

Oatley rolling rapidly in Iditarod Invitational

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Fairbanks bicyclist Jeff Oatley extended his ridiculous lead in the Iditarod Trail Invitational to more than 11 hours on Tuesday as he headed into the treacherous Dalzell Gorge reported to be blanketed with deep snow.

Oatley, a former champion in the 350-mile race to McGrath, left the Rainy Pass Lodge at Mile 165 at 3 a.m. Ahead was a 45-mile trek to the Rohn River that all the bikers, skiers and runners would face in what some consider the toughest human-powered winter race.

Between the two checkpoints, Oatley needed to climb to the highest point of the Iditarod Trail, the often wind-scoured 3,160-foot Rainy Pass, before descending tortuous trail into the Happy River Valley and the Dalzell Gorge.

Not until 2:09 p.m. Tuesday did a pack of five other cyclists give chase. Among that group was the defending champion, Jay Petervary of Jackson Hole, Wyo., and his wife Tracy.

The trail from Rainy Pass to Rohn can be beautiful or horrible, noted co-race director Kathi Merchant.

"It is possible to push a bike from Puntilla to Rohn in 14 hours," she wrote on the race blog, "but it has taken racers as long as 24 hours from Puntilla to Rohn if conditions are bad.

"The trail can be windblown, drifted in, granular unconsolidated snow and deep snow to non-existent (trail). Racers find their way with their feet and look for a base under the snow."

Anchorage's Cory Smith, the leading skier, left Finger Lake at Mile 130 at 11:50 a.m. Tim Hewitt and Tom Jarding were the first athletes on foot, leaving Skwentna at 4:30 a.m.