

[Close this window](#)

[Print this page](#)

FAIRBANKS
Daily News - Miner

Ski classic delivers great scenery amid dangerous situations

By [Tim Mowry](#)

Published Thursday, April 3, 2008



Watching bowling ball-sized rocks crash down around them as they negotiated a 40-foot deep ice chasm in the Nizina Glacier.

Clinging to the side of a canyon wall as they scampered along a 3-foot-wide ice shelf with the open Nizina River rushing by beneath them.

Kicking toe-holds into hard-packed, windblown snow with their crampons while traversing steep side slopes that dropped off into sheer cliffs.

Post holing through deep snow on skis while breaking trail for hours at a time through webs of ski- and leg-tangling alders.

Sliding off ice shelves and wading across knee-deep creeks.

Those were just a few of the highlights for Fairbanks skiers Brian Jackson and Ed Plumb in this year's Alaska Mountain Wilderness Ski Classic, a 150-mile backcountry ski and mountaineering race from Nabesna to McCarthy across the Wrangell Mountains.

"It was absolutely awesome," Jackson said of his first Wilderness Classic. "It was one of the best experiences I've ever had."

Jackson and Plumb were two of the nine racers who accepted the challenge that is the Wilderness Classic, the longest, toughest — and only — unsupported backcountry ski race in Alaska.

Each year, a small group of hardcore skiers like Jackson and Plumb venture into the wilderness carrying only a backpack or towing a sled with enough food and supplies to get them across some of the most rugged country Alaska has to offer, in this case the Wrangell Mountains 250 miles south of Fairbanks.

"It's our idea of a good time," Matt Obermiller, a 37-year-old carpenter from Valdez who won this year's race in little more than four days.

Sketchy situations

As is always the case in the Classic, there were "a few sketchy areas," as Plumb called them.

The gnarliest was creeping along an ice ledge along an open section of the Nizina River on the final day of the race. Open water forced racers to hug the side of a canyon wall and make their way along a thin ice shelf about 400 feet long while grabbing at pieces of brush and trees to hold them up, all while carrying a pack and their skis.

"You had to hold your skis and poles in one hand and reach in and grab the trunk of a branch or bush with the other and push into it so it didn't push you off the ledge," Obermiller said.

Perhaps the scariest moment for Jackson and Plumb came when they were negotiating a 40- to 50-foot deep ice chasm in the Nizina Glacier after making it down Skolai Creek. The canyon was new to the race this year, race organizer Dave Cramer said.

Some force of nature, most likely a huge release of water, washed out a huge wall of ice that used to butt up against the glacier and cut a 50-foot deep canyon between the glacier and a rock wall. Racers had to pick their way around ice chunks the size of cabins, scramble across narrow ice bridges and wade through the knee-deep, ice-cold creek to get through the chasm. In a few spots, huge cornices of glacier ice hung over the gorge, looming above the racers as they crossed underneath.

When Jackson and Plumb reached the canyon, it was late afternoon and rocks melting from the ice above were raining down. At one point, Jackson stepped into the water to cross the creek and a rock the size of what Plumb called “a huge bowling ball” landed next to him. Jackson estimated the rock hit the water 3 feet from him. It was close enough that the spray from the splash soaked him, Jackson said.

“That was an unbelievable experience,” Jackson said. “It was hair-raising but at the same time you wanted to stop and take pictures because it’s so awesome.”

Changing conditions

From what Jackson and Plumb witnessed, hair-raising and awesome is what the Wilderness Classic was all about.

Jackson, a 32-year-old pesticide control inspector for the Department of Environmental Conservation in Fairbanks, had dreamed of doing the Wilderness Classic since moving to Fairbanks from Wisconsin four years ago and reading a story about it in the newspaper.

Plumb, a 37-year-old hydrologist at the National Weather Service in Fairbanks, has been gradually working himself up to the Classic. The last two years he competed in the Susitna 100, a 100-mile ski/bike/foot race in the Matanuska Valley, and last year he skied across the 135-mile Denali Highway in four days. Just a few weeks ago, he joined Andy Sterns, a Wilderness Classic veteran, on a 200-mile ski trip on the Iditarod Trail from Koyuk to Nome.

And even though Jackson and Plumb sat down with fellow Fairbanksans Sterns and Ned Rozell, who have finished the Nabesna to McCarthy trek twice before, to walk them through the course, Plumb said words and maps couldn’t begin describe the country and conditions they encountered.

Every day, if not almost every hour, they encountered a different challenge. If it wasn’t walking up a frozen creek with crampons, it was stopping to put skins on their skis to climb a hard-packed, snow-covered slope. If it wasn’t picking their way across a rock- and ice-strewn sections of glacial moraine, it was wading across any number of creeks. If it wasn’t double-poling down smooth river ice, it was wallowing through chest-deep snow and brush with their skis on, getting tangled in body-, leg- and ski-grabbing alders.

“We felt like we were on a learning curve the whole time,” Plumb said. “Nothing was static; it was continually changing.”

Or as Jackson put it, “If you were miserable, all you had to do was wait a little while and it would get a little better. If you were doing all right, all you had to do was wait for a little while and it would get miserable.”

Before the race, both Jackson and Plumb questioned whether they had the skills to survive the Classic. After completing it, the two racers said they learned “a butt load,” as Jackson put it, about backcountry skiing and travel.

“It does change your perspective on things,” Plumb said of the challenges he overcame during the race. “It sure built my confidence up.”

Not to mention they were treated to spectacular views everywhere they turned. Had they not each taken a camera, Plumb said he and Jackson probably could have cut a full day off their time because they took so many pictures.

“The scenery was amazing,” Plumb said.

Close race

Obermiller, who had claimed three straight titles on a route in the Brooks Range before sitting out last year’s race, won this year’s Classic by overtaking the Anchorage threesome of Tyler Johnson, Luke Mehl and John Pikar on a plowed road just two miles from the finish after stalking the Anchorage trio for much of the race.

“The only reason I passed them was because I could skate ski and they couldn’t,” Obermiller, a 37-year-old carpenter, said. “My skis had glide and theirs didn’t.”

The Anchorage trio had waxless skis better suited for rough conditions while Obermiller was using skinnier skis that allowed him to skate ski on some sections.

“He would catch up to us every night,” Pikar said of Obermiller. “He had a gear setup that allowed him to travel fast on overflow ice and river ice and hard-packed trail and we had a gear setup for breaking trail and rough terrain.”

Obermiller dubbed his three Anchorage competitors as “The Three Amigos,” in part because their food of choice during the race.

“They stopped by Taco Bell before the race and got the 10 burritos for 10 bucks value pack,” Obermiller said. “That’s what they ate on the trip.”

Obermiller, who is known for his innovative gear designs, was also impressed with the homemade

crampons the Anchorage racers had.

“They had running shoes and they screwed roofing screws in the bottom of them,” Obermiller said.

In the end, though, it was Obermiller’s knowledge of the course that proved to be the difference. Knowing that he would be able to skate ski down much of the final 30 miles down the Nizina River, as well as the road leading the last eight miles into McCarthy, Obermiller’s strategy was simply to keep up with the Anchorage racers until they hit the Nizina River. He even allowed the three Anchorage racers a three-hour head start on the final day. They left camp at 5 a.m. while Obermiller didn’t leave until 8 a.m.

“I knew the lower Nizina was going to be clear and hard,” Obermiller said.

Sure enough, Obermiller caught up to the trio on the road leading into McCarthy, just two miles from the finish.

“We thought we had it,” Pikar said.

Obermiller ended up beating the three Anchorage racers to McCarthy by 35 minutes for a total time of 4 days, 6 hours and 10 minutes.

Despite the disappointment of being caught and passed that late in the race, Pikar and his traveling companions thoroughly enjoyed the race. The weather was perfect, the scenery was spectacular and the challenges were numerous, Pikar said.

“It was a great trip,” Pikar said. “It’s a trip worth doing in itself and not as a race.”

Classic converts

Both Pikar and Johnson have completed the summer version of the Wilderness Classic but were rookies to the winter edition. The biggest difference between the summer and winter races is that competitors actually sleep in the winter race, Pikar said. Racers have to camp out at night because of the darkness in the winter while racers in the summer can basically go non-stop because of long daylight hours.

“You’re not pushing as hard,” Pikar said, comparing the winter and summer races. “You’re never pushed to the point of hallucinations. It’s more moderate.”

The scenery is much more spectacular in the winter race, especially the Nabesna to McCarthy course, he said.

“I’d heard this was one of the most scenic routes to do if you wanted to do it,” Pikar, a 33-year-old civil engineer, said. “That was the motivation for me to go and it definitely delivered.”

Seven of the nine racers who started this year's race made it to McCarthy. The only two who didn't were race organizer Dave Cramer and his traveling companion, Chris Wroble of Anchorage, who ended up bailing out of the race after trying to pioneer a new route through the Jumpoff Icefall at the top of the Chisana Glacier. The old route through the icefall is no longer viable and Cramer was hoping to find an alternate route.

This year's field of nine racers was one of the smallest in several years and there were fewer Fairbanks racers — only Jackson and Plumb — than Cramer can remember. Several Fairbanks skiers had signed up for the race but ended up scratching for various reasons, Cramer said.

After finishing his first Classic, Jackson is a convert. He plans to be back for next year's race and is looking forward to two years down the road when Cramer said the race will likely return to the Brooks Range for a three-year stint.

"It kicks your ass but it's a good ass kicking," Jackson said, summing up the Wilderness Classic. "It's not often that an event lives up to everything you hope for and more, and this one did."