

Missing endurance racer rescued

OFF-TRAIL: Aussie cyclist in invitational went wrong way but stayed put, built cave.

By MEGAN HOLLAND and CRAIG MEDRED

Anchorage Daily News

(03/08/09 22:36:32)

After spending a couple days shivering in his sleeping bag and building snow caves to block the chilling wind, Australian Yair Kellner was rescued near the historic Iditarod Trail on Saturday morning.

A cyclist competing in the 350-mile Iditarod Trail Invitational Race from Knik to McGrath, Kellner had been missing since Tuesday when he parted ways with a fellow competitor not far from the Finger Lake checkpoint about 130 miles into the race.

"I didn't feel psychologically broken down, I knew what I was doing was the best I could be doing," the 53-year-old Melbourne man said in a phone interview late Saturday.

Exhausted after 40 hours of pushing through deep snow with little sleep, he went down a wrong trail and ended up falling into a waist-deep creek in the Red Creek Canyon.

Kellner said he had started to turn his bike around when the snowy ice under him suddenly gave way and he found himself in the creek. He tried to pull himself out, but "it kept collapsing," he said.

He said he didn't panic, though. "It was scary enough that I wasn't scared," he said. "I didn't have time to be scared. The adrenaline kicked in."

He thought about ditching his bike but it had all his gear and he knew he'd be in worse trouble if he came out of the creek with nothing but the wet clothes on his back. So he struggled and eventually made it to solid ground.

He knew from previous mountaineering experience that he was in serious danger of hypothermia. Estimates from the National Weather Service said temperatures this week ranged from about zero to 25 degrees. With the 30 mph winds, though, the temperatures felt much colder.

Kellner quickly removed all his clothing and got into his sleeping bag to warm his body. "I stripped down to nothing and wrung out the clothing one piece at time," he said.

But no matter what he wrung out, the clothes still grew icicles. He fired up his stove to melt snow to drink, and spent the night trying to dry his clothes, one piece at a time, with his body heat.

The next day, he decided to go back the way he had come, which meant climbing back up a steep hill. Using the serrated pedals on his bike to wedge his way along, it took him about three hours to zigzag up about 500 yards, he said.

At the top of the canyon, he looked for his tracks but the wind had swept them clean. He was lost. Moving kept his body warm, but he didn't really know where he was going. The batteries in his GPS were dead.

For the next two days, he divided his few slices of cheese and four energy bars into squares and

he fed himself every few hours. He tried to drink enough to stave off hypothermia and dug snow caves. He poured orange Gatorade on the snow to mark his location in case someone came by, and propped his bike at the entrance to the snow cave, hoping the bike's reflectors would catch the attention of someone flying overhead.

To stay alert and to monitor possible hypothermia, he sang songs.

"I tried to think of more obscure songs, where I had to remember the words," he said.

Kathi Merchant, one of the organizers of the Invitational, knew Kellner and was confident of his survival skills. If he was lost, she figured he would find his way back. If he was hurt, she was sure he'd make camp and wait for help. But after a couple days with no word of him, she asked the Alaska State Troopers to start a search Friday.

A trooper helicopter went out Friday night but found no sign of Kellner, Merchant said. Then she turned to pilot Michael Schroder at Shell Lake.

Schroder had met Kellner a few days before at a lodge.

"I couldn't stand it that I might have been one of the last guys to see him," he said.

Schroder has had a cabin in the Shell Lake area since the 1970s and he knew how the Iditarod Trail, especially in bad weather, can be easy to lose. He took off in his Piper Cub with another Shell Lake resident, Ken Peterson, as a spotter. The two had an idea of where to look for Kellner, and they spotted him under a spruce tree about five miles north of the trail.

They dropped the cyclist a note scribbled on the back of a flight chart, weighted down by a pack of batteries. The message: "Stay put, we'll come get you."

Merchant said Schroder called her around 10 a.m. Saturday to report all was well. "He just yelled through the phone, 'I found him. I found him,' " she said.

Earlier this week, the race had one competitor go out with serious frostbite, and others had to struggle mightily to fight through deep snow to make it over Rainy Pass. It looked for a time that a whole bunch might need to be rescued, but Fairbanks cyclist Jeff Oatley made it into McGrath on Saturday to win, and about 20 racers still on the trail behind him were once again moving along well. Most of the rest of the 45 who had started the race last Sunday had dropped out.

Back in Anchorage and in good condition Saturday night, Kellner described his rescuers as "fantastic."

"People here did exactly what people back in Australia would have done if someone was in trouble," he said.

Find Megan Holland online at adn.com/contact/mholland or call 257-4343. Find Craig Medred at adn.com/contact/cmedred or call 257-4588.

[Print Page](#)[Close Window](#)

