

OUTDOORS

Section
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Friday, April 7, 2000

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Mowry, Outdoors Editor: 459-7587

rip south Seattle a teaser

Just got back from a brief
to Seattle and saw some-
I haven't seen in six
hg and probably won't see
least one more.
een grass.

was a weird feeling. We
driving down the freeway at
r, shortly after landing at
Seattle-Tacoma Airport, and
ted out the window and saw
ch of green grass alongside
ad.



Tim
Mowry

ook, it's grass," I yelled, as
ad just discovered America.
r friend, Rupert, turned
ad and gave me a strange

it I couldn't help it. After
g in a sea of white for the
six months, the sight of
a grass was just too much for
I had forgotten what it looks

fter five days in Seattle, I got
ed. The temperature climbed
0 degrees a couple of those
I got a sunburn on the back y
neck. I ran in shorts and a
sleeve shirt instead of poly-
ylene and polar fleece. I
ed tennis. I watched boats
ing around Puget Sound
the waters for steelhead. I
led flowers. I killed a bee. I
ed bocci ball.

oming back to the frozen
d of Fairbanks and firing up
wood stove wasn't easy. It
like walking from one world
to another.

he bad part is that it made
think that living in someplace
Seattle might not be so bad,
ought which I am sure makes
t Alaskans, especially Fair-
kans, shudder as much as
wind of the past few days has.
he transition from winter to
ng in Fairbanks is a difficult
long one. It is a slow process
requires patience and a pair
rampons.

As winter begins to loosen its
on us, all we can do is wait
try to stay on our feet, which
not easy to do considering it's
if we're living on a giant
key rink at this time of year.
Fortunately, I have yet to slip
fall in the dog lot while car-
g two buckets full of dog
d. I have come close, very
se, but so far I have managed
void taking the plunge.

This is my least favorite time
year in Alaska. It might seem
winter is almost over and
ing is almost here but we
ow better. Did you feel that
id blowing through you yes-
day?
While it will be only a matter
days before we put our skis,
s sleds and snowmachines
ay for the season, it will be
aner month or two before we
ll out our fishing rods, canoes
d mountain bikes, or even
ink about planting a garden. It
ll be another three or four
eks before we see any open
ter in rivers and lakes.
Not that this is anything new.



CLASSIC COURSE—Brian Pekar heads into the Wangell Mountains after climbing up off Lost Creek during the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race from Tok to Gulkana. Shawn Harper photo

Wilderness race no walk in the park

By TIM MOWRY
Staff Writer

Before the race even started,
some people questioned just how
rugged and wild the route was for
this year's 14th annual Alaska
Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski
Race.

The 150-mile course through
the Wrangell Mountains paral-
leled the Nabesna Highway and
Tok Cutoff most of the way, it
was pointed out. How difficult
could it be?

"Pretty doggone tough, as it
turns out.

Only three of the 15 racers
who started the race finished.
The rest of the field fell victim to
broken equipment, food short-
ages and the temptation of cold
beer.

The trio of Shawn Harper,
Brian Pekar and Harlow Robin-
son teamed up to win the wild-
erness race from Tok to
Gulkana by completing the
course in just under a week.

This was the first year this
course was used for the Wilder-
ness Classic, which rotates
courses every three years. The
previous three races traveled

from Nabesna to McCarthy.

"I think it was a little tougher
than people anticipated," said
race organizer Dave Cramer, who
himself was one of the dozen
racers to withdraw or be disqual-
ified when the sole on one of his
ski boots split in half.

"There's a little more to it
than met the eye," he said. "It
does parallel the road, but it goes
through some challenging ter-
rain."

Harper, Pekar and Robinson
covered the course in approxi-
mately 6 days, 13 hours, during
which time they skied over tus-
socks and through patches of
willows, hiked over barren mor-
aine for more than five miles,
jerry-rigged broken sleds with
twine and repaired a broken ski
boot with hose clamps.

All the while, the three skiers
were having the times of their
lives.

"I thought it was a great
course," said Harper, a 23-year-
old senior at the University of
Alaska Fairbanks, where he is a
member of the cross country ski
team. "It was really pretty.

"I liked the fact this course

didn't have as much snowma-
chine trail," he said, referring to
last year's course from Nabesna
to McCarthy. "There was a lot
more route finding this year."

Harper, Pekar and Robinson
were among several racers who
got off the route by taking a
wrong turn off the Little Tok
River that cost the racers a day of
travel, Harper estimated.

Seven racers turned up Buck
Creek and climbed over a steep
pass in the Mentasta Mountains
before breaking trail to the Tetlin
River and then to Platinum
Creek before reaching the check-
point at Sportsman's Paradise
Lodge, the race's only checkpoint
at about 50 miles into the course.

Harper said the racers knew
they had made a wrong turn
when they were confronted with
a steep headwall leading to a
ridge. Rather than turn around,
they decided to push over the
pass, strapping their sleds to
their backpacks so they could ne-
gotiate the climb, which required
the use of ice axes.

"It was really steep," said
Harper, a three-time Wilderness
Classic finisher. "We got up to
the top and we were standing on
a knife-edged ridge.

"Everyone knew something
was wrong," he said. "Harlow
was saying, 'Dave never said we
had to bring an ice axe.'"

But the wayward racers never
contemplated backtracking a
mile or two to where they turned
off the Little Tok River.

"We had climbed up and we
weren't going to turn around,"
said Harper.

To complicate matters, a
storm blew in as soon as they
created the ridge, forcing racers
to camp below the ridge top. The
next day, the racers teamed up to
break trail to the Tetlin River,
which they followed to Platinum
Creek and on to the checkpoint.



FUN TIME—Shawn Harper stands atop a ridge in a snowstorm after scaling a steep pass in the Mentasta Mountains. Brian Pekar photo



NO SNOW—Harlow Robinson, front, and Brian Pekar hike over grass on the way to the Sanford River in the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race from Tok to Gulkana. Shawn Harper photo

Harper referred to it as the scenic route. The duo of two-time winners Eric Lindskoog and Gabe Lydic

"It was really pretty in the were the first racers to pass Tetlin Valley," he said. See RACE, Page C-3

The end is near for local ski trails

activity and a contact number for additional information.

Anyone with a boreal owl nest box in their yard is asked to report to ABO if their box is occupied.

The observatory does not want people to report great horned owl sightings.

Retriever training classes offered

The Interior Alaska Gun Dog Association is offering a basic retriever training class starting on Tuesday. The class is designed to help you and your dog become the best of hunting companions and family dogs. The class is open to puppies and young dogs, focusing on hunting retriever training. Call 451-8323 to register.

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about rigging for halibut. He put the wire herring on the end of some 20-pound-test line on a salmon rod, thinking the couple weren't going to fish long.

"Christina was already getting seasick," he said. "It was almost flat (calm). There were only maybe 6-inch waves, but she was starting to get seasick."

That didn't matter, she didn't have to fish long.

"Just 15 minutes (after) we put down

he eventually had to help because Christina was getting tired. He knew she was into a big fish, but he couldn't imagine anything more than 100 pounds.

"I've been guiding for 20 years," he said, "and about 11 for (winter) kings down there at Homer. I've never taken a fish (of any kind) over 50 pounds."

In this case, he was worried about how to handle a big fish.

"My husband doesn't have any gun" to

160 pounds, making it 60 to 80 pounds heavier than Christina.

Petruck, who has photographs of the fish, remains more than a little smug.

"I wish I would have had a video," he said.

Christina, meanwhile, is already talking like someone sold on Alaska fishing.

"It's fun to take a big one," she said, laughing. "It is really, really big."

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RACE: High attrition rate for ski race TRAILS: Fading

Continued from Page C-1

through the checkpoint, but they ended up skiing out to the Nabesna Highway because they didn't have enough food after packing for what they had planned would be a four-day race.

"Taking the wrong turn in the beginning threw our schedule off a little bit," said Lindskoog. "Gabe didn't want to be out there for nine or 10 days."

Harper and Co. had little hope of catching Lindskoog and Lydic until they noticed there weren't any tracks in front of them when they reached the Copper River.

Like other racers, broken equipment posed a problem for the winning trio of Harper, Pekar and Robinson.

The sled Harper was towing broke an hour into the race and Pekar's sled did the same on the third day. They jerry-rigged the sleds with twine by lashing them to the backpacks they were carrying until they reached the checkpoint at Sportsmans Paradise Lodge, where they shed their sleds.

The sole on one of Robinson's ski boots peeled off after leaving the checkpoint and Pekar repaired it strapping hose clamps around the boot.

"He was able to ski and hike on it," Harper said.

The Wilderness Classic was a sort of last hurrah for Pekar, a 23-year-old UAF graduate who recently took an engineering job in Anchorage and began work on Wednesday.

The 33-year-old Robinson, another UAF graduate now living in Anchorage, was a rookie to the Wilderness Classic who started the race solo before hooking up with Harper and Pekar.

Lack of snow plagued racers in some spots. Harper said part of the course from the Copper River to Drop Glacier was riddled with tussocks and that's where Crooks and Bennedson broke their skis.

"There was a section in there where it was all tussocks," said Harper.

Bare ground forced Harper,

Pekar and Robinson to strap their skis to their backpacks and walk for more than five miles coming down off a plateau on Mount Sanford to the Sanford River.

"The snow was just gone," said Harper.

As for the rest of the field, they dropped by the trail side for various reasons.

The team of Jeremy Crooks, Yoshi Nishiyama and Jay Hughes pulled out of the race after Crooks broke a ski. Rookies Ken and Catherine Geiser were disqualified for going off course when they opted to ski down the Copper River to reach the finish after their partner, B.J. Bennedson, skied out to the Nabesna Highway because of a broken ski.

Cramer, who was the only racer who didn't take the wrong turn, was the first to reach the checkpoint, but he was forced to quit because the sole of his ski boot split in half. Cramer's partner, son Eric, pulled out of the race on the second day with shin splints.

The Fairbanks team of Bob Groseclose and Rourke Williams quit the race after reaching Sportsmans Paradise Lodge. In the log book at the checkpoint, Williams and Groseclose said the cold beer sign was too much to pass up.

Despite the high attrition rate, Cramer said racers approved of the new course.

"I think everybody felt pretty good about it," said Cramer. "I had a lot of good comments about it afterwards."

Continued from Page C-1
form of water and overflow at many of the Beaver Creek crossings.

Trail conditions
BIRCH HILL RECREATION AREA: Trails are icy and hard but still skiable for skating or striding. Grooming equipment will be put away this weekend for the season.

BIRCH HILL SKI AND SNOWBOARD AREA: Closed for the season.

CANTWELL: 3-4 inches of new snow this week. Wind has pushed it around a little bit but riding is still good. Probably another few weeks of riding at least.

CHATANIKA: No melting this week so trails are still in good shape for snowmaching. Fairbanks Creek Road has been plowed. Chatanika River is still frozen solid.

CHENA RIVER STATE RECREATION AREA: Trails are still in suitable condition for snowmaching, skiing or dog mushing. Trails are open to all public-use cabins but there is some overflow on both the Colorado Creek and Angel Creek trails. Stiles Creek Trail should still be good for traveling around Four-Mile Ridge. East Fork Trail should also be good for at least another week or two.

CHENA LAKES RECREATION AREA: Trails are icy. No grooming was done this week. Still track set for classic skiing by the river and mushers are still using the 12-mile trail at the lake. No more grooming unless more snow falls.

CREAMER'S FIELD: Front-viewing field is closed for migration but you can still use the trails in the back of the field.

DENALI HIGHWAY: Superb spring riding conditions with 6 inches of new snow on Tuesday. Poker run from Summit Lake to Maclaren River Lodge with almost 200 people passed through on Thursday. No plowing yet; you can still ride in from both ends of the highway.

DENALI PARK: Road in Denali National Park and Preserve will be opened to Savage River today. You can still park at the Savage River campground to access the trail where it leaves the road about one-eighth of a mile past the campground. There is 10 miles of off-road trail before you get back on the road, which is plowed to at least the Sanctuary

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