

## Wilderness race leaders power through pass

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(03/06/09 11:24:21)

The storm that stranded racers in the Iditarod Trail Invitational high in the Alaska Range on Thursday was easing today, but the race lead that Fairbanks cyclist Jeff Oatley sweated so hard to obtain in the 350-mile, human-powered wilderness epic appeared gone, swallowed up by the deep snow that stalled the race.

Invitational officials reported that by the time Oatley reached the Rohn checkpoint late Thursday, he had a gang of about a dozen cyclists, skiers and even a couple runners with him.

When Oatley left Perrin's Rainy Pass Lodge at Puntilla Lake at 3 a.m. Tuesday, he had been holding a lead of nearly 12 hours on the nearest cyclist with the runners about a day and a half behind. Then Oatley pushed his bike out into a snowy hell that even snowmobiles were having a tough time navigating.

By Wednesday, Oatley and the few racers that managed to catch up to him were holed up in a wind-ravaged cabin at Rainy Pass Lake waiting on teams of snowmobilers from the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race and Invitational to pack a trail over the pass above and down Pass Creek into the Dalzell Gorge.

When -- even if -- the snowmobiles made it all the way through by Thursday is unclear. The Rohn checkpoint is stuffed down in a crack between the Terra Cotta and Tea Colli mountains with the only communication out a satellite phone that sometimes can't get a connection because the mountains get in the way.

It was believed possible, if not probable, that Oatley and a gang of the stronger bikers broke over the top of Rainy Pass and started down Pass Creek early Thursday after the news reached them that the Iditarod Trail breakers had trail in through the notorious Dalzell Gorge.

Whatever the case, the lead racers were into Rohn and nine of them were already reported out of there on the way to Nikolai by this morning. The trail ahead did not sound pleasant. There was about a foot of fresh snow, and the winds out in desolate Farewell Burn were starting to whip up to 30 mph or so, perfect for ground-blizzard conditions.

Behind them, a half-dozen racers who'd found all the adventure they'd ever wanted in Rainy Pass had turned back for the lodge there and were abandoning. Several others, slowed by fatigue, were reported to be over the pass but resting in the Dalzell Gorge.

4/2/2009

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