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No cause for alarm on Iditarod Invitational

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As nasty and perilous as portions of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race were this year, consider this: The Iditarod Trail Invitational was far worse.

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Where it took rookie musher Rob Loveman from Seeley Lake, Mont., eight hours and 15 minutes to negotiate the 50 miles between Rainy Pass and Rohn, it took mountain biker Jeff Oatley some 57 hours.

Loveman was a back of the pack musher going so much slower than the rest of the teams he was finally forced to drop out of the race. Oatley was the leader and eventual champion of the 350-mile Invitational race.

The Invitational brings together some of the world's toughest cyclists, skiers and runners. Most race over the Alaska Range the 350 miles to McGrath, but a hardy few go 1,000 miles to Nome.

Two racers had to be rescued in the days after the Feb. 24 start of the race. And midway through, a pack of competitors went largely out of touch for days after a blizzard pinned them down in Rainy Pass.

"For racers who feel the world needs to know where they are in real time, there are other races out there for them," said Invitational co-director Bill Merchant, who plans to ban satellite signalling and tracking devices from the race next year because of problems they caused this year. The devices have uneven performance in Alaska, he said, and can cause all sorts of confusion when people use devices like the SPOT personal tracker to signal for help only to have the signal subsequently blink in and out.

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A tracking device linked to satellites in the Global Positioning System (GPS), SPOT marks the location of the person carrying it and enables that person to send one of three pre-programmed messages: a "check in" message to family or friends indicating all is OK; an "ask for help" message to request assistance, or an "Alert 9-1-1" message that goes straight to search and rescue organizations.

Given the vast distances in Alaska, situations can quickly grow confusing when people push the "ask for help" button when far from nowhere. And it doesn't necessarily help if they later push the "check in"



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message to signal they are OK, as cyclist Billy Koitzsch did after twisting his knee on the trail near the ghost town of Iditarod.

Conflicting messages emanating from one of the most remote areas in North America in that case caused considerable concern. There was some thought Koitzsch might be hypothermic or in some other way so disabled he didn't know which buttons he was pushing. As it turned out, he was merely limping along on a painful and badly swollen knee. A camera crew traveling the Iditarod Trail by snowmobile eventually stopped to help him, and everything turned out fine.

All the SPOT did was give everyone indigestion, according to Merchant, who fears the devices will "cause more unnecessary worry for families, grief for the race and instigate unnecessary rescues."

He and others question whether an easy way to call for assistance might also make it too easy to seek help when the going gets tough. That would have been easy for many to do this year. Oatley at one point found himself wallowing in deep snow and dragging his bike for a couple days behind trail-packing snowmobiles that kept getting stuck. The going was so slow he was caught by the lead hikers, who had been about a day and a half behind.

An 11 hour lead over other bikers, meanwhile, evaporated, though Oatley still ended up reaching McGrath 10 hours ahead of the race runner-up after five days, 19 hours and 34 minutes on the trail.

"It was a tough year," he said by phone from his home in Fairbanks afterward. "But I've done the race several times now, and I always go into it expecting the worst. Then you're not surprised."

"I don't know that this was the worst," he added. "In 2006 we did a lot of pushing in much, much colder weather."

"I wouldn't say it was any gnarlier than other years, though maybe on the harder end of the spectrum," said ultradistance cyclist extraordinaire Peter Basinger of Anchorage, who this year skied the route. "This was my ninth year. You know, folks have a tendency to forget (the worst). The first year I did it, I pushed my bike the first three days."

"But this was fun. (Skiing) gave me a whole different perspective. You have your head up much more of the time."

Oatley worries that the sometimes brutal conditions, limited communication much of the way-- racers can go for days without checking in -- and the rescues this year might amplify calls for safeguards, though no one has ever died during the Invitational.

Invitational competitors have been the subject of rescues, but so have competitors in the similarly rugged Iditarod and Tesoro Iron Dog snowmachine race. And, Merchant notes, this was the first year since the Invitational started in 1997 that a state or federal agency was asked to help.

"What we're doing is not for everybody," Oatley said. "It's not a catered-to or coddled race experience. This is not a race for people who aren't skilled in ways beyond pedaling a bike or skiing."

He worries that technologically sophisticated tracking devices might actually make the race less safe rather than more safe by attracting entrants who lack important Bush survival skills. Increasingly during the race, organizers Bill and Kathi Merchant get calls, often from racers' family and friends, demanding to know exactly where people are on the trail.

"That was definitely a lot of pressure on me," Kathi said.

"Constant calls," Oatley said. "It's just not a question they can answer."

The Merchants try to avoid problems by screening who they let into what is now an internationally recognized event. More than a third in this year's field were foreigners who paid up to \$1,000 for the experience.

One of them, 53-year-old Australian cyclist Yair Kellner, was rescued nearly 150 miles into the race after he went down a wrong trail into Red Creek Canyon north of Skwentna and fell through ice into waist deep water. After struggling onto dry land and spending precious time trying to get himself and his gear dried out in subzero temperatures, Kellner tried to retrace his steps only to find the trail behind blown over.

Unable to find the way back, he camped for four days before being spotted by a private pilot who helped organize a rescue. The Alaska State Troopers had launched a search but did not find Kellner. Invitational co-director Kathi Merchant was worried about Kellner when he went missing, but she was confident he could care for himself.

A past Invitational racer, checker and trail breaker, part of Kathi's job as co-director is to background check new competitors and decide if they're qualified. In Kellner's case, she and Bill

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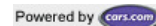
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even went on a winter camping trip with the racer to check that he was ready.

Both Merchants say the fact that 50 to 70 percent of the racers finish is evidence that screening works.

"Our racers are very prepared," Kathi said. "We could easily sign up 100 people, but we don't want to do that. We want to make sure everybody is qualified to be out there."

"I know they've turned people away," Oatley added. "People in Alaska know how bad it can get and how much you might not want to be out there."

Still, Kathi said, "we're going to have to deal with the SPOT issue, and it's not necessarily a good thing for this race. A racer panics and pushes the button and the people on the other end could overreact -- especially if they don't understand the context."

Reporter Craig Medred contributed to this story. Reporter Mike Campbell can be reached at mcampbell@adn.com or 257-4329.

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kathih wrote on 04/01/2009 10:44:34 AM:

Just a note: I will allow SAT phones and or EPRBs just not something that causes the confusion that SPOTs have cause not only in our race but two others I know of this winter. Poor performing safety equipment causes more problems than it cures.

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brrr99 wrote on 03/31/2009 06:31:16 PM:

This is crazy, they want to BAN safety equipment?? I hope they understand that once a competitor dies or is seriously injured during the race & couldn't call for help because of their silly macho rules, they'll have absolutely no defense in the inevitable lawsuit.

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leecris wrote on 03/31/2009 04:41:13 PM:

The Iditarod Invitational race wants to ban carrying GPS equipment. They say the competitors are screened so it's known they are well-versed in wilderness survival and the device could create confusion & unnecessary searches. There is potential for bad outcomes including death of a lost competitor. If the organizers choose to ban a device that can help locate a lost or incapacitated racer, then Alaska state troopers should not be expected to risk their lives because competitors consciously chose to enter an event that banned an effective safety measure. The organizers should be informed that Alaska state troopers will not be permitted to

search for any missing racers. Every potential entrant should be informed that only race staff will search for them should they become lost. The people risking their lives up in that plane doing the searching should be the people who take the money paid to enter the race.

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amberdawn0 wrote on 03/31/2009 02:17:27 PM:

It seems they could avoid banning SPOT if they make sure everyone involved understands and follows a protocol. ie. hitting help means; next person up the trail watch for me and assist, and only use the 911 button if you are in extreme peril. Clearly they allow only qualified people in and it didn't appear the racers were "relying" on the device to save them. It's just another tool, if used properly and with the right expectations, it's a good one. Not to mention it makes the race more fun to follow.

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aaron_selbig wrote on 03/31/2009 11:30:36 AM:

Jill Homer got frostbite for her efforts:
<http://arcticglass.blogspot.com/2009/03/frostbite.html>.

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nanuq wrote on 03/31/2009 06:39:31 AM:

@crbypass - If you can't understand why Bill and Kathy are making this decision, then maybe you shouldn't comment on it?

Relying on your whining to get attention and get tacit approval is no different than allowing similarly unqualified competitors in who would rely on electronics for "safety".

Well there IS a difference after all... the competitor's reliance will get them killed. Your whining just makes you look like a fool.

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japhyr wrote on 03/31/2009 00:53:47 AM:

Read the article. It says safety gear that is designed to work elsewhere, which does not work consistently in Alaska, may cause more confusion than safety. People may actually be safer with reliable but low-tech safety measures like screening and a safety pre-plan.

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crbypass wrote on 03/30/2009 10:46:19 PM:


You must be kidding me - telling participants they CAN'T carry safety gear? Who are these organizers? I don't know why racers would participate in such an expensive venture when obviously the organizers care more about padding their egos at what a superepic "race" they put on than they do about safety.

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