

## COLD FEET, HARDY SOULS

WHEN THE **ARROWHEAD** 135 DEBUTED THIS WEEK, A FEW DARING RACERS -- WALKING, BIKING OR SKIING -- DECIDED TO GO THE DISTANCE.

*Richard Chin, Pioneer Press*

Hard-core athletes hit a hilly, snow-covered trail in the north woods for a grueling test of endurance in two recent Upper Midwest races.

Last Saturday, of course, there was the American Birkebeiner, North America's biggest cross country ski race, a 32-mile marathon that attracts international elite athletes along with thousands of citizen racers to northern Wisconsin every year. There was also the

### **Arrowhead**

135.

Never heard of it? That's no surprise.

The 135-mile self-supported, multiday ultramarathon in northern Minnesota was held for the first time Monday through Wednesday. It wasn't well publicized, and competitors in the **ultra**-endurance sports community learned of it largely through word of mouth. Only 10 racers started the race.

But among those 10 were some pretty tough hombres.

Brian Robinson, for example, flew in from Mountain View, Calif. "Flyin' Brian," 43, became a legend in hiking and backpacking circles in 2001 when he was the first and only person to achieve a Calendar Triple Crown: hiking the

Appalachian Trail, the Continental Divide Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail -- 7,400 miles -- in 300 days.

Mike Foster came up from Fort Benning, Ga. A major in the Third U.S. Army Ranger Battalion, Foster, 37, just returned from Iraq for a long leave. He learned about the **Arrowhead** 135 on the Internet.

"I'm trying to find ways to fill up my month, and this is the best thing going this week," he said.

Laurie and Dick Woodbury, a White Bear Lake couple, also were there. She's 49. He's 60. Each has completed 14 Ironman triathlons. But now, they're looking for a challenge with a few more unknowns.

"The Ironmans are getting too predigested," Laurie Woodbury said. "It's always fun to get in on things before it gets too huge and hyped up and blown out of proportion."

### SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The **Arrowhead** is a different kind of endurance event, an odd combination of epic and low key.

It was held on the Department of Natural Resources **Arrowhead** State Trail, a trail primarily used for snowmobiling that runs from about International Falls to Tower.

Racers started at 7 a.m. Monday at the north end of the trail and had until 7 p.m.

Wednesday to complete a 135-mile trek under their own power.

Eight racers decided to ride the route on mountain bikes with winter tires. One decided to walk. One opted to use cross country skis.

The racers could resupply at a checkpoint at about the 80-mile point. And some would take advantage of food and shelter at lodges near the trail. But otherwise, there would be no feed stations. All the competitors were required to be self-sufficient, and most of them would spend at least some time bivouacking on the trail.

Each competitor was required to carry at least 15 pounds of gear, including a sleeping bag rated for 20-below-zero temperatures, sleeping pad, bivouac sack or tent, a stove to melt snow for drinking water, a headlamp and a flashing red light. Each racer also was required to finish with at least one day's worth -- 3,000 calories -- of food.

Modeled after Alaskan events like the Iditasport and the Susitna 100 -- multiday, self-supported winter wilderness ultramarathons -- the **Arrowhead** 135 is the only event of its kind in the lower 48 states, according to race director Pierre Ostor.

The 48-year-old White Bear Lake resident and Iditasport veteran completed the 100-mile Susitna 100 on foot Feb. 19. He planned to bike his own race after just eight days of rest.

The **Arrowhead** 135 is intended to be a sister event to the Kiehl's Bad-water Ultramarathon, a 135-mile foot race from Death Valley to Mount Whitney, Calif. Eventually, the race organizers would like to create a grand-slam series, linking four 135-mile races in extreme conditions.

"Maybe one in South America in the jungle," Ostor said.

The **Arrowhead** race cost \$100 per competitor. Unlike marathons run by an army of volunteers, only four people staffed last week's race.

One of them, Air Force veteran Jonathan Yeakel, patrolled the trail on a snowmobile. He shared the sentiments of a lot of local snowmobilers: People trying to ski, walk or bike the trail were basically crazy.

"I've done a little more dangerous stuff in my life, but I don't know if I could do this," he said. "There's a hill out there, we call it Death Hill. On a snowmobile, you've got to goose it."

## GOING, GOING, GONE

The temperature at the race start was about 9 degrees, but after sundown on the first day, the thermometer reading really started to drop.

At about 10 p.m., the lead racer, Matt Evingson, 35, of Minneapolis, arrived on his bike at the 80-mile mark, a checkpoint at a lodge at Myrtle Lake.

"My energy level is great. And my muscles feel great," he said. But his knee was hurting. He took some pain pills, ate some food and debated whether to rest or push on.

"Those hills were really tough," he said. "It's getting colder, for

sure.&quot;

Evingson may have had a technological advantage over some of the other bikers. He pedaled a custom-made bike built by his brother to accommodate cartoonishly large tires designed to float over soft snow.

He decided to push on, despite his knee. He left the lodge after resting only about an hour, got back on his bike and pedaled off into the cold darkness.

Ostor, also biking, showed up at Myrtle Lake a couple of hours later. He decided to sleep for a few hours. &quot;I don't have much legs left from last weekend,&quot; he said. &quot;I ran for 100 miles.&quot;

He was up again at about 5 a.m. &quot;My butt is sore. I lost some skin already. Thirteen hours to go at least,&quot; he said. &quot;What we do for fun, eh?&quot;

The race was just into its second day when the first competitors start dropping out. The Woodburys, bikers, scratched at about 10 a.m.

At about that time, Bill Shand, of Red Lake, Ontario, also reported he would drop out. The freewheel on his bike broke, so he couldn't pedal it. He pushed it through the snow for about 5 1/2 hours until he reached a resort at Elephant Lake, where he stayed overnight.

&quot;I'm not much of a walker,&quot; he said as he ate Froot Loops at Melgeorge's Resort. &quot;And these boots aren't made for walking.&quot;

But Shand was back in the race when a reporter offered to loan him the wheel

from his bike. Shand said part of the appeal of the race is accomplishing the event without outside help. But he didn't want to quit, either.

"I was bummed last night. I was bummed. I've never scratched in my life. Been racing for 10 years and never scratched," he said as he fitted the wheel to his bike.

By about noon, three racers had reached the lodge at Myrtle Lake: Shand; Foster, a biker; and Ron Kadera, the only racer on skis.

Kadera, a veteran of 18 Birkebeiners, decided he needed to try something different. The owner of County Cycles in Roseville, Kadera is also a sponsor of the race. Kadera estimated the temperature dropped to about 20 below zero during the night.

"It's been difficult. I've never ridden in the snow. Last night was the coldest weather I've ever seen, bar none," Foster said. "I had an ice cube form in my nose last night."

Word arrived that Evingson had just finished the race, downing pain pills to get to the end.

The three racers at Myrtle Lake soon headed out again, each with a different target for finishing. "I'm hoping 10 hours," Shand said. Maybe by midnight, said Kadera. Early Wednesday afternoon, said Foster.

"I want to finish so bad," he added.

The attrition rate continued to rise. Brian Block of Ames, Iowa, had to drop out because his bike's derailleur broke. Josh Peterson of St. Paul arrived at Myrtle Lake saying he was throwing in the towel.

"I got into my sleeping bag at 7, and I started shivering," he said. "I didn't sleep at all, I was so cold."

He built a fire, "but I was so fried. I was so cold and wet."

"There were wolf tracks everywhere," he added. "When you're sleeping or trying to sleep, you hear these things. You think, 'Oh, what if a wolf comes along and bites me in the leg?' "

Robinson showed up at Myrtle Lake at about 5 p.m. pulling a sled. He also announced he was done. He had frostbite on his fingers. "I was prepared for 5 or 10 below," he said. "Even walking, I couldn't maintain my temperature. It was fun while it lasted," he said.

Ostor, who would finish about 33 hours after he started, said he already has about 15 people interested in doing the race next year. Within a couple of years, he projected that number may climb to 50 or 75 racers.

Both Peterson and Block said the same thing: "I'll do it next year for sure."

For more information: [www.arrowheadultra.com](http://www.arrowheadultra.com)

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#### 4 PHOTOS BY RICHARD CHIN, PIONEER PRESS

1) Legendary hiker &quot;Flyin' Brian&quot; Robinson flew in from Mountain View, Calif., to compete in the only winter wilderness multiday ultramarathon in the lower 48 states.

2) Ron Kadera, the only skier in the **Arrowhead** 135, tows the mandatory gear, including a sleeping bag warm enough for 20-below-zero temperatures, a sleeping pad, a bivouac sack or tent and a stove to melt snow for drinking water.

3) &quot;I've never scratched a race in my life,&quot; said Bill Shand, a racer from Red Lake, Ontario, who managed to get rolling again after borrowing a part to fix his broken bike.

4) At a checkpoint about 80 miles into the **Arrowhead** 135 ultramarathon, biker Matt Evingson consults his map and tries to decide whether to sleep or keep pedaling.

PHOTO Pierre Ostor, race director