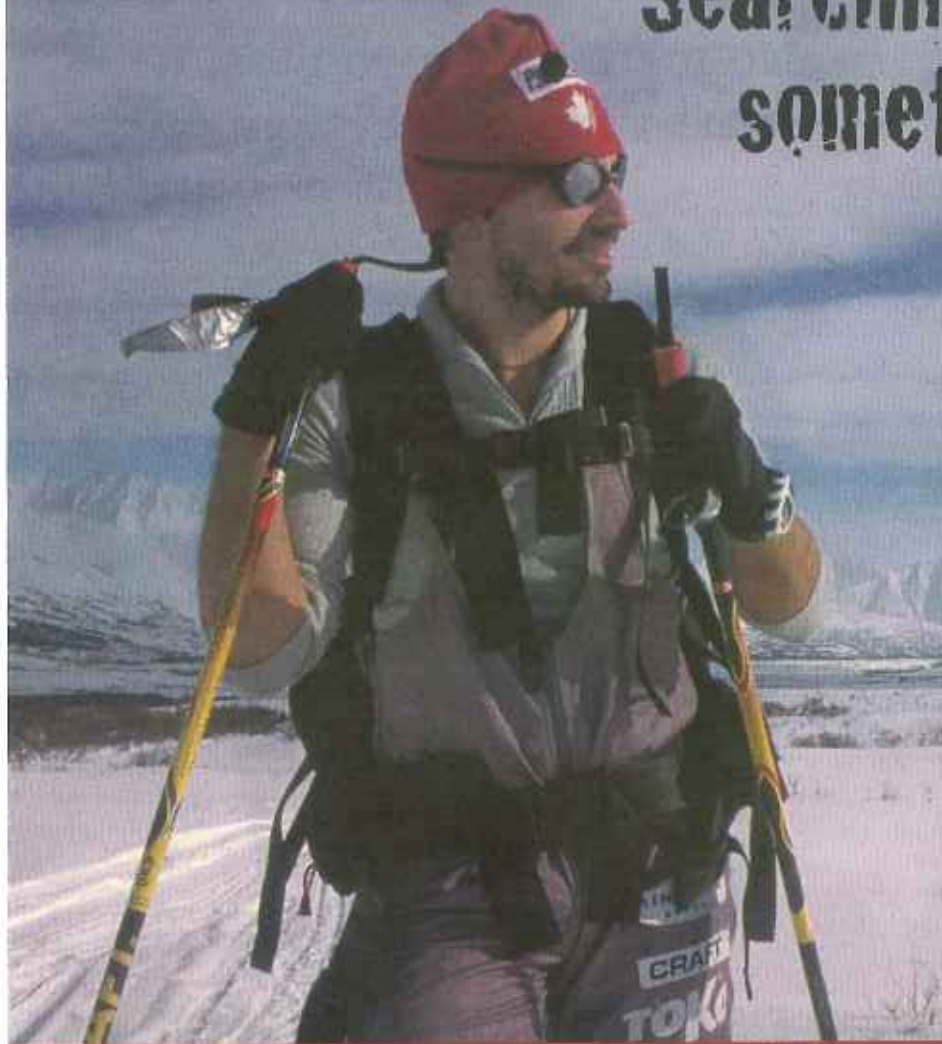


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SUPER DAVE DOES THE IDITASPORT EXTREME

ALASKA-STYLE



ACROSS 1,800 SNOW- AND ICE-COVERED KILOMETRES IN 33 DAYS

by Dave Norona

Making a mad dash to the garage where my trusty cross-country skis and plastic supply sled lay, I am hammered by 60-km-h winds. The cold air finds its way beneath tiny cracks in my armour of clothing. I meet a gentleman on my way back to the house who, with a loud bellow, says, "It's a death sentence to move in this weather." His advice does not sit well with me but we decide to press on through the blinding snow.

It was a regular day in Alaska where Kevin Vally, Andy Sterns and I were locked in a constant battle with Mother Nature. The Iditasport Extreme race started Feb. 26 on the edge of Knik Lake just outside of Anchorage, Alaska. Forty-two hardy athletes from around the globe loaded up their gear and took one last look at sanity before heading off into the unknown.

The Extreme course usually travels 560 km along the famous Iditarod dog sled route through the Alaska Mountain Range, finishing in McGrath. For the Millennium, a special twist was added: Race director Dan Bull was allowing seasoned vet-

Many were keen but the fury of Alaska's cold washed some racers hopes and dreams away even before they had reached McGrath.

Athletes had three human-powered options for their trek (bike, skis or their feet). For those who think that bikes do not belong in a harsh winter environment, think again. One had to only watch riders like Fernie native Greg Blackwell as he hammered off across Knik Lake arriving first at the mandatory camp on the frozen Flat Horn Lake after travelling 40 km in 2 1/2 hours. Greg later went on to place third in Nome.

Kevin and I were cross-country skate-skiing and although conditions were perfect, 30-pound sleds that contained our basic survival gear hampered our speed. I know many of you are thinking of a beautiful groomed track much like the trails around Lake Louise or other top x-c areas right now. Well imagine this — a four-foot wide snowmobile track that snakes its way through forests, over ice-covered swamps and yes, even across

course a week earlier, the track had never ending whoop-de-dos that snap skis and mess with racer's minds.

This was my third-time racing in Alaska, and I was familiar with the grooming practices. Kevin, on the other hand, had no idea and he had a look of utter disbelief on his face as we travelled through the forest on Day One.

Travelling by foot was just plain nuts as far as we were concerned. It's hard on the uphill and gives you no time to rest on the downhill. There was even one crazy couple that were on their honeymoon and were committed to going all the way — I mean to Nome, of course.

Kevin and I pushed along at a steady pace that first afternoon and found ourselves alongside another skier, Andy Sterns of Fairbanks, Alaska. We started talking and before we knew

event and since all our goals were the same (reaching Nome), we decided to travel together.

Andy is an incredible person. Years earlier, he had been in a ski accident which left him paralyzed. Doctors insisted he would never walk again but, as we would find out, in true Andy-like fashion he proved them wrong. Although he walked with a slight limp, his skate-skiing was incredible. Andy has also mushed the Iditarod Dog Sled Race twice, so he filled our heads with wacky stories along the way. He is one of the most motivated people I had ever met and I considered myself honoured to ski with him. Kevin felt the same way. So the three of us skied, cursed and laughed along the trail to Nome.

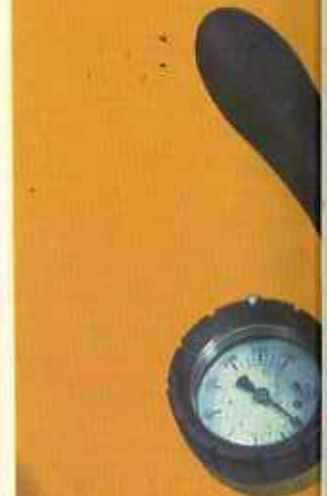
Race director Bull hates rules. At the pre-race meeting (which was held in a bar), he promised competitors nothing more than a start line, a finish line and a T-shirt. I loved his approach. We were allowed to mail ahead food or extra equipment we would need along the way to 11 en route villages. This allowed us to travel relatively light. Three days of food was the most we had to carry at one time. This does not sound like much but when you are burning 10,000 calories a day, a three-day ration equalled 10-12 pounds. Because our boxes were sent ahead by mail, we had to plan our arrival at the villages to could collect our goods. This only added to the fun.

It was like Christmas when Kevin and I would rip into a drop box and divvy up the fresh food. We started each day with a bowl of instant oatmeal and finished each day with a hardy pasta dish that contained our secret ingredient —

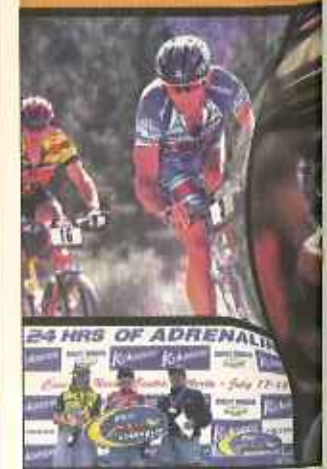
a quarter-pound of butter. Pop Tarts, Twinkies, Snickers bars, cream cheese, nuts and other junk food kept us ticking during the day. We nicknamed Andy "the eating machine." He could inhale three Pop Tarts in the time it took Kevin and I to eat one. It was mind-boggling. Andy's favourite snack were good ol' peanut butter sandwiches. During the whole trip, he must have scoffed down at least 200 sandwiches. He would take one that had been sitting in the post office for 20 days, add banana chips, marshmallow fluff and — are you ready for this — mustard before ingesting. Gross.

Our equipment had to be bomber because we had to be totally self-supported. Between Kevin and I our sleds contained: one Moss Outland tent, two Marmot minus-40 sleeping bags, two Serratus vapour bags, two Marmot 8000-metre suits, one MSR Expedition camping stove, two extra Fischer skis, one Pentax camera, one video camera, extra Craft long underwear, Oakley goggles and food. Andy went one step further and designed his sled so he could sleep in it. When we would stop he would pull all his gear out and crawl into his tiny dungeon.

The Iditasport was my first experience with winter camping and there is nothing like getting into your sleeping bag and filling it with all the gear you didn't want to freeze. It was insane trying to hop into bed along with ski boots, water bottles, socks, gloves, stove and cameras. I felt like a mummy. Nevertheless, sleeping was pure heaven. One-third of our time was spent bivouacked under the Northern Lights. Another third was spent in shelter cabins while the



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final third was spent in village schools where we would trade a warm place for an hour-long presentation to students.

The best part of the trip came when we would arrive in a village. Rural Alaska has to be the friendliest place on Earth. People would see us coming from miles away and welcome us with mugs of hot chocolate — our favorite drink. They would also offer shelter. I found it very weird to go from being outside into a warm environment. We would usually sit there for an hour with our jaws dropped open wide in disbelief of where we were. It was like coming into a movie in the middle and trying to figure out these peoples' lives. Early on in the race, I started having people sign my extra ski and it became an offering for the great hospitality we received. Native elders, teachers, mayors and four-time Iditarod champion Susan Butcher signed it.

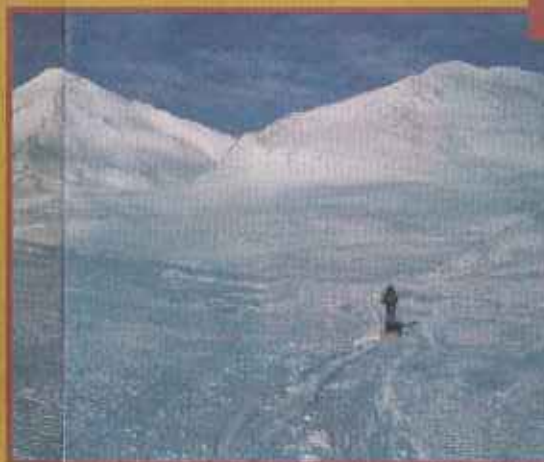
Making headway was usually pretty tough. Some days the skiing was easy and we glided along at 10 km/h. Most days, however, we were forced to use the classic shuffle, leaning on our poles so as not to slide backwards. At least 800 km were spent double-poling through whoop-de-do sections, which reduced our speed to less than five km/h. We averaged 12-13 hours of skiing per day and it was incredible how our bodies adapted to this regime. Kevin came up with a great analogy: He told me what he would do is look as far into the distance as possible and that is where we would probably be by nightfall. It

was sick and twisted, so of course I loved it.

Early morning temperatures were usually a cold minus-30 but rose to a balmy minus-5 during the day. Andy always warned us of vicious storms and when we hit the coast, we were greeted by a four-day storm with winds of more than 80 km/h and minus-50 temperatures. Needless to say we were stuck, luckily at a friend's house in Shaktoolik. We would go outside for a minute and any skin not covered would instantly freeze. Snow drifts in the street rose to 15 feet. We had lots of time to think and I won't lie to you — we spent most of it thinking about girls. At times, it was overwhelming to think of reaching Nome because we had such a long way to go. So we broke down the distance into a daily segments and tried to focus on the fun things that would happen.

On March 10, the first Iditarod dog team passed us. That evening five of the top mushers in the world had passed our bivy site. They were shocked to see us out in the middle of nowhere. Andy knew a lot of the mushers, so they would stop and give us some words of encouragement. As Andy said, they were truly the only ones that could relate to our daily predicament. Some of the slower dog teams would think they were approaching a rest spot for them and swerve into our bivy site. They were no different from us and were anxious to rest. This was then followed by prying the dogs out of the trees and placing their small

frames back into their harnesses. The toughest day of the trip came at Mile 955. Andy had pulled a muscle the day before and was now barely able to walk upon arriving at Koyuk on Norton Bay. Kevin and I watched as he tried to fight off the pain. This was the only day I had seen Andy without a smile on his face. We pushed onto Elm and it was here that Andy said he could no further. Kevin and I didn't want to leave — we had skied more than 1,400 km with this guy and were not about to finish without him. Andy, however, insisted that Kevin and I push on and said he would rest a couple of days before trying to continue. It was the only day I cried.



For 30 days Kevin, Andy and I had survived the torturous Alaskan weather and climate without one argument or disagreement. It was special. I could not have imagined doing this trip with anyone else but those two awesome individuals.

That day both Kevin and I were quiet and when I did not see Andy ahead of us, I would look back expecting to see his smiling face. But it was not there.

Kevin and I pressed on. We made great time despite thinking about Andy. Finally, at 7:30 p.m. on March 30, Kevin and I skied right down the middle of Nome's Front Street. We were the freak show of the day but we marched right into

For more Iditasport information and results, log onto www.iditasport.com or www.vimff.org/idasport..

the Board of Trade, which has the reputation as the roughest bar in Alaska. The owner quickly poured us a couple of shooters and we threw them into our tired bodies. Kevin and I both looked at each other and smiled. After 33 days and 1,800 km on the trail, words were not necessary.

On March 31, Andy tried to continue but was unable to do so. He flew back to see a doctor in Fairbanks. The snow will be around for a while so, weather permitting, he will fly back and finish the course. I know he will.

In between epic adventures and TV appearances, North Vancouver's Super Dave Norona somehow finds the time to write.

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