

Wilderness racer gets through Rainy Pass

INVITATIONAL: Satellite shows petro in dalzell gorge; report of group moving into rohn.

By CRAIG MEDRED
cmedred@adn.com

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An effort to reach mountain bikers, skiers and runners trapped by deep snow along the Iditarod Trail high in the Alaska Range appeared to have succeeded Thursday, but the only one known for sure to be through treacherous Rainy Pass was a hedge-fund trader from the Boston area.

Alex Petro, a middle-aged businessman and part-time professor from Duxbury, Mass., was being tracked by a SPOT satellite messenger his wife made him pack for his big Alaska adventure. The device enables him to send a signal saying he is OK along with map coordinates giving his location. The coordinates supplied by the satellite tracker on Thursday put Petro down in the Dalzell Gorge moving toward the Rohn checkpoint.

Iditarod Trail Invitational official Kathi Merchant reported from McGrath hours later that she had a second-hand report of six mountain bikers and a skier making it into the Rohn checkpoint. Petro is thought to be one of those bikers, though none of that information could be confirmed.

Rohn is a one-room log cabin on a spit of land between two rivers in a crack between the towering Terra Cotta Mountains to the west and the Teocalli Mountains to the east. The only communication with the checkpoint is by satellite phone, and sometimes the mountains block the signal.

Reached by telephone at the family home in Massachusetts, Petro's wife, Leah, said her husband had apparently been having similar problems with the signal from his SPOT. She said she was relieved to get a signal just before midday Thursday indicating he was OK and on the move. Petro is an accomplished cyclist who finished second on a team in the Race Across America in 2007, but this is his first Alaska wilderness adventure.

The Invitational is a 350-mile, human-powered race from Knik to McGrath.

Petro is on a fat-tired mountain bike designed for winter riding, but given the chest- to waist-deep snow that has beset racers, he is most likely pushing his bike. The snow is so deep that even the snowmachines sent ahead of bikers, skiers and runners to pack the trail have been getting buried and stuck.

"I've been nervous for him," Leah said, "and my phone has been ringing off the hook" with calls from friends and relatives similarly concerned. They have been nervously following Petro's progress on the Invitational Web site, http://www.alaskaultrasport.com/alaska_ultra_home_page.html.

Forty-five racers left Knik on Sunday. More than 35 were still on the trail Thursday. Seven had dropped out, including Juneau cyclist Jill Horner who suffered badly frostbitten feet. She got them wet when she either went through the ice or stepped into deep overflow on Flathorn Lake on the race's first day. Her feet froze after she decide to push on for miles to the Yentna Station checkpoint before changing out of her wet footwear.

There were no other serious injuries reported. But there were concerns about racers running out of food and water after the event bogged down in snowy Rainy Pass.

Jeff Oatley from Fairbanks, a mountain biker who led the way into the Rainy Pass Lodge on Puntilla Lake, left there at 3 a.m. Tuesday and spent more than two days out in Rainy Pass. The 50-mile run through a broad, windswept valley and then up and through the slot in the mountains that is Rainy Pass proper usually takes bikers only six to eight hours, and it is rare for anyone to carry food for more than 24 hours. Merchant was hoping Oatley was joined by a larger group of racers and officials who could share food and, just as importantly, fuel for melting snow to make water.

Rich Crain, a snowmachiner from Anchorage helping to break trail for the Invitational, managed to reach racers huddling in a roofless cabin at Rainy Pass Lake just below the pass on Wednesday, Merchant said. She suspected Oatley was in that bunch with her husband, Bill, and other racers who left the lodge Wednesday.

Racers who left the Puntilla checkpoint after Oatley were advised to pack extra food because of the conditions. Bill Merchant was traveling well-equipped on a trail-packing snowmobile which, unfortunately, was reported to be stuck in deep, deep snow.

"He buried his machine," Denise Perrin said Thursday morning by radiophone from Perrin's Rainy Pass Lodge.

She got a full report from Crain, who returned to the lodge's comfortable accommodations in the dark late Wednesday to grab a few hours sleep and something to eat before gassing his snowmachine and heading back down the trail early Thursday.

Meanwhile, Terry Boyle, a longtime Iditarod volunteer and skookum woodsman, was reportedly leading the pack of snowmobiles that apparently managed to open the trail from Rohn up the Dalzell Gorge and over Rainy Pass to where racers waited.

The process of building the Iditarod Trail started south from Rohn began days ago, but it has been slow going, Kathi Merchant said.

Dalzell Creek froze when flowing at high water. When the water dropped, all the ice that had formed collapsed into the creek. Trail builders zig-zagging up the narrow gorge were being forced to find ways to bridge broken ice as they went. Kathi said they had to haul snow in places to fill holes where the creek ice had collapsed.

The trail is sure to be in passable shape by the time the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race goes through next week, but things do not look so good north of Rohn. Kathi was reached by telephone in McGrath on the north side of the Alaska Range where she said there was 8 to 9 inches of fresh snow with the wind starting to blow. Perrin reported 6 inches or so fresh on the south side of the range.

The Invitational has never before taken the winner more than about five days. Anchorage cycling phenom Peter Basinger made it in 3 days, 5 hours and 40 minutes in 2007.

By Thursday morning, competitors had been on the trail for four days, and were only about halfway to the finish with nothing but miles and miles of bad trail or no trail ahead of them.

Find Craig Medred online at adn.com/contact/cmedred or call 257-4588.

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