

By NED ROZELL

Surrender

Rays of sunlight slanted through the cigarette smoke that filled Sportsmen's Paradise lodge. I sat at the bar wearing ski clothes that needed washing, nodding at a red-

haired woman who had heard that my friend Andy and I had just scratched from the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race.

"Coming over from Bear Valley is quite an accomplishment," she said, holding a can of beer. "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Until she mentioned shame, I was pretty happy to be drinking a Coke in a heated building. But then it hit me. I had dropped out at the 50-mile point of a 150-mile race. I had never quit a race before.

But the Classic is not a normal race. It's a 150-mile winter trek that demands making a thousand decisions. Route finding is as important as perseverance; racers have nothing to guide them but map, compass, an occasional snowmachine trail and the tracks of skiers ahead. Wrong turns cost racers hours, food and fuel. Mistakes eat away at morale. Slow, hard travel wrecks schedules and punctures egos. The Classic is a lesson in humility.

Andy and I had tasted that humble pie the last time we entered the race. In 1999, we ate our 102nd and final peanut butter sandwich on a glacier 40 miles from the finish. Hours later, we ate my toothpaste like it was a packet of Gu. The next day, after we failed to reach McCarthy by the race deadline, we



Ned Rozell on the trail to Copper Center.

accepted cold hot dogs and peanut butter from a pilot sent to look for us.

Our goal for the 2002 race, held in early April, was to finish in better style. Missing the finish deadline again was not an option.

The 2002 race started on a snow-

machine trail off the Tok Cutoff Road in the Wrangell Mountains of Southcentral Alaska, and it was to end at Copper Center, 150 miles and two mountain passes away. Race organizer Dave Cramer, who competes every year, invites competitors into his home for a chili feed the night before the race. Cramer is a concrete block of a man who knows the Wrangells better than any of the racers who show up in his driveway. One of the few feelings of security in the race comes from following the tracks of Cramer's sled.

The night before the start, Cramer showed the competitors digital images of the course. After scribbling notes on topo maps, 13 of us filed into Cramer's workshop to tinker with our loads. Most people worked on fitting fuel bottles, food, shovels and other gear into their plastic sleds. Because my sled had exploded and cost us time during our last attempt, I chose to ski with only a pack. I had a funny feeling in my stomach every time I hefted the backpack and imagined skiing with 58 pounds on my shoulders. To get some of the weight off his back, Andy invented a "shovel sled" that he would tow behind him.

Our fate was set from the start. Skiing on snowmachine trails from Bear Valley to the Little Tok River, we covered only 12 miles the first day, 13 the second. In my sleeping bag, I looked at the maps and did some math. One hundred-fifty miles divided by 12½ miles per day equals 12 days.

Though a dozen days in the Wrangells would be wonderful, we couldn't continue at that pace and make it to Copper Center in one week unless we had a few "gimme days." Andy and I both knew there were none of those in the Classic. In 1999, the race became harder every day, and the same was proving true in 2002.

The crux of the race was a 6,000-foot pass near Noyes Mountain. The pass was a snow bowl; 6 miles of hilly moraine coated with bottomless sugar snow. Lucky for us, racers ahead of us had skinned a route through the pillowed maze of steep white hills. Following the slot-car tracks of those who came before, we made it through the Noyes Mountain pass in one day, but advanced just 10 miles toward Copper Center.

That night, camping in willows off Platinum Creek, Andy and I talked about our options. Even though plenty of food and fuel was still pressing down on our shoulders, I wanted to drop at the race checkpoint at Sportsmen's Paradise lodge, about 11 miles away.

"I don't really feel we have a choice," I said, bracing for Andy's rebuttal.

Looking toward the shrubs in the snowy gully where we set up camp, he nodded.

"I guess you're right."

Decision made, we sat in the snow and enjoyed our freeze-dried dinners in silence, watching the nearby Boyden Hills go pink, then turn to silhouettes. With no light pollution, the sky turned purple with a billion stars. To the north, the aurora's halo reached down from the pole and sharpened the curve of Noyes Mountain.

Surrounded by this grace, I thought about our decision to drop. Sure, we wouldn't accomplish our goal of steaming into Copper Center with the sun shining off our backs, but neither would we have the queasy feeling of watching a small plane bank into a steep turn when the pilot spotted us.

Both Andy and I have a stubborn streak that is useful when grinding through a spruce bog but not so handy in other life situations. Here, logic was telling us that the stubbornness of a mule was not enough to reach our goal.

I sat with my hot tea and took a deep breath. I looked at the Boyden

Hills and surrendered, shedding the loads of worrying about mileage and what path to take. The feeling was beautiful, made even more powerful by the mountains and the hum of quiet country.

The next morning, we saw that wolves had been moving in the early morning light, padding on the tracks of other skiers and breaking off to pursue a sheep that had risked coming down low. We followed Cramer's sled tracks down to the amphitheater of upper Lost Creek in brilliant sunshine. Lost Creek led to the Nabesna Road, which led to the Sportsmen's Paradise.

A few hours later, we skied past a sign: "Loose Horses and Dogs will be Shot." We were at Sportsmen's Paradise lodge. Andy found the race clipboard nailed to a post. The leaders had signed in only two hours before us.

"Do you think we should go on?" Andy said.

Just like in a bad movie, a gust of wind came up and blew my ski poles, which were leaning against the post, to the ground.

"It's a sign from God," I said in a Blue's Brothers' Chicago accent. "Let's quit."

Andy checked the box on the clipboard that said "Dropping Out." Five others had made checks in that same box, four had gone on, two had dropped before the pass, and two were still behind us.

In the end, the four skiers who went on—B.J. Bennedsen, Michael Gibson, Chris Wroble and Frank Olive—emerged in Gakona, rather than Copper Center, because trailbreaking through the deep snow made reaching Copper Center impossible by the cutoff time. Cramer declared them finishers for their considerable effort. The other nine skiers dropped, none advancing past the checkpoint.

Andy and I debated our decision on the long drive from Sportsmen's Paradise to Tok, and all the way from Tok to Fairbanks the next day. I quit my first race, and I reached a conclusion: coming over from Bear Valley is nothing to be ashamed of.

NED ROZELL is the author of *WALKING MY DOG, JANE: FROM VALDEZ TO PRUDHOE BAY ON THE TRANS-ALASKA PIPELINE*, published by *Duquesne University Press*.

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