

Iditarod Trail Invitational cyclist has been missing since Tuesday

OUT OF HIS ELEMENT: Search to be organized today if Aussie still hasn't been seen.

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Nineteen competitors in the 350-mile Iditarod Trail Invitational race from Knik to McGrath were on the trail out of Rohn on the north side of the Alaska Range on Friday afternoon, but one competitor was notably missing.

Australian cyclist Yair Kellner hasn't been seen by anyone since he left the community of Skwentna, about 100 miles north of Anchorage, at 1 a.m. Tuesday.

He is now almost 100 miles behind the tail-end Invitational walkers and concern for his welfare is growing.

Kellner trained for the Invitational with race organizers Bill and Kathi Merchant of Chickaloon. Kathi, who has spent time on trail with him, sounded a little nervous Friday, but said she has confidence in his winter survival skills.

"Regarding Yair Kellner, we are aware that he is still missing but we know that he is a very experienced rider and mountaineer," she wrote on the Invitational's blog. "I am confident that he has taken shelter in a cabin with a local person. He is a very sociable man and so lets hope that he is having a good chat with the locals waiting for the weather to pass."

She added, however, that if he is not seen by today, the Invitational will organize a search. Race officials have already asked airplanes hauling supplies for the event to drop low over the Iditarod Trail to look for him.

There is a possibility he could have gotten lost leaving Skwentna. There are several trails going north out of there. Most of them eventually go to or near the Winterlake Lodge at Finger Lake, but it is possible to get confused along the route. It is even possible to take one trail north to Shell Lake, go past there and do a big, long loop back to Skwentna on the Old Skwentna Trail.

Likewise, it is possible to bypass the Winterlake Lodge on a trail to the west used by the Tesoro Iron Dog snowmobile race, though much of that trail is now under so much snow it is hard to find.

Who was in the lead of the Invitational Friday afternoon remained unknown, although a leader was expected to emerge at Nikolai sometime late Friday. There were no reports available on who left Rohn first.

Rohn is one-room log cabin hemmed in by mountains and communications from there are poor. The checkpoint has a satellite phone, but it doesn't always work.

Before the race bogged down in snow on Wednesday, cyclist Jeff Oatley from Fairbanks appeared to have built an insurmountable lead in the competition that began in Knik on Sunday. He left Perrin's Rainy Pass Lodge about 160 miles into the race on Tuesday morning hours in front of

everyone.

Out in Rainy Pass, however, he found himself wallowing around in deep snow for a couple days along with trail-packing snowmobiles that kept getting stuck. The going was so slow that Oatley ended up being caught by the lead runners who had been a day and a half behind when he left the lodge.

The Invitational pits runners, skiers and cyclists against each other on the same rotten, wilderness trail.

Five runners -- walking more than running, however -- were among the 19 people reported out of Rohn. There were also three skiers in the group. The rest were cyclists, including Oatley. Fourteen of the approximately 45 people who started the race had given up and dropped out. One suffered serious frostbite, but is recovering.

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