

A Cold Classic

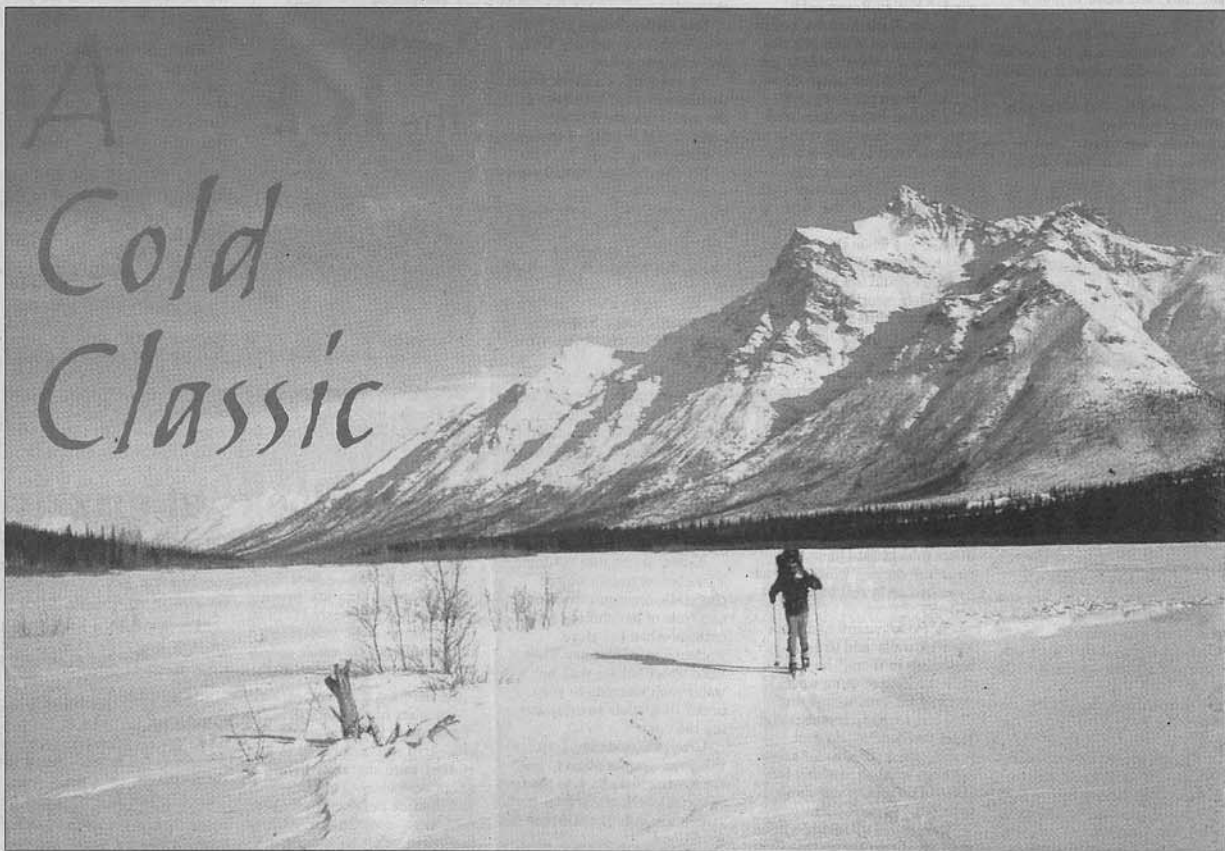


Photo by Jed Kallen-Brown

ENTERING THE GATES—With 6,666-foot Boreal Mountain looming in the background, Erinn Whitmer of Fairbanks skis through the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve in the Brooks Range during the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race, a 130-mile backcountry race from Galbraith Lake to Wiseman. The mountain was named in 1924 by Brooks Range explorer Robert Marshall and is considered one of the two Gates of the Arctic that sit on each side of the North Fork of the Koyukuk River. Boreal Mountain sits on the east bank and 5,550-foot Frigid Crags sits on the west.

Wilderness Classic skiers faced chilly conditions in Brooks Range race

By **TIM MOWRY**
Staff Writer

Not having a thermometer to know how cold it was during their five days on the trail in the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race didn't bother the winning team of Jed Kallen-Brown and Erinn Whitmer.

In fact, given that the temperature dropped to a reported 50 degrees below zero on the first two nights of the race in the Brooks Range and stayed well below zero for most of the race, it was probably better they didn't know how cold it was.

Besides, after a while Kallen-Brown and Whitmer devised their own kind of thermometer based on which piece of their gear wouldn't work.

"We came up with our own list of reasons why it's colder than 10 below," said Whitmer, who was running her first Wilderness Classic.

Among them:

- Kallen-Brown's knife broke as he tried to cut into a frozen brick of cheese.
- Gaskets on the pump of their stove wouldn't work because they shrank in the cold.
- The bindings on their skis froze shut several times.
- They fixed a broken pole basket by "gluing" it back onto the pole with cold water.

All of that and they still managed to win the Wilderness Classic.

It took Kallen-Brown and Whitmer four days, 12 hours and 57 minutes to ski the approximately 130 miles from Galbraith Lake to Wiseman, a distance that a North Slope truck driver covers in an hour and a half on the Dalton Highway.

"It was crazy," said Whitmer, a 22-year-old senior and former ski racer at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who was competing in her first Wilderness

Classic.

That's just one word to describe the 17-year-old Classic, which is rated as Alaska's most extreme and remote backcountry race. There are no checkpoints, no support, no trail markers and no prize money. Competitors blaze their own trail through mountain passes, over glaciers and down rivers, haul all their own gear and food in backpacks or sleds towed behind them and often travel in teams for safety purposes.

Eight racers showed up for this year's race, which started on March 28, but only four finished. The others to finish were Dave Cramer, who serves as race director, and Chris Wrobel, who arrived in Wiseman 2 1/2 days after Kallen-Brown and Whitmer.

After taking seven days to complete the race and suffering frostbite on one of his fingers, Cramer said he couldn't have been happier.

"It was a fun race," said Cramer, who has organized the race for the past several years.

Two racers—Frank Olive of Fairbanks and Oakley Cochran—quit on the first day because of the cold and the team of Yoshi Nishiyama and Jason Tinsley



Photo by Dave Cramer

COLD CAMP—With the temperature approaching 50 degrees below zero high above the Itkillik River Valley, Chris Wrobel cooks in camp after the first day of the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race. Wrobel, from Anchorage, and his partner, Dave Cramer of Tok, finished the 130-mile backcountry race in seven days.

pulled out at the start after Tinsley fell ill.

It was Cramer's idea to move the Classic, which used to alternate courses every three years, to the Brooks Range after eight straight years of racing in the Wrangell Mountains.

"It turned out to be a heckuva route," said Cramer, who mapped out the course.

This year's race took place entirely north of the Arctic Circle. From Galbraith Lake, racers skied up the Itkillik River Valley, around 7,457-foot Mount Doonerak and down the North Fork of the Koyukuk River to the village of Wiseman.

The course couldn't have been more inspiring, said Wrobel.

"It was awesome," he said. "Going through the Gates of the Arctic is spectacular. Skiing by Mount Doonerak hanging right

over your shoulder is incredible."

Caribou greeted racers at the start at Galbraith Lake and were spotted at several points along the North Fork of the Koyukuk River.

"We saw a lot of caribou and we saw a lot of tracks from wolves, wolverines and lynx," said Wrobel.

While competitors in this year's Wilderness Class confronted trail conditions that ranged from decent to poor to what-the-heck-are-we-doing-out-here, the aspect of the race that posed the biggest challenge to racers was the cold.

"We didn't know how cold it was; we just knew it was cold," said Whitmer, who had never traveled in the Brooks Range before.



Photo by Bernie Hicker

VICTORY DINNER—Jed Kallen-Brown, left, and Erinn Whitmer enjoy a 1:30 a.m. dinner of pizza and beer at Alaska's Arctic Get-away Bed & Breakfast in Wiseman after completing the 130-mile Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic Ski Race on April 2.

CLASSIC: Cold biggest foe in race

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At one point, Whitmer broke a pole basket on one of her poles and they used water to glue it back on.

"It froze on just like Super Glue," Whitmer said. "It froze so quickly we didn't even have time to turn it."

She skied the rest of the race with her pole basket on backwards. It wasn't perfect but it was better than no pole basket, she said.

"There's a way to fix everything," said Whitmer. "You just have to be positive and open-minded."

Despite their youth, both Kallen-Brown, 20, and Whitmer, 22, are experienced backcountry travelers.

Kallen-Brown, who will graduate from UAF this spring, completed the Wilderness Classic three years ago and he is an accomplished climber.

Whitmer, who spent four years on the UAF ski team, was one of the top female Nordic skiers in the United States two years ago and has spent a lot of time in the mountains, including a stint on Mount McKinley where she made it to 18,000 feet.

The cold temperatures conspired to make for a tougher and slower race because skis didn't glide, said Kallen-Brown. He and Whitmer felt as if they were skiing on sandpaper for much of the race.

"It would have been a lot faster if it had been warmer," he said.

Getting geared up each morning to confront the cold was the hardest part, Kallen-Brown said.

"Once we got going, things were fine," he said.

While Kallen-Brown and Whitmer wore backpacks weighing about 40 pounds, Cramer and Wrobel towed their gear in sleds weighing around 50 pounds.

The worst day was the second, Kallen-Brown said. He and Whitmer had to negotiate what was basically a canyon wall at the headwaters of the North Fork of the Koyukuk River in what Kallen-Brown described as a "hellacious" wind. It was "wind that would knock you over," said

Whitmer.

"We were wearing all our clothes and we couldn't stop because it was so cold and windy," Kallen-Brown said.

To complicate matters, one of the bindings on Whitmer's skis froze and she wasn't able to get her skis off to put crampons on to climb down the steep wall. After Kallen-Brown descended one steep section with crampons, Whitmer tried to ski down the slope and fell, running into Kallen-Brown. Both skiers ended up sliding 30 or 40 feet down the slope.

That was when they decided they had to get Whitmer's skis off so she could use her crampons. They resorted to kicking the binding until it came loose. "At that point we had to get them off and if it broke we'd deal with it," Brown said.

The low point came when one of Whitmer's mittens blew away and she had to dig through her pack to find a spare. She ended up with frostbite on the tip of one of her fingers but was able to get into her crampons and walk down the slope.

It took Cramer and Wrobel six hours to negotiate their way down the canyon, which Cramer described as "a real precipitous feature."

"It's very narrow and there are rock walls and (frozen) waterfalls in there," he said.

"It's the kind of thing where if you had full mountaineering gear (i.e. ice axe, crampons and rope) you could go down it."

"We skied down as far as we could go without reaching the point of no return and climbed back out," Cramer said.

They ended up taking a different route down the canyon that featured two steep slopes they were able to negotiate with the help of lightweight, step-in crampons. It took them six hours to get down the canyon.

"It was intimidating but we managed it," said Cramer. "Mountaineering gear would have been nice."

In fact, Cramer plans to rewrite the course description for next year's race and will recommend that racers have crampons, rope and an ice ax.

The canyon was the only real technical part of the course, Cramer said. Other than that, it was just a matter of coping with the cold.

Like Kallen-Brown and Whitmer, neither Cramer nor Wrobel had a thermometer.

"It was kind of a shock when we heard it could have been in the minus 50s the first two nights," said Wrobel. "I thought it was pushing minus 30 or 40."

But Cramer and Wrobel were prepared. They had a mountaineering tent and down sleeping bags rated to 40 below. They also had plenty of clothes, including synthetic down jackets and pants.

"We brought a lot of clothes and would change frequently" to avoid wearing wet clothes, Wrobel said.

While they had plenty of gear to keep warm, Cramer and Wrobel didn't have much food to spare. They subsisted mostly on pasta, rice, beans, cheese and peanut butter.

"I finished the race with three almonds and one package of peanut butter crackers," said Wrobel.

Kallen-Brown and Whitmer subsisted on peanut butter, chocolate, couscous, dried meat and "lots of hot chocolate and oatmeal when the stove worked," said Whitmer. They filled water bottles with hot water each morning to keep under their coats to drink during the day.

Given the cold temperatures this year, Cramer plans to push the starting date back to the first or second week of April for next year's race in hopes of warmer conditions.

Had you asked Whitmer a week ago whether she would do the race again, she said she probably would have told you no. But after a week of rest and reflection, Whitmer said she was already thinking about next year's race.

"Now that it's over, it's great," she said. "I'm ready to do it again."

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