



Carl Tobin leads the chase group.

Just what does it take to stop a fit committed Alaskan mountain biker?
CHARLES KELLY Reports

SURVIVORS



The lead group in a 'pace' line, from left, Matt Van Enkevort, Charlie Tarver, Eric Breitenberger, Mike Kloser, Ole Kristian Silseth, Rocky Reifstuhl.



The quad bike ridden by winner Dave Ford.

If this was a bicycle race, why was everyone walking? If this was a failure, why was everyone so happy? The Fourth Annual *Relo Alaska Iditabike* went only 80 of the scheduled 320 kilometres before what was described as a 'friendly mutiny' took place in a remote cabin at the Big Su checkpoint. The nine leading riders gathered there had covered only a quarter of the planned distance in something more than the time two-time winner, Mike Kloser, spent riding the length of the course last year.

A council of war among them took stock of the situation: most were out of food, exhausted, and dehydrated from the long

cold march. Kloser had already abandoned with a strained muscle that he suffered during a full day of walking, and no one could question his strength or courage. They decided to quit, and contacting the race headquarters by short-wave radio, they challenged the organisers to make them go on. They challenged each other also, since an attempt by any of the leaders to go back on the trail toward the next checkpoint would have meant that the others would have had to respond.

SURVIVORS WIN

Some bicycle enthusiasts might say that this was failure, but the standards for success or failure are different in Alaska. It is a failure only if you don't survive the event. This is a hard land and the people

who live there are used to the problem of staying alive outdoors where the temperature can drop to -50°C .

Just the week before the *Iditabike*, the local mountain bike club held a race in -40 weather, which can kill an unprepared person in minutes.

It's cold there all the time, and Alaskans see no reason to surrender to it.

The *Iditabike* is conducted in conditions that make a mountain bike race a gamble; the temperature may drop, the snow may fall, or a moose may take over a trail and challenge anyone wishing to pass. Before starting the *Iditabike*, competitors must display a long list of required survival equipment to officials, including emergency flares, stove, sleeping bag, food, and water carrying capacity.

not been known to attack humans, and it is certain that the wolves eating the moose knew about the riders approaching long before they arrived.

GO OR NO GO?

The race started a couple of hours late from the staging area at Big Lake, because the organisers were hoping the weather would improve. The snow kept falling though, and the riders pressed for a decision: go or don't go. Looking out at the weather, several riders retired before even beginning the ride.

When the race started, the temperature was -18°C and a light snow was falling. Even though snow machines had made dozens of trips over the trail for weeks in an attempt to pack the snow, continued cold temperatures had kept the snow light

one of the race favourites, because he suffered serious leg injuries several years ago in an avalanche and cycling is the only sport he can still participate in competitively. His knees started bothering him immediately, and Tobin dropped from the lead group to the second group, then found himself alone, and eventually camped.

Some of the other competitors had worried about him because he didn't seem to be carrying much gear, but Tobin is an outdoor survivor who has attempted to climb Everest and has been killed three or four times (it just hasn't worked yet). He was carrying more weight in water than any of the other riders, and he never



BIG SNOW

The winter of 1989-1990 had the deepest snowfall in 41 years in Alaska, and this was very hard on the moose population. These animals, the largest members of the deer family, are larger than a horse, and while they normally can travel through snow, this year they stayed near packed trails where the travelling was easier. They can be quite aggressive, and in the past have killed sled dogs and destroyed snow machines on the same trail used by the *Iditabikers*.

These aren't the only animals around; several days before the race a moose died and lay in the snow next to the trail. During the race two groups of riders passed it about half an hour apart; when the first group passed the moose was in one piece, but when the next group passed it had been torn apart by wolves.

Despite a fierce reputation, wolves have

and dry, perfect for skiing but not for cycling because it did not pack into a surface that would support a bicycle. The new snow on the trail forced the competitors to begin pushing their bikes within a kilometre of the start. A lead group of six riders formed, and although they moved at a walking pace, they formed a 'pace line'.

Last year's second place *Iditabiker* and two-time veteran Roman Dial, who might have had the best chance to win, was not at the race. In addition to being an excellent mountain biker, Dial also has a reputation for being a strong hiker who is willing to carry his bike as far as he needs to. After hearing about the race, Dial lamented, "I wish I were there now. I could walk to Nome for \$2000."

Nome is more than 1500 kilometres from Anchorage.

LONG MARCH

The walking was hardest for Carl Tobin,

suffered from the cold because he kept his fluid intake up. "I finally camped. I slept for ten hours, I was completely comfortable," he said.

By the standards of any other bicycle race, the airplane and snow machine evacuation of a few dozen riders from the course might have been an emergency, but the *Iditabike* is not run by these standards. Where other bike race promoters are prepared to deal with high-speed crashes and crowd control, the *Iditabike* organising committee has no such problems, and instead commands a force of aircraft and snow machines ready to bring in riders who have abandoned the race. A fee to cover the cost of evacuation is paid with the entry fee, to be returned after the race if it is not used. After camping on the trail overnight, many of the *Iditabikers* chose to ride back in to the starting area and save money.

THE EXTREME

Even though the *Iditabike* is a very small event in terms of the number of riders (54 this year), and number of spectators, (none, for the fourth year in a row), it draws attention from all over the world out of proportion to the number of participants. This year there were representatives from the BBC, an American television network, and American, French, English, Italian and German mountain bicycle magazines. The reasons for both the limited participation and the media interest are that this race represents the most extreme competition that is possible on a mountain bike, and although in the past most participants had completed it, sooner or



Helena Reuter, Susan Corcutt, Janet Downing.



Jack Keane gets in a rare bit of actual riding.



Winner Dave Ford pushes his special quad bicycle.

later the race was bound to conflict with the harsh Alaskan weather.

The conversation in the leading men's group started out bold, as the riders, particularly Reifensstuhl, tried to psyche each other out by expounding on what a good time they were having after hours of trudging along the trail. Rocky had a steering shock damper on his *Klein*, which allowed him to push it from the saddle with one hand, and in order to give his sponsor full value for his money, every time he saw a journalist he said, "This bike pushes great. What a design!" After fatigue set in, the conversation slowed and turned to the subject of water and who might have any.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE

Water was an important weapon at this year's *Iditabike*. In cold weather, liquid intake is the best protection against hypothermia, and even those who aren't thirsty should drink as much as they can. But in the *Iditabike*, water goes quickly or freezes. In previous races, riders could travel between checkpoints fast enough to refill their supplies, but this year the push between checkpoints took three or four times as long as planned.

Even though water is everywhere, in the form of snow, it takes time to melt it.

It takes more time for those using the barest minimum in equipment that meets race requirements, and some of the Fairbanks contingent carried extremely light, but not very hot, alcohol stoves. Some took a chance on continued good health by drinking from questionable standing water. They would not know for some time after the race whether they had contracted the *giardia* organism, because the unpleasant symptoms take several weeks to appear.

One enterprising rider wore a water carrier inside his clothing, and when it ran low he stuffed snow into it and melted it with his body heat without having to stop.

TIME TO QUIT?

The lead group dwindled slowly, and now and then it would stop while riders drank, adjusted clothing, and waited for someone else to take the chore of breaking the trail. Mike Kloser injured a groin muscle and stopped to stretch every half-hour or so, but it didn't help. When a snow machine driver told him that the trail didn't get any better, he accepted a ride out, and in doing so he let a few others abandon with their pride intact. It's not so hard to quit when the two-time defending champion drops out.

Dave Ford was one of two riders with

experimental 'quad' bikes, which use two rims welded together and two tyres on each wheel for use in soft snow. The other quad bike rider was Bob Forney, and he decided to take his six-hour rest stop at the Knik checkpoint and hope the trail would improve to the point where he could ride. At the time he said: "I can go 24 hours straight if I have to. It's a gamble."

Between the first checkpoint at Knik and what became the end of the race at Big Su, Ford made up a gap of nearly 15 minutes and joined the leaders, now down to Ole Silseth, Eric Breitenberger and Rocky Reifensstuhl, and just before reaching the checkpoint he moved out in front. By this time they had been on the trail around the clock and Silseth was suffering badly from the cold. It seemed likely that he would be forced to abandon the race at the checkpoint. All the leaders declared that they would take their mandatory six-hour break in the tiny cabin at big Su while they warmed up and rested, hoping the weather would change.

Forney finished his break and returned to the trail, but it was not much improved. When he reached Big Su, he was virtually tied with Dave Ford, but Ford was rested and Forney was exhausted. Gail Koepf was in eighth place overall, and looked so fresh that she would certainly move out in front of some of the leading men when she went back on the trail after her six hours.

Come dawn, with no improvements, they decided to quit. The lead group decided on a finish order that was fair, and spoke to race headquarters on the radio. Since it was obvious that the race could not be finished, the organisers agreed to the placings, and agreed that all prize money would be paid, the \$2000 first prize going to Ford.