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Not your ordinary camping trip

Wilderness Classic racers prepare to endure a week of discomfort

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Ned Rozell returned from a week-long, 110-mile ski trip in the White Mountains National Recreation Area on Wednesday without a single blister. But he knows that won't be the case in the upcoming Alaska Mountain **Wilderness Ski** Classic.

"I know I'm going to get blisters," said Rozell, talking about the 150-mile backcountry race from Tok to Copper Center. "The Classic is another thing. You push yourself so hard you don't always stop to tighten your (ski) boot even when you know you should. You just keep moving.

"That's why people have quarter-size blisters at the end of the race," he said.

Instead of skating on a hard-packed trail and hop-scotching from one warm cabin to the next, as he and his girlfriend did in the White Mountains, Rozell and his traveling partner, Andy Sterns, will be bushwhacking it through the Wrangell Mountains. There will be no wood stove to dry out wet gear, no thick mattress pads to sleep on, no trail map or trail markers to follow.

"When you've got a cabin to sleep in, you can recover so much better than in a tent, especially when you're trying to eat up so many miles in a day," Rozell said.

The Wilderness Classic, now in its 16th year, is not your ordinary camping trip.

"Basically, it's how much discomfort you can endure," Rozell said.

Rozell should know. He and Sterns spent more than 10 days on the trail in the 1999 Wilderness Classic race from Nabesna to McCarthy, subsisting almost exclusively on the more than 100 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches they packed for the trip.

Race organizers sent a plane out to search for the Fairbanks duo after they failed to show up within the 10-day race cutoff. While they weren't in any serious trouble and were found only about 15 miles from McCarthy, they were getting low on food and spirits.

"That was the hardest outdoor thing I've ever done," confessed Rozell, who spends a good part of his time doing things outdoors. "There's not much more challenging things to do out there."

As of Monday, a field of a dozen racers were entered in this year's Wilderness Classic, according to race organizer Dave Cramer, who also competes in the race.

"Some familiar faces and a couple of new faces," is how Cramer sized up this year's Classic competitors.

Roman Dial of Anchorage, a former winner in both the summer and winter editions of the Classic who is perhaps Alaska's best-known adventure racer, is back after a hiatus of several years.

"He hasn't done one of these in a long time but if he's in there he's going to be competing," Cramer said of Dial, who figures to be the man to beat.

One person who could give Dial a run for his money is Matt Obermiller of Valdez, who put in a respectable rookie race last year despite misreading his map and taking the wrong route through Chitistone Pass. Cramer said Obermiller has improved his map-reading skills and done more research on this year's route. Last year he didn't look at a map until after the race started.

"He's a big, rangy, strong guy," Cramer said. "I expect him to put in a pretty strong performance."

Rozell and Sterns aren't slackers, either, regardless of what happened in their rookie race three years ago. While they haven't been back to the Classic since then, they haven't exactly been lying on the couch eating potato chips. Last year, Rozell and Sterns skied 600-plus miles from Nenana to Nome.

"We don't have a time goal," Rozell said. "We just want to finish in good style without being hungry or hurt. We just want to have a good time."

Racers are advised to pack 10 days worth of food and fuel for the trip and Cramer said the top racers will probably take at least five days to finish the race.

"I think five days is the minimum," Cramer said. "It's not a short course and it's not a real fast one either."

The race starts near Mile 91 of the Old Tok Cutoff at the Little Tok River and finishes at the Grams Homestead, a bed and breakfast at Mile 105 of the Richardson Highway. Racers must sign in at the Sportsmen's Paradise Lodge at Mile 28.5 of the Nabesna Road, which is the halfway point.

The course appears to be in good shape, judging from what Cramer saw during a flyover last week.

"We've got good snow throughout and the rivers are tight," he said.

Assuming they don't take a wrong turn and pioneer a new route like Obermiller did last year in the Nabesna to McCarthy race, competitors basically have three route options in this year's Classic. No matter which way they go, racers must cross several mountain passes ranging from 4,000 to 8,000 feet. Some routes involve more glacier travel and technical climbing than others.

Racers typically carry their 50-plus pounds of food and gear in a backpack or tow it behind them in a sled.

While Rozell and Sterns towed sleds as rookies three years ago, they will be carrying packs this year.

"Our sleds blew up on us last time and that cost us so much time," Rozell said, explaining the switch from sleds to packs. "We spent too much time fixing sleds."

Neither will Rozell and Sterns be packing any peanut butter and jelly sandwiches this trip. Instead, they will carry lighter freeze-dried meals.

"They were too heavy," Rozell said of the sandwiches.

Even with the lighter, freeze-dried food, Rozell figures their packs will weigh in excess of 50 pounds. He carried about 40 pounds for his seven-day trip in the White Mountains and he's packing 10 days worth of food for the Classic.

"It's going to be heavier with more food," he said.

Nicole South of Fairbanks, who scratched halfway through last year's race because of equipment failure, is the lone woman entered in this year's race. South was forced to drop out of last year's race because of a defective stove. Some of her gear also got wet because of packaging problems.

"I've addressed the problems I had last year," said South, a 28-year-old engineer for Williams Alaska Petroleum. "I borrowed quite a bit of stuff last year and this year I've got all my own gear."

South said she is more prepared for this year's race and has a much better idea what to expect, both from herself and her equipment.

"I have more experience," she said. "I found these great socks and I haven't had a blister all season."

While she expects to get a few blisters during the race, her feet should fare better than they did last year, South said.

"Last year my feet were just burger on the second or third day," she said.

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