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### Backcountry Slog

Skiers face deep snow, slow going in Wilderness Classic

*TIM MOWRY Staff Writer*

Ask Frank Olive if he had fun during the Alaska Mountain **Wilderness Ski** Classic and he will give you an honest answer. "It was a lot of work ... not what I'd call a good time," said Olive, one of only four finishers in this year's 150-mile find-your-own-way, fend-for-yourself trek through the Wrangell Mountains. "There were times out there when you weren't happy to be where you were."

The hardest part was going so slowly, despite the stunning scenery skiers enjoyed most of the trip, Olive said.

"Just keeping going through that deep snow, step after step after step, making only 1 mph," he said, describing his daily routine during the eight-day race. "You could see what you wanted to get to but it took forever to get there."

"I was looking right down on the Sanford River and it looked like it was 200 yards away," Olive said. "Three hours later I still wasn't there."

Welcome to life in the Wilderness Classic, the only race in Alaska where racers have to find their own route and haul all their own gear. There are no trails, no trail markers and no resupply points.

This year's event, the 16th annual, was more a war of attrition than a race. Only four of 13 competitors that started the race on March 31 finished, and even those racers took a shortcut because the going was so slow.

The Fairbanks trio of Olive, B.J. Bennedson and Michael Gibson, along with Chris Wroble of Anchorage, arrived together at Gakona Lodge early Sunday night after deciding to turn down the Sanford River rather than ascend the Wrangell Plateau and continue on to Copper Center. The detour cut about 10 miles off the normal race route.

"We knew if we went to Copper Center it was going to take another two or three days and we'd be overdue and then they'd send somebody looking for us," Gibson said, referring to the race's eight-day finish deadline. "We didn't want to run into that situation."

Though Bennedson, Gibson, Olive and Wroble took a shortcut down the Sanford River, they were awarded official finisher status by race director Dave Cramer.

"I don't consider it a bailout," said Cramer, who pulled out 50 miles into the race due to a chest cold. "They didn't turn back. They forged ahead. They would have been overdue if they had done anything else."

Forge is a good way to describe what the foursome of Bennedson, Gibson, Olive and Wroble had to do to reach Gakona. The four skiers encountered knee-deep snow for much of their eight days in the backcountry.

"There was a lot of trailbreaking, that's for sure," said Bennedson, who was racing his second Classic after pulling out of the race two years ago with a broken ski. "We had six days of breaking trail and two days of good skiing."

The deep snow convinced most racers to bail out of the race by the time they reached a mandatory checkpoint at Paradise Lodge at Mile 28.5 of the Nabesna Road, just 50 miles into the race.

Six racers--Cramer, Ned Rozell, Andy Sterns, Ted Moore, Pete Robertson and Nicole South--all pulled out of the race at the checkpoint, most because they felt it was going to take them too long to finish if they kept going.

Three racers didn't even make it to the checkpoint, including former Wilderness Classic champion Roman Dial of Anchorage, who is perhaps Alaska's most-famous adventure racer. Dial and his partner, Issac Walton, turned back on the Little Tok River because they reportedly ran into a patch of pitched overflow they didn't feel they could get up without crampons, which they didn't have. Matt Obermiller of Valdez also turned around and returned to the start.

While he was still having a hard time fitting his swollen feet into a pair of tennis shoes on Tuesday, Gibson said his first Wilderness Classic was worth it.

"It was mentally and physically challenging but at the same time it was an exhilarating experience," said the 26-year-old Gibson, a natural resources management student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

"Doing 150 miles on a hard-packed, marked trail would be big step for a lot of people," he said. "This is big step up from that."

The scariest moment in the race for Gibson came as he, Bennedson and Olive were skiing through a narrow 6,200-foot pass on the second day.

"There were a lot of 'whumping' noises," Gibson said, referring to the sound of snow settling. "At one point Frank and B.J. were on a slide slope above me and we heard a whump and there was a crack in the snow right above Frank and B.J."

"Avalanche conditions were really high," he said. "It definitely wasn't a place you wanted to hang out."

Bennedson felt the same way, especially when he saw the crack in the snow open up above him. "You could hear the snow settling all over the place," he said. "It was kind of a scary place."

Bennedson, Gibson, Olive and Wroble spent the last 85 miles of the race traveling together after teaming up just outside Paradise Lodge. While Bennedson and Gibson had started the race as a team, Wroble was partnered with Cramer for the first 50 miles of the race and Olive was traveling solo.

But Cramer dropped out at Paradise Lodge and Wroble hooked up with Bennedson and Gibson. Had Cramer not pulled out, Gibson might have had to. He broke a ski on a rock the day before reaching Paradise Lodge and ended up borrowing Cramer's skis after walking into the checkpoint.

Olive caught the trio on Tanada Lake shortly after they left the checkpoint and the four traveled the rest of the way together, sharing the trail-breaking burden.

"Having four of us really helped out a lot," said Bennedson. "It was a big difference."

The four skiers adopted a daily routine of rising at 5 a.m. and skiing from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with short breaks for food and map-checking mixed in.

The only two good parts of the course were a 25-mile section of snowmachine trail from Paradise Lodge to Copper Lake and a six- or eight-mile stretch of overflow on the Sanford River, according to Olive. They followed caribou trails when they could.

"By the time we got down to the Sanford River we were going at snail's pace," Olive said.

That's when the four skiers decided to head down the river rather than up and over the Wrangell Plateau. "By that point we were all pretty tired of breaking trail," said Gibson.

The group unanimously agreed to turn down the river.

"We talked about it for quite a while," Bennedson said of the decision to alter course. "We felt like if we got to Gakona we'd gone the distance."

While the skiers made some minor navigational mistakes, it's doubtful they could have gone much faster, said Bennedson, a 34-year-old English student at UAF who hails from Denmark.

"We made some navigational mistakes but they weren't big ones," Bennedson said. "It probably made it a little bit harder for us."

Despite the rigors of the race, both Olive and Gibson were already contemplating next year's race after getting their first taste of the Wilderness Classic, as well as a dinner of lasagna and beer at the finish line,

"We were sitting there eating lasagna and drinking a beer and Dave (Cramer) was telling us about next year's route (from Nabesna to McCarthy)," Gibson said. "You could see the mountains out the window."

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