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FACES

by JAYME OTTO » photo by LOREEN HEWITT



Man vs. Wild

HOW A PENNSYLVANIA LAWYER DOMINATES ALASKA'S 1100-MILE IDITAROD TRAIL INVITATIONAL

For 10 years the Iditarod Trail Invitational has been the world's longest human-powered winter endurance race—and arguably the most dangerous. Only a handful of participants dare enter, let alone finish the 1100-mile trek along the famed dog-sled course from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. With temperatures dropping to minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit, winds erasing the trail from the landscape and traveling long stretches without seeing another living creature, DNFs are the rule.

The exception, however, is 55-year-old Tim Hewitt, a lawyer from Greensburg, Pennsylvania, who is the only runner to finish the race five times (participants either run or mountain bike). “Besides the physical discomfort of running for three to four weeks straight, the sleep deprivation, extreme weather, terrain and snow conditions are overwhelming,” says Hewitt. “You have to take the race one step at a time. Look too far ahead, and you’ll psyche yourself out.”

Hewitt isn't the big, burly type of man one might expect to dominate an Arctic sufferfest. Rather, he is a former college gymnast whose build has been whittled away by years of endurance running.

With an easy smile punctuated by blue eyes, a crop of well-groomed graying hair and a mellow western Pennsylvania accent, Hewitt “makes you feel comfortable right away,” according to his wife of 30 years, Loreen.

Mike Spinnler, race director of the JFK 50 Miler, where Hewitt holds the 50+ age-group record of 6:29:30, describes him as “friendly and unpretentious.”

But behind Hewitt's approachable and easy-going demeanor lies the kind of grit that inspires movies. Take last year's Iditarod. A 180-mph headwind made it impossible for Hewitt to continue dragging his 50-pound sled (containing clothes, food, insulated Nalgene

bottles, stove, sleeping bag, pad, bivy sack, snowshoes and trekking poles) across the frozen Yukon River, even with sheet metal screws in his shoes for traction. He retreated from the ice, digging a hole in a snow bank and burrowing inside his sleeping bag, where he stayed for 23 hours. “My teeth were chattering, and my fingers curled into clenched fists,” says Hewitt. “It was miserable, but I was tired enough to sleep a bit. That sort of discomfort can cause people to underestimate what their bodies can handle.” After all the other competitors dropped out (save for an Italian who finished five days after him), he went on to win in 25 days 9 hours 29 minutes.

From Fire to Ice

Hewitt took up running as a law student, and in his mid 30s, completed a few road marathons, scoring a PR of 2:38. In 1996, he entered the Laurel Highlands Ultra, a 70-mile race in Western Pennsylvania, placing second. “I realized then that I had more endurance than speed,” he says.

Later that year, Hewitt took second at the Vermont 100-Mile Endurance Run in 16 hours 41 minutes (the third-fastest 100-mile time in America that year) and, in 1998, was fourth at the GNC 100K National Championships. Colorado’s Leadville Trail 100 was next, followed by the Badwater Ultramarathon.

Ironically, it was during the Badwater in July 2000—a 135-mile road race through California’s Death Valley in furnace-like heat—that Hewitt locked his mind on the Iditarod. “My mind kept going back to the Susitna 100, a 100-mile race I’d done earlier in the year in Alaska, where I pulled a sled through the wilderness, never passing a house or a road,” he says. “That’s when I decided that the Iditarod couldn’t be as impossible as everyone said. I suddenly felt sure I could do it.”

After registering for the 2001 Iditarod, Hewitt, who was already running 100 miles a week, pondered how to adapt his training. “Nothing can physically prepare you for running and walking for 20 hours a day for 20-plus days,” he says. “Bumping up my weekly mileage to 120 wasn’t going to get me any more prepared.” Instead, he supplemented his running regimen with sled pulls up nearby Laurel Mountain, snowshoeing, and learning to melt snow

and sleep outside in winter.

Hewitt’s first Iditarod experience was bittersweet. Halfway through the race, he developed a tibial stress fracture in his right shin that forced him to crawl up inclines on his hands and knees. “Those last 500 miles were so intensely painful that I made a deal with myself to never do anything like it again,” he says.

Less than a year later, however, running marathons and ultras could not quell the Iditarod’s pull. “I began to think, what if I’d done X instead of Y? What if I’d never gotten the stress fracture?” he says.

Redemption Run

In 2004, he was back, and that year, was the only finisher due to way-colder-than-normal temperatures that scared the rest of competitors off the course. Two years later he again stood on the start line, despite suffering from a flu virus. Once the race was underway, though, he quickly developed acute bronchitis and exercise-induced asthma. Hewitt was evacuated after covering 250 miles in four and a half days. “I thought I was going to die,” he says. “It was 30 below the first night and I couldn’t lie down without my airway closing. Looking back, I probably should never have started.”

Hewitt sought redemption in 2008. As additional incentive, Loreen entered the concurrent “mini” Iditarod—a 350-mile foot race from Anchorage to McGrath, Alaska. Hewitt paced her to the finish of the 350-mile event in McGrath, then continued solo to Nome to earn his third win.

Hewitt attributes his consistent Iditarod success to the kind of mental fortitude that lets him function on two-hour blocks of sleep, remain undaunted when fluctuating temperatures convert snow from to energy-sucking slush in the day to ice blocks at night and cope with colossal mistakes. At this year’s race, he lost his antibiotics and suffered a painful wrath of infected blisters. And at a remote village, he mistook a bottle of seal oil—used as lantern fuel—for water, after which his insides “burned” for days.

But such hardships are what draw Hewitt back year after year. “Every time I say I’m not doing it again, but I’m already thinking about how to get under 20 days [Tom Jarding set a course record in 2010 of 20 days 14 hours 45 minutes]. No other challenge appeals to me as much.” ■

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