

## The loneliness of the long-distance winter race

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OUTDOORS

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The hardest race to run is the one waged in your mind, and it is for this reason the Iditarod Trail Invitational is the hardest race in the world.

Forget the distance of hundreds of miles, the brutal Alaska winds, the subzero cold, the bad trail, and the danger of avalanche and overflow. Those are the smallest of the challenges to be met.

The bigger hurdle is the sheer desolation one finds from near Shell Lake in the foothills of the Alaska Range on through Rainy Pass to McGrath, and beyond across the vast tracks of nothingness and ever more nothingness to the Bering Sea coast and, eventually, for some, to Nome.

Out there, you learn just how sweet the scent of wood smoke is, because it means somewhere upwind are other people. Whether they are snug in a cabin at 40 degrees below or huddled around a campfire heating one side while freezing the other really doesn't matter.

What matters is that there are others.

There is a comfort to being around others.

Like wolves, we are social animals. Only the rare recluse, like the lone wolf, desires to remain largely free of contact with the rest of the species. Most of us yearn for companionship. We're genetically hard-wired for it. If we can't find it with other people, we find it with pets. If there's not somebody there, there's something -- Fifi or Fido, or even Fred the fish or Billy the bird.

It is this that separates the Invitational from the well-known Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. The Iditarod is an exhausting event if you are in it to win and a most-difficult adventure if you are in it only to finish. More people have climbed to the summit of Mount Everest than have made it to Nome in the Iditarod.

And yet this race is so much easier than the Invitational that it is almost unfair to compare them.

A musher has a team. A musher has a little group of friends with whom to hang.

Granted, they need as much care as children. They are not much good at conversation. And in the worst of times they seem more trouble than anything else, sort of like family. But like family they are usually there when you need them too.

More than one bumbling musher has been pulled to safety by an Iditarod dog team. More than one musher has overlooked his own problems and pushed on, fueled by concerns about the need to take care of his buddies. The dogs can and have motivated more than a few to go on when it would have been so easy to quit.

There is no motivation, let alone companionship, in a pair of skis or snowshoes, a set of running shoes or a fat-tire bike. These are merely tools. You don't love them the way you do a dog. They are not going to motivate you to do anything.

Nor can they do anything to help push back the emptiness when you are out there so alone. More alone than you have ever been before. More alone than most can imagine being alone.

"O outcast land! O leper land!" wrote Robert Service, the poet laureate of the North. Service understood. He named the poem from which came those lines "The Land God Forgot."

Not much has changed since Service roamed the country 100 years ago, except maybe the land has become at times even more desolate.

Back in Service's day, there were miners and trappers and woodchoppers scattered broadly across the countryside. Now most everyone in Alaska has contracted into a few, major urban centers and a comparative handful of villages.

The Iditarod Trail once offered the comfort of a roadhouse about every 20 miles, "a day's journey" as it was called by those marching north toward the Innoko or Nome gold fields. The roadhouses are all gone now.

If you're making your way north, the beginning of the end comes now at the tiny, but hospitable community of Skwentna on the Yentna River about 100 miles from Wasilla. You get the feeling there that it is the end of civilization, though the Shell Lake Lodge is only 20 miles along on the Iditarod Trail and the Winterlake Lodge at Finger Lake only 20 miles beyond that.

If the weather is good, it is an easy 20 miles. If the wind is blowing the snow sideways across the muskegs and the trail is gone, it is a frighteningly long and lonely 20 miles. And from there on, the trail just gets longer and lonelier.

Thirty miles across the snow-covered beaver ponds and up through the Happy River Gorge to Puntilla Lake. Forty miles or so across windswept Rainy Pass and down the snakey Dalzell Creek from Puntilla to Rohn. Ninety miles through the snowless Post River country and the Farewell Burn to Nikolai.

When it is nice, when the sun is out and the weather only a few degrees below zero or even warmer, and the Alaska Range sprawls across the horizon in a spectacular display of Alpine beauty, it is very nice. And when it is not, well, the country can border on downright terrifying.

Some, maybe many, reading this will never have heard of the Invitational, let alone the people who compete in it. The human-powered race along the Iditarod Trail doesn't attract much attention in this country.

Some years there seem to be more Europeans entered than there are Americans. Some hike, a few ski, most bike. The bike has proven the best human-powered machine for travel on the snowmobile packed trails of Alaska, even if the cyclists do sometimes end up pushing almost as much as they ride.

The field for the race is limited to 50. Last year 29 competitors, a somewhat unusually large number, made it 350 miles north over the Alaska Range to McGrath. Six managed to push on to Nome. It took the fastest of them, homegrown cyclist Pete Basinger, 18 days 4 hours to reach the finish line.

There were no crowds to greet him. He won nothing. But he was happy. He had endured.

Since the Invitational took over for the failed Iditasport in 2000, only 30 people have made it all

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the way to Nome. One of them is Pennsylvania runner Tim Hewitt. Last year, he labored north for 24 days, six hours, jogging a bit here and there but mainly hiking on relentlessly. He said he'd never do it again.

And yet he is back this year.

"I have no idea what draws people back to (this) event," the 54-year-old confessed to a reporter for the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review earlier this month. "I guess the satisfaction of getting it done ... and anytime you accomplish something, you feel good afterwards."

Or at least you feel relieved, like when you emerge from a good horror flick after having the bejesus scared out of you.

"For whatever reason, I do like being out there and being challenged alone," he said. "I like to endure through that punishment, for whatever reason. Maybe because when you do get through it, it's just, 'wow.' "

He and the rest leave Knik Lake on Sunday. Wish them luck.

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