

## Oatley plows through snow for race lead

Anchorage Daily News  
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(03/02/09 22:34:19)

Picking his way through deep snow, Fairbanks cyclist Jeff Oatley is dominating the field in the early stages of the Iditarod Trail Invitational.

By 2:54 p.m. Monday, Oatley had checked in at the Finger Lake checkpoint, some 130 miles into his race to McGrath. He was alone.

Oatley checked out of Skwentna, the previous checkpoint, with a mammoth seven-hour lead over fellow cyclists James Leavesley of Great Britain and Chris Wrobel of Anchorage less than a third of the way into the 350-mile race to McGrath.

Most of the 37 starters in what many consider to be among the toughest human-powered winter races in the world are headed to that Interior town on the Kuskokwim River. A handful will press on all the way to Nome, 1,100 miles from the start line at Knik Lake.

Several racers had scratched from the race that began Saturday morning.

Distance runner Geoff Roes, who reported problems with his knees, may be the most noted of that group. Roes had been on a remarkable run over the past year, winning the Wasatch Front 100-Mile Endurance Run in August and finishing fourth in the Crow Pass Crossing backcountry marathon.

Italian biker Riccardo Ghirardi also scratched with knee problems. Jill Homer of Juneau, whose popular blog documented her travails on last year's race, stepped into some overflow and scratched rather than risk frostbite.

The race's Web site reported several trail problems. One of the trailbreakers' snowmachines broke through ice and into open water in Ptarmigan Pass.

After camping about 5 miles outside of Rohn, trailbreakers used machetes to hack a new trail through the woods, planning to work their way back toward Rainy Pass through the Dalzell Gorge.

Another trailbreaker, Bill Merchant, left Puntilla today and was on his way to Rainy Pass when the snowmachine sunk into the snow up to the handlebars, taking two hours to dig out. He was aiming to put in a trail through Ptarmigan Pass via the longer-than-normal Hells Gate route.

4/2/2009

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