

## Iditarod Invitational ready to roll

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While the 1,100-mile Iditarod Trail Invitational slog to Nome which begins March 1, a week before the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, remains the domain of just a few endurance studs, the shorter 350-mile race to McGrath features a stellar field littered with former champs.

Here are some top contenders:

- Peter Basinger of Anchorage biked to Nome last year in just over 18 days — faster than three of the first four Iditarod Sled Dog Race champions. This year he will “sprint” to McGrath as the course record holder (3 days, 5 hours, 40 minutes). Merchant calls Basinger’s time in the 1,100-mile slog “amazing in way less than ideal conditions. ... Pete’s time from Shaktoolik to Nome was only five hours slower than Iditarod winner Lance Mackey’s with his dog team.” Basinger, course record holder for the 350-miler in 3 days, 5 hours and 40 minutes, has also ridden a single-speed bike to a second-place finish in the 24 Hours of Adrenaline World Solo Championship in Monterey, Calif.
- Jay Petervary of Jackson Hole, Wyo., the defending 350-mile champion, who finished in 3 days, 14 hours, 20 minutes last year. Petervary won the two-week-long Great Divide Race through the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico in 2007. This year, Petervary is entered along with his wife, Tracey. “We’ll see how strong love is versus competition,” Merchant said.
- Rocky Reifentuhl of Fairbanks was in 2007, at age 55, champion of the Fireweed 400 bicycle race. He’s a former Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Classic champion, too.
- Jeff Oatley of Fairbanks, a former champion in the 350-mile race, is the record-holder in the Fireweed 400 and has completed the Race Across America
- Geoff Roes of Juneau, who plans to run the 350 miles to McGrath, is coming off a remarkable year. In August, he won the Wasatch Front 100-Mile Endurance Run in 20 hours, 1 minute, 7 seconds, the fourth-fastest time in race history. Roes won two 100-milers and finished fourth in the Crow Pass Crossing backcountry marathon from near Girdwood to the Eagle River Nature Center last year. And in June, Roes covered about 1,400 miles before dropping out of the epic Great Divide Mountain Bike Race, a 2,490-miler from the U.S.-Canada border to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Meanwhile, looking to extend his record of three Nome finishes in the 1,100-miler is Pennsylvania ultra runner Tim Hewitt.

“It’s the toughest race in the world,” Hewitt told reporters back home in Pennsylvania after the 2007 race. “They went 15 years with no one completing the race on foot. In fact, there are more people who have walked on the moon than have completed this on foot.”

After a difficult race last year, Merchant, who traveled much of the way with Hewitt, was

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surprised to see him back.

"I didn't know whether to offer him congratulations or condolences for the Alzheimer's you've come down with," Merchant said.

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