy drink and watching a "Star Wars" video.

She'd had a good ride between Skwentna and Yentna, following the leaders' tracks down the river. Innocently, she expected the rest of the way to be smooth going, but it was not to be. "After leaving Yentna Station, the trail was harder to follow in the dark," she said. "The main trail was hardpack but the others weren't. You found out when your front wheel suddenly dove in up to the axle in snow."

For Mark Frise, the final going was even worse. He had recovered from his mid-fight battle with uncertainty on Sunday night, and had left Skwentna on the return leg at 7:40 P.M. Monday. His time splits on the rivers were decent, but the final rounds of the match were to prove to be his toughest.

"I was bored and cold by Big Su. Then the shadows became park benches, animals, people, cars passing me. I asked myself why I was there, and I didn't know. Didn't know who I was, or where I was. Didn't know I was in a race. For two hours all I knew was that the tire tracks would take me home. I knew I had to be somewhere, so I decided that I was on a training ride in Minnesota."

Seventeen miles from the Wasilla McDonald's, Frise rode around lost in the Alaskan woods for six hours.



**Why are these people smiling? Zink and Kennedy won free round-trip tickets to Iditabike 88.**

"Then I found this road, and suddenly I remembered 'Knik Lake.' There was a man standing outside his house, and I asked him how far it was. He said, 'Four miles.' I told him I was glad he said that. I

don't know what I would have done if he had said 25."

While Frise was rope-a-doped by the shadows, Kennedy continued her ride for the women's title. Having heard that rid-





ers were getting lost between Big Su and Knik Lake, the veteran of a few 24-hour marathon road attempts fended off fears of succumbing to hallucinations herself. She finished at 4:29 A.M. Tuesday, 13 hours ahead of the next woman.

Frise, Phil Vigil, Howard Drew, and Wayne Lynch, an Anchorage teenager taking in Iditabike during a spring break, rode in separately throughout Tuesday. Diane Munson finished early Tuesday evening, still effervescent and jovial. "I guess I'll have to buy a mountain bike now," she said.

Nels Johnson, a 40-year-old train engineer from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, was the final scratcher from the race after an inspection at Big Su revealed one blackening foot. "I think I had too many socks making it too tight in there," he said, "but I'll be back next year. This race sure expands the idea of what can be done with a bike."

Janet Niichel found the reserves to continue, sharing caboose-tending duties with Dan Bull. They closed the race Tuesday night with a time of 61 hours, 44 minutes. "After this, everything is easy," declared Niichel.

"No other mountain bike race compares with this one," agreed Zink. "It never seemed like it would be a normal bike

race, and I think it'll always be a race where anything can happen.

"I wish I didn't have to go back home," he continued. "I haven't figured out a way to come back permanently yet." If he does, his transportation is assured. Iditabike's first-place prize was a free round-trip ticket for Iditabike 88. There were no second place awards. □

## THE LUCKY THIRTEEN

1. Dave Zink, St. Paul, MN 33:50
2. Mike Kloser, Vail, CO 33:50
3. Karl Tobin, Fairbanks, AK 36:43
4. Mark Corson, Anchorage, AK 37:11
5. Les Matz, Anchorage, AK 37:11
6. Martha Kennedy, St. Paul, MN 42:59
7. Mark Frise, La Crosse, WI 49:26
8. Phil Vigil, Fairbanks, AK 50:47
9. Howard Drew, Los Angeles, CA 53:15
10. Wayne Lynch, Anchorage, AK 53:46
11. Diane Munson, Fairbanks, AK 55:57
12. Janet Niichel, Los Angeles, CA 61:44
13. Dan Bull, Anchorage, AK 61:44

All times are hours:minutes, and include the mandatory six-hour layover in Skwentna

