

Wilderness Classic takes toll; racers happy to pay

By **TIM MOWRY**
Outdoors Editor

John Carlson was back teaching at Anne Wien Elementary School on Monday less than 30 hours after finishing the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race.

But he was wearing slippers. "I take back what I said about my feet being tough," Carlson, an ultramarathon runner, said in reference to a bold statement he made before the race. "My feet suffered."

The blisters that festered for much of 5 1/2 days he spent skiing 150-miles under the load of a 50-pound pack were just starting to heal on Monday.

"I'm not going to put shoes on until Friday if I can help it," Carlson said.

That's the kind of toll the Wilderness Classic takes on racers, even those who win.

The trio of Carlson, Keith Echelmeyer and Jed Kallen-Brown claimed victory in this year's Classic, a backcountry ski race from Nabesna to McCarthy that traverses frozen rivers, creeks, glaciers and mountain passes. They skied into McCarthy at 2 a.m. Saturday under a full moon after taking 5 days, 14 hours to negotiate the unmarked course through the Wrangell Mountains.

Of the 14 skiers who started the

race, 10 finished.

Carlson and Echelmeyer started the race together and teamed up with Kallen-Brown after abandoning a plan to take a shorter, more technical route across Chisana Glacier because of high winds in Chisana Pass.

Both Echelmeyer, a glaciologist at the University of Alaska

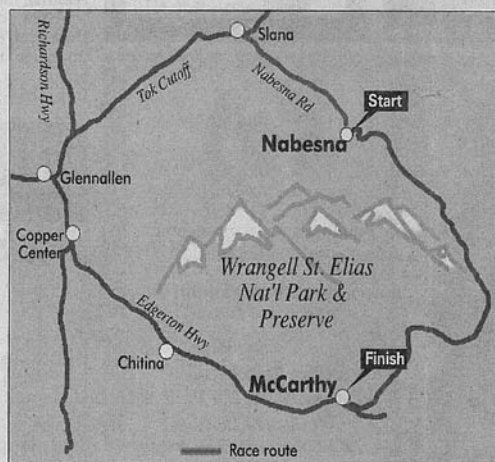
Fairbanks and experienced backcountry traveler, and Kallen-Brown, an 18-year-old freshman on the UAF ski team, described the race as "fun."

"It was a beautiful trip," Echelmeyer said.

"I'll definitely do it again next year," Kallen-Brown said after an impressive Classic debut.

But Carlson had a slightly different perspective on the race.

"It was interesting; I don't know how



much of it you would call fun," Carlson said. "It was definitely unlike anything I've done."

While he has completed running races as long as 100 miles, Carlson had never taken a backcountry ski trip wearing a backpack weighing 50-plus pounds.

"I was surprised how much strength it required to deal with the terrain," he said. "There were miles of ice that required double poling. You were falling

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RACE: Fairbanks trio wins Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race

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down with a backpack on and having to get up. It was real physical.

"The terrain changed constantly. One day you'd be on the floor of a huge river valley and the next you'd be in a windblown pass with hard-packed snow and the wind gusting to 50 mph. We were going up and down cliffs, through open water, bushwhacking through heavy alders.

"I felt a lot like I was just clawing my way out of a bag," Carlson said. "One minute you might be moving along at 3 mph and the next you're going backwards."

One of the things Carlson learned from doing the race is "you can get anywhere you want if you're willing to go slow enough to get there."

Carlson developed blisters on

his heels early in the race and the best medication was simply to ignore the pain, he said. The worst part was pulling his ski boots over swollen feet each morning.

"My feet were wet every day," he said. "Every night I had wet socks drying out in my sleeping bag."

Despite his blistered, swollen feet and aching body, Carlson said the trip was more than worth it. He and Echelmeyer saw a flock of trumpeter swans fly over Solo Mountain as they were climbing up Skolai Pass. They encountered fresh tracks from wolf packs, Dall sheep and wolverine. The scenery of the Wrangell Mountains was stunning.

"I felt like we were a long way away from everything," Carlson said.

Perhaps the real story of the race, though, was solo racer Matt Obermiller, who finished second despite taking four wrong turns that cost him the equivalent of 1½ days.

Obermiller, a rookie to the Classic but not backcountry travel, finished 14 hours behind the winners even though he climbed up and over Chitistone Pass and traveled through Chitistone Gorge, which is not one of the three suggested routes.

"He pioneered a new route but it's not one I would recommend," race organizer Dave Cramer said. "He took four or five wrong

turns and he still kept up with (the leaders)."

Obermiller lost a full day when he got lost after following a snow-machine track the wrong way outside of Chisana.

"I didn't read the route description or look at a map before the trip," confessed Obermiller, a 30-year-old carpenter who lives in the Tielke Valley between Glennallen and Valdez. "I never thought I'd be leading anybody. I thought I'd just be following other peoples' tracks."

Obermiller ended up climbing "I don't know how many thousand vertical feet" up steep, snow-covered slopes to reach the top of Chitistone Pass. He didn't have crampons and relied on his ski poles to prevent from falling while carrying a homemade backpack/sled.

"If you slipped there was no stopping," he said. "If we had had avalanche conditions it would have been scary."

Once he got to the top of the pass, he had to tiptoe around Chitistone Gorge and Chitistone Falls and bushwhack through alders to get to the valley floor. There was also the matter of a small avalanche he purposely set off en route to the valley floor.

Despite what would have been an ordeal for most people, Obermiller loved it.

"I look at it like all the parts of you. You are an orchestra," he said. "A lot of people spend their entire lives playing only a couple instruments. When I go on a trip like this I get to play all my instruments."

"How many things in life require everything out of you?" Obermiller said. "I thought the whole thing was a blast."

A trio of UAF exchange students finished third in the race. Christian Leonhard and Kenneth Urins of Norway and Christen Egeland of Sweden skied into McCarthy two hours behind Obermiller to finish in 6 days, 6 hours.

They were followed by the Fairbanks trio of Jeremy Crooks, Gabe Lydic and Yoshi Nishiyama, all Classic veterans, who finished in 7 days, 5 hours.

Four skiers pulled out of the race at the remote settlement of Chisana, about 50 miles into the race.

Fairbanks' Nicole South cited "equipment packaging failures" for quitting. Some of the gear she was towing in her sled got soaked in overflow on the Chisana River when the seal on a Ziploc bag was left open.

"Some important stuff got wet—my toilet paper, my first-aid kit," South said.

Her cook stove also "crapped out," South said. She managed to fix the stove with the help of other racers but wasn't confident it would hold up another three or four days.

"I didn't really trust it," she said.

The team of Cramer, Chris Wrobel and Dan Dunne scratched when the sole on one of Wrobel's ski boots cracked on the second day of the race and couldn't be repaired.

Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race

Nabesna to McCarthy
Approximately 150 miles

Finishers:

1. John Carlson, Fairbanks; Keith Echelmeyer, Fairbanks; Jed Kallen-Brown, Fairbanks. 5 days, 14 hours.
2. Matt Obermiller, Valdez. 6 days, 4 hours.
3. Christen Egeland, Sweden; Christian Leonhard, Norway; Kenneth Urins, Norway. 6 days, 6 hours.
4. Jeremy Crooks, Fairbanks; Gabe Lydic, Fairbanks; Yoshi Nishiyama, Fairbanks. 7 days, 5 hours.

Dunne wanted to go on but needed a partner to do so because he wanted to travel over the Chisana Glacier, a more technical route that requires a partner.

"I didn't feel comfortable going on and doing the long route by myself without knowing the country," said Dunne, a 21-year-old exchange student at UAF from Western Washington University.

Ten of this year's 14 racers were rookies, which is a good sign for the future of the Classic, said race organizer Cramer.

South is already looking forward to next year's race. After scratching, she flew from Chisana to McCarthy and greeted the trio of Carlson, Echelmeyer and Kallen-Brown when they arrived at 2 a.m. with a hot lasagna dinner and cold beer.

"I'm hooked," South said. "It's just gorgeous down there."

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