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OUTDOORS

Welcome to Frostbite Falls

By **STEPHEN REGENOLD**

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INTERNATIONAL FALLS, Minn. — In a vast and frozen forest, in the middle of the night, all alone under a black sky of infinite stars and glimmering, wispy clouds, I pushed my bike up a hill on the Arrowhead State Trail.

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Bruce Kluckhohn for The New York Times

Matthew Maxwell of Ames, Iowa, on his bike during the Arrowhead 135 Ultramarathon in northern Minnesota. He was one of 32 freeze-dried participants.

Arrowhead 135

JOHN STORKAMP, 26, walked the course in 53 hours, the first person to complete the race on foot.

TO THE FINISH No skiers and only 2 of the 5 walkers who

It was a silent, windless night in the Kabetogama State Forest of northern Minnesota, a dreamscape of moonbeams and luminescent snow, birch and pine, silhouette and shadow. Wolf prints, pressed cleanly in soft snow, lined the trail's edge. It was 10 degrees below zero, and I was racing in the dark.

The Arrowhead 135 Ultramarathon, a self-supported 135-mile race through Minnesota's remote North Woods, had begun that morning. The 7 a.m. start at a snowmobile trailhead near International Falls lacked the ceremony this kind of event might deserve. Thirty-two racers, absurdly bundled against the cold, pulled away from the start line to the hoots and

started finished the course; 25 cyclists started the race, 14 finished.

THE WINNER David Pramann, 48, of Burnsville, Minn., who biked the 135-mile course in a bit less than 16 hours with only one short break.



Bruce Kluckhohn for The New York Times

Chris Finch was one of the 32 people to start the Arrowhead 135 Ultramarathon in sub-zero temperatures.

including 31 men and one woman — were in high spirits. As I pedaled hard for the first five miles, spinning fast to keep blood going to my numbing toes, and passing a dozen racers in the process, the competitors — bundled unrecognizably — shouted encouragement.

For the next two days, the racers battled the elements as much as each other. Deep snow, wind, ice, twisting trails and steep hills eventually eliminated half the contestants. The finishers traveled for hours, fighting exhaustion, blisters and chafes, sore knees and cramped backs, dehydration, sleep deprivation and hallucinations — all the customary components of an ultra event, exacerbated by the cold.

The Arrowhead 135 Ultramarathon owes its existence to the perpetual cold that each winter settles over this region of northern Minnesota, which has been tagged the Icebox of the Nation. As a flagship event in the BAD 135 World Series, a new international series of human-powered races that traverse 135 miles in extreme environments, the

hollers of only a half-dozen well-wishers.

Feet began to pedal, and bike tires turned — a dull whirl on the hard-pack snow. Skiers and walkers started off, crunching along in the back of the pack. Fingertips and toes, despite overboots, wool socks and mountaineering mitts, zinged in the chill. The sun had yet to rise, and breath froze instantly to beards, balaclavas, eyelashes.

In the predawn silence, on the initial flats of the Arrowhead State Trail, beneath frozen, motionless trees, snow and ice all around, the surface of the moon may have been more hospitable.

But the racers — a group of cyclists, skiers and walkers,

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Arrowhead 135 Ultramarathon has been designated as the cold-weather race, and it is the opposite of the Badwater Ultramarathon, a sister 135-mile race held in Death Valley, Calif., at the height of summer's heat in July.

Impeccably, on race day morning, Feb. 6, the second Arrowhead 135 Ultramarathon met its meteorological expectations: The National Weather Service reported that, at 20-degrees below zero, International Falls was the coldest spot on the map in the lower 48 states that day.

An hour down the frozen trail, I caught up with Matt Evingson, a 36-year-old physician's assistant from Duluth, Minn., and the winner of last year's inaugural Arrowhead 135. Evingson, like myself and half the other cyclists, rode a custom snow bike, equipped with 4-inch-wide tires and specialized gear racks to haul equipment. His face was red and frosty, his breath giant foggy spouts, but Evingson was smiling.

"It's like Alaska out here," he said. "It's beautiful."

My bike rolled along, weighed down with about 20 pounds of survival gear (stove, fuel, matches, knife, bivy sack, insulated pad, minus-20-degree sleeping bag); food (sandwiches, trail mix, nuts, energy bars); and water that was slowly freezing in its insulated container. But the bike, a custom fat-tire model made by Evingson Cycle in Lindstrom, Minn., supported the load well.

All participants in the Arrowhead 135 go solo and are self-supported, save for a heated lodge on a remote lake at Mile 72. Bikers tie gear onto racks and use panniers; skiers wear backpacks; walkers pull sleds full of supplies.

A list of survival gear, specified by the race director, was mandatory for all competitors. Food and water were the racer's responsibility. On my second day, 40 miles from the end, I melted snow in a titanium pot to make water and replenish my supply.

In a nod to the North Woods self-preservation ethic, every racer must finish the course with at least 3,000 calories of emergency food in their pack. I stored a cache of shredded coconut and walnuts in a pannier to meet this requirement. Some racers brought one-pound blocks of butter.

"Don't eat it unless you really have to," Pierre Ostor, the race director, had said during the prerace meeting.

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Four hours and 25 miles into the race, I hit my groove. The sun had warmed the Kabetogama State Forest to well above zero. I removed my balaclava. Hands and feet were content after a morning of cold pain. Trail conditions were perfect, my tires humming with motion on the firm snow.

By sunset I was 60 miles into the course, nearing the halfway mark and the checkpoint lodge at Elephant Lake. The race pack had dispersed, and I was alone for two hours on the dark trail.

The faint glow of my headlamp lit the path. Dark evening chill seeped back in through layers of nylon and wool. Toes and fingers went numb again. My breath, an icy mist, froze instantly to the fabric around my face. In the sky, a bone-white moon was framed in a giant celestial halo.

The finish line — which I crossed after 37 hours on the trail — was but a faint hope as I pedaled in a daze across the frozen surface of Elephant Lake. The checkpoint lodge, coming ever closer, was a warm dot of yellow light on the distant shore. The lake ice was a white plane before an abyss; the stars and planets above, bright bulbs on a black winter sky.

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