

Invitational cyclist rescued

INJURED KNEE: Koitzsch found by "Iditarod Insider" film crew.

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Cyclist Billy Koitzsch was limping along the most desolate stretch of the Iditarod Trail in one of the most desolate corners of Alaska on Thursday when rescue arrived in the guise of a film crew on a snowmachine.

Who says the media only rides in to shoot the survivors?

Safely back in McGrath on Friday after being hauled by sled to the ghost town of Iditarod and evacuated from there by volunteers with the Iditarod Air Force, Koitzsch said he was thankful to the film crew from the "Iditarod Insider."

They encountered Koitzsch, the last cyclist in the Iditarod Trail Invitational race to Nome, shortly after he badly twisted a knee in the last of many bike crashes caused by soft snow.

He was only about 30 miles from the Iditarod checkpoint, but he was not moving well.

"It would have taken me four days just to get to Iditarod," Koitzsch said.

The snow-covered and frozen Iditarod Trail often presents cyclists with a white highway north, but not this year. Heavy snow stalled and slowed the 350-mile Invitational race to McGrath at the end of February, and it got worse after that.

Koitzsch ended up being one of only a couple cyclists who decided to keep pushing north, the operative word being "push." Koitzsch was hoping his 4-inch-wide bike tires would float him through, but they didn't.

"Every day, it was snowing," he said. Snowmobiles with the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race would occasionally come by and pack the trail, he said, but it would only "set up for an hour or two." Then the trail would go to pieces again.

"It was a good four to five inches you were sinking in even on a good trail," said Koitzsch, who spent far more time pushing the bike than riding it.

He ended up beat both physically and psychologically. He confessed it was a relief to get rescued.

"They were definitely nice guys," he said. "I tried to pay for the evac out, but nobody would take my money."

Koitzsch was reached by telephone at the home of a friend in McGrath. He hoped to be back home in Anchorage today. He plans to take another go at riding his bike to Nome next year, if the knee heals OK.

Three Invitational competitors remain on the trail. Pennsylvania's Tim Hewitt and Tom Jarding, a pair of ironmen who've done the trail before, were past Iditarod and marching north on snowshoes

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Friday. Italian Marco Berni, also on foot, was somewhere back behind them.

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