

switchback

fuel for the trail.



CONNECTIONS

\$7.99 AUG/SEPT 2013



ISSUE 12 | SWITCHBACKMB.COM

HALF ASLEEP IN TERRA INCOGNITA

How Jay Petervary crushed the Alaska Ultra-Sport Invitational record on a broken ankle and zero sleep.

Shortly before midnight, Jay Petervary was weaving across a frozen swamp in the dark of an Alaskan subzero night, unconscious atop his bike. His next stop, Rainy Pass cabin, was close, less than an hour if he rode hard. But in his sleep-deprived state he was merely meandering in its general direction. His thoughts were muddy and growing ever thicker. The “sleep monster,” as he calls it, was coming for him. And then, without knowing it, Jay unsaddled his bike and started pushing it across the barren ice.

Thirty-six hours and some 160 miles before, he stood below a banner at Knik Lake declaring the starting point of the 2013 Alaska Iditarod Trail Invitational, a 350-mile endurance odyssey following the infamous dogsled route of the same

name. Intended to take participants to the fringes of their physical and mental breaking points, the Iditarod trail winds through forests of birch and spruce, across windswept tundra, past frozen rivers, swamps and lakes speckled with scrub willow and over the mountains of the Alaska Range—home to Denali National Park and Mount McKinley, North America’s highest mountain. The route finally ends in McGrath (population: 346 as of 2010), a silent, cabin-scored outpost in Alaska’s Interior that serves as the economic and transportation hub of the region.

Jay and 48 others made last-minute preparations. They stuffed gear into packs and food from the Knik Bar & Grill down their throats. Fat bikes were loaded with the kind of gear that enables humans to warmly

embrace occasional waste-deep snowdrifts, howling winds and nights that dive to 40-below. Two 10-pound food drops are allowed along the route, but racers must carry everything else. Between cabins and tented checkpoints, they were all about to brave the wilderness for however long it would take to either complete the route or give up and try to escape.

Typically, Jay—a veteran of long-distance, endurance sports chaos, who has a weathered face and a wicked goatee (the visual representation of his seemingly permanent stoke)—takes off at the start, intending to dictate a fast pace. But this year he was a last-minute entry with mediocre fitness and a broken ankle (more on that later). As the leaders shot ahead, he hung behind and fell into his

WORDS: BRYAN SCHATZ ILLUSTRATIONS: MATTHEW BURTON





own rhythm, traversing the snow machine trails to Flat Horn Lake, over Dismal Swamp and onto the frozen-solid, snow blanketed Susitna and Yenta Rivers. For the first day-and-a-half, the group maintained an average pace—nothing earth shattering, no records were expected to be broken. The snow was compact enough to ride but not enough to make it easy. It was power riding, the grueling, grinding kind. They hit the checkpoints of Yentna Station at mile 60, Skwentna Roadhouse at 90, and Winter Lake Lodge at 130.

And now, trudging along in a sleep-deprived haze, Jay had just exited the forested Happy River valley—a section of uphill, singletrack-style riding that required every ounce of energy and focus—and found himself on wide-open swamps where the riding became more automatic with fewer obstacles to overcome. The 36 hours of non-stop competition was catching up with him. His headlamp was off. The moon was high in the night sky and nearly full. But the light reflecting off the snow

was the ambient sort that soothes more than pries the eyes open; he was slowly lulled to the ragged edge where consciousness and oblivion crash against each other.

How much time had he wasted meandering across the swamps? When did he start walking instead of riding, and for how long? Hours? Minutes? There was no way to know. Sleep deprivation does that: throws you into a time warp where reality and dreamscapes blend. The mind retreats and lets the body take over for a while, and sometimes the body wants to take it easy. So when Jay noticed that he was walking his bike along a compact path that was perfectly rideable, with a moon ripe with light, and the temperature mild for a February night this far north, the best trail conditions he'd ever experienced in this race, in fact, he snapped awake. "Jay!" he said out loud. "What the hell are you doing?"

And everything came screaming back. He'd purposefully lingered behind the "The Alaskans," as he

called them—three rookies (Kevin Breitenbach, Tim Bernston and John Lackey) grouped with longtime competitor, Jeff Oatley, who were in the lead—but ahead of the rest of the pack. He was now in fifth place, not bad, but since he couldn't gauge how long he'd been out, he had no idea how far ahead the Alaskans were. They were all younger than him except for Oatley, all strong riders, all hungry for a win, and for the moment, pushing harder than he was. "Get on your damn bike and pedal," he demanded. So he did. He stood up and cranked hard, chasing after the frontrunners and Rainy Pass Cabin, the last stop before entering the Alaska Range.

February 1, 2013, twenty-seven days before the start of the Iditarod 350-miler, Jay went out skiing and promptly broke his ankle. He heard the snap, and decided to ignore it for a few hours before visiting his doctor to hear the obvious: Yep, it was broken, clean through. "Take six to eight weeks off and let it heal," came the instructions. The doctor gave him an air cast, which Jay immediately removed

once home in exchange for his own wrappings. He elevated the ankle, gave it electroshock therapy, swallowed a bunch of supplements and then proceeded to continue riding, he says, "Like I do."

Two weeks later a friend said, "Hey man, you know the theory nowadays is, if you stress injuries a little bit, you promote healing."

Sweet, sweet music.

Jay replied, "That's what I like to hear!" He took his bike out and dragged it through the snow while postholing with his broken-but-wrapped ankle to ascertain whether or not it would hold up to miles and miles of it if necessary, and thought, *Yeah, why not*. Then he decided two things: 1) the Iditarod Trail Invitational was a go, and 2) to keep things interesting, he'd abandon sleep for the duration of the race, no matter what.

Jay is among the masochists who subscribe to the philosophy that pain and suffering do not exist. Instead, things are merely *uncomfortable*. Sleep deprivation, with its hallucinatory hazards, is something to shrug off. Broken bones: trivial interruptions. Jay carries himself to the brink, on purpose, to see how close he can get to ruin. Some might ask, *Dude, why embrace the cyclone?* To which one J. Petervary may respond, *What's life without kamikazying into some storms?* Unforgiving terrain, equal parts peril and beauty, well, that's the stuff dreams are made of.

And if unforgiving terrain is truly what's desired, no better choice can be found than that of the Iditarod. As far as anyone can tell, "Iditarod" comes from the Ingalik and Holikachuk word *hidedhod*, meaning "faraway place." The people who live along it—the very, very few (after all, Alaska, when considering the entire state, has a whopping 1.28 inhabitants per square mile,

with the remaining sentient beasts being moose and elk and wolves and bears)—are the types who get around on sleds pulled by wolf-dogs. They travel via their own established trappers' trails, in order to *actually trap animals*. Some have built log cabins and lodges and they lead people into the great alone on hunting and fishing and let's-disappear-for-a-while-and-hopefully/maybe-get-out-alive trips. Hardened people. The salty and the salt-of-the-earth. This is the company one keeps, this is where one goes—*thousands and thousands of miles from everywhere*—to encounter the most visceral form of adventure.

By the time Jay made it to Rainy Pass Cabin on night two, he assumed the Alaskans had arrived long before him. When he glanced at the time sheet, to his surprise he found that they were only eight minutes ahead.

"They were right there the whole time," he says. "That sleep demon, that time lapse, reality was it probably lasted only 15 minutes or less."

Rainy Pass Cabin, also known as Puntilla, is a strategic point. It's the last stop before entering the Alaska Range, and for veterans and rookies alike it's a place of nervous, fidgety energy. The section is usually a minimum 15-hour long slog. It's alpine terrain and storms can build and pour down without notice. In a previous year, Jay had to push his bike the entire section. He was out for 30 hours, sometimes in waste-deep snow.

"At this point, is it a resting point or do you tackle the pass? You want to do it all in one go; you don't want to get stuck on Rainy Pass and try to bivouac."

Within minutes, the Alaskans were off. Jay removed his boots and elevated his legs to ease the swelling of his broken ankle. It

itched more than it hurt, he decided, which meant it must just have been doing that stress-it-to-heal-it thing his friend had mentioned.

After two hours of rest, maintenance and packing, he was after them. The conditions were sublime. A hard-packed trail on the tundra led to the pass. Before long, he could see the Alaskans' headlamps in the distance—"not out of reach at all"—and as he ascended Rainy Pass, the sun rose up from the horizon. He ripped down the descent and switchbacked through a gorge, dumping out onto a frozen river that winds for six miles to the next checkpoint, a tented shelter called Rohn Camp. That's when he realized they were on record time. The section that normally requires 15 hours or more had only taken eight.

Throughout the history of the Iditarod, there have been few moments when the weather gods have smiled down on the hapless souls playing out their personal dramas on Alaska's most celebrated trail. This was one of those rare times.

While the formal Iditarod race was developed with the intention of preserving and elevating the dog sledding tradition of Alaska, bringing bikes to the ice has an aged history as well. In the early 1900s, men who couldn't afford a dog team instead used bicycles to travel the Yukon Rover in search of gold, seeking booty and bounty from Dawson City to Nome. The first bike race held on the Iditarod traveled 200 miles from Knik to Skwentna and came to fruition in 1987. It's grown ever since. Now options include the full 1,000 miles from Knik Lake to the town of Nome on the edge of the Bering Sea, just a hop and a skip away from *Russia*. The shorter, 350-mile haul ends in McGrath. Jay has completed and won both. This was his sixth time out on a

race that requires the heroic, He-Man variety of physical prowess. But increasingly, for Jay, mental durability and strategizing have become the more crucial factors.

"I enjoy the mental challenge. I get adrenaline from it. That's where I thrive," he says. Plus, at 40 years old, he can see that it won't be long before the sport's fitness buffs leave him behind. He can no longer rely on physical supremacy. Now it's about making the right moves at the right time and maintaining a cheerful indifference to suffering. One can imagine his ponderings: *If I wrap up this broken ankle to the point of immobility and then jam it into a stiff boot, will I be able to ignore it? And more importantly, will it function sufficiently for me to not only finish this race, but maybe even win it?* And then the questions of sleep experimentation: *What will happen if I stay awake for days on end? Will I be found frozen and forever dead in a snowdrift after passing out against my will, or rather, more likely, will I be able to tell sleep to go fuck itself?* And inevitably, regardless the questions, the answer that comes to him is a great resounding, *Yes!*

Jay first dipped into the realms of sleep deprivation after college when he and his friends began adventure racing. They learned the various outdoor trades of biking, trail running, paddling, climbing, orienteering, etc., and before long they were training for 500-kilometer team-oriented adventure races. "You have each other when you need to push past the hard times. If you're feeling bad or having a hard sleep deprivation moment, things just aren't right, your buddy is going to help get you through those times. We would not sleep for like five to seven days. It was ridiculous, it sucked, and I learned a lot. We were a team. Your friends were keeping you safe."

When he transitioned from team races to solo exploits, he

abandoned the no-sleep rule. It didn't seem safe or as effective when he was alone in the wild. But slowly, in recent years, he began revisiting that world, investigating how little sleep was required to still perform in the upper reaches of his ability. Long-haul endurance racing exists at the intersection of efficiency and safety, and Jay found that on weeks-long events, races like the Tour Divide, he could sleep just three hours a night and still ride at 90 percent output—the perfect ratio. But, he says, in the past few years the level has jumped. "People are risking more and going faster and harder, there's new blood in the sport," and with a nod at the younger riders in better shape, he says, "I'm 40 years old."

With the Iditarod, a matter of days, he determined that sleeping just wasn't an efficient use of time. As far as strategies go, taking a snooze would be a dumb maneuver. "These are chess matches to me. Certainly it's a ride, but it becomes a game and the moves you make are going to affect your outcome."

Heading into Rohn Camp, Jay was scheming. "My strategy going down the river was, 'Okay, it's 10:00 a.m. I'm going to eat and get the hell out of there.' You don't waste time—and especially not daylight."

Four bikes were piled outside of Rohn when he arrived. Inside, the rookies lounged with shoes kicked off. They were eating and doing maintenance. Jeff Oatley, on the other hand, was fully dressed. He hadn't taken anything off and was plowing down food while standing in the entryway. Oatley looked over at the checkpoint keeper and said, "Okay, I'm off."

Jay smiled. "I thought it was awesome. If you're going to win, this is where you're going to do it. He was breaking away from the Three Musketeers and was out of there. Good move."

Suddenly someone said, "I didn't expect him to do that," and a scramble ensued. The rookies grabbed their gear and hauled out to chase Oatley down.

"I felt sort of bad for him," Jay says now. "I felt they were relying on Jeff a little bit."

Being part of a group in a solo race, at least for Jay, is counterproductive. People wind up waiting for each other; they make decisions based on what others want. "I really need to be by myself so I can run my own race and focus. I also don't want to share my decisions with the others because I don't want to help them. The more strategies you can keep to yourself the better."

The day was defined by rolling hills and demanding riding in the face of a stiff headwind. At two points, Jay caught sight of the Alaskans atop hills in the distance, tiny black specks against the backdrop of a chemical-blue sky. Then, some 25 miles to the last checkpoint in Nikolai, he bumped into them filling water bottles at Solomon Bridge. Catching them this close to the end reminded him a victory was in the cards. "I'm going to do everything I can to stay with these guys now." It was too late now to keep playing the hanging back game. To win, he had to plot his breakaway moment.

The village of Nikolai. All five riders roll in together and are welcomed by a family who feeds them platefuls of spaghetti and homemade cake. It's a godsend. But now everybody's strategizing. *They have to be, right?* Jay thinks, *Game on. Something's going to break.* It's the last checkpoint. Only fifty miles to the end on flat, meandering and generally "very good" trail. Jay and Jeff Oatley both know this. Oatley has power in his legs and usually kills this section. It's where he makes up hours of time.



But then—talk of sleep peeps up. "What do we do? How long do we sleep for?" Jay hears the questions coming from the rookies talking amongst each other, quietly, almost whispers, and Jay stays silent, watching, waiting to see what they'll do. Oatley is the first to fall. He nearly passes out at the dinner table and then moves to the floor, eventually crawling off to an empty room. The others seem nervous, unsure. Everyone's exhausted; eyelids are heavy and falling fast. *Perfect. This is it. This is the time to make my move.*

Jay gets up from the table and walks to the door, and one of the rookies asks, "Jay, you outta here?"

"Oh yeah I'm outta here! Anyone want to join me?"

"Ah man, we need rest."

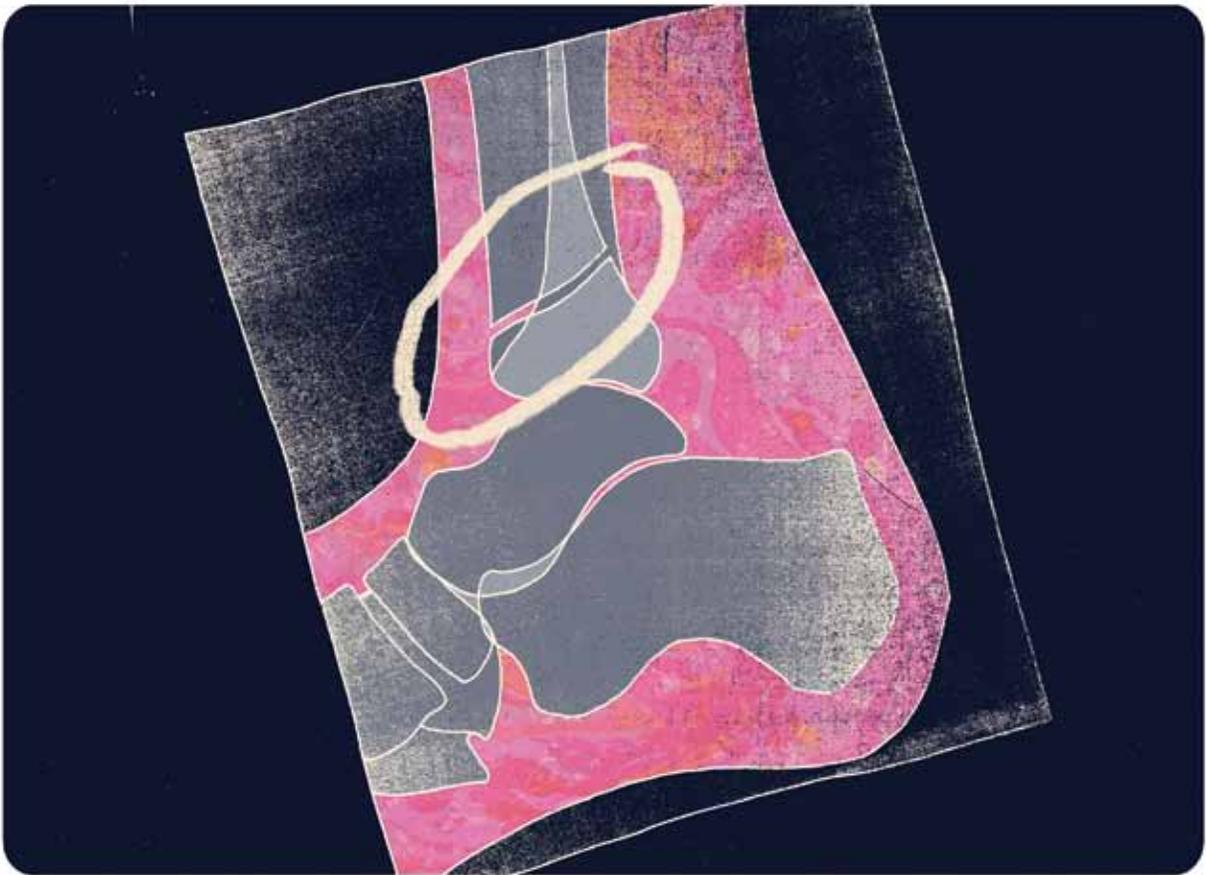
"I'm going to go catch up with the sleep monster. Sure you don't wanna come?"

No one does. So he just walks out the door. "Jeff probably would have expected that," Jay says, "but he was already passed out."

At 1:24 a.m., Jay exits Nikolai and enters the night of another nearly full moon. It illuminates the path in beautiful, ambient visibility. But by 1:30, his sleep monster, the nemesis he's grown to love in an odd, approving but dreadful way, returns. First he gets lost. He wanders off what he later assumes is a trapper's trail. This particular stretch of wilderness normally hovers beyond 20-below, but on this

night it is a balmy negative-10, and he's overdressed. "When I go down to the river, I'm just ... fucking hot." He removes clothing and readjusts his gear, and it happens slowly, because he's started to lose consciousness again. "Let me frigging ... put some air in my tires ... adjust ... I'm futzing around" He can't clear his head. He's feeling the pressure of the race now, wondering what the Alaskans are doing. *Did they get dressed and follow me out the door? They gonna rest for an hour? Two hours? I know they're not going to let it go that easy. They aren't going to just let me leave and go for it.*

And then all coherent thought vanishes. He's riding on the yawning, snaking Kuskokwim River, unconscious again, swerving from side to side, dozing in and



out. Once again he leaves the saddle and starts pushing his bike on a firm trail. "I'm in that state of mind ... I tripped as a kid, I took drugs, I know what that shit's like, and sometimes that's what sleep deprivation feels like. It's an unreality reality. You're not sure how to catch up with it, you're not sure of time."

Then, suddenly: "Jay, realize where you're at!" The thoughts come pouring back. "You're only 50 miles from the finish! You've been out here for this long. You're on record pace! How bad do you want it?"

He takes an ibuprofen, chugs a five-hour energy drink—the first he's ever had even though he's carried them for thousands of miles on the Tour Divide and other races—and gets some music in his ears. Now he's stoked. The moonlight. The record. A broken ankle. The first time a Salsa bike might win this event. He can see for what looks like forever

on this "big meandering river." All this, the sheer potential of it all, is driving him. "Hell yeah," he says. "Get up and pedal your ass off. You're almost there!"

For six hours straight he's out of the saddle, pedaling hard and huffing, jamming out to a loop of the Stones, the Dead, reggae, and metal, and this happens throughout the black of night illuminated by the ever-present moon until the horizon starts to lighten, the black sky gets a thin layer of yellow-blue at its lowest point. He watches the sun rise over the tundra. He looks back and sees no one on his heels. The Alaskans might be close, but not close enough. And at 9:16 in the morning, Jay pulls into the cabin residence of Peter and Tracy Schneiderheinze, the official ending point in McGrath, with a final time of two days, 19 hours, and 16 minutes, destroying the previous course record of 3 days, 5 hours, and 40 minutes.

"I just remember jumping up and down on the porch. It was one of the most satisfying wins I've ever had."

It isn't long before second place comes rolling in, less than an hour. And it isn't another hour before the rest of the guys arrive.

"The reality is, those guys slept for a couple hours, then hauled ass and almost caught me. They were clearly riding faster than me. But it's a numbers game, strategy. If I would have slept, they would have won."

But they didn't. He's the one jumping around on splintered wooden steps, triumphant in his win. Is he tired? For sure. But is he going to sleep? It's 9:16 a.m. A beautiful day is blossoming. In Jay's world, you don't waste daylight. This morning is for celebration. There'll be plenty of time to sleep later. ☺

*Bryan: @bryanschatz; bryanschatz.com
Jay: @NoIdleTour; nodiletour.org*